

Intersections of Caste and Race with Transgender Identity

By: Sweta

However you may want to classify us --- as “Elite Dalits, Token Dalits, Radical Dalits, etc...”, each lived experience shares a sense of guilt and empowerment at the same time. Guilt of talking, doing, and embodying the Savarna way of life of studying at international schools, speaking “good” English, and making our own wealth not only through our caste occupation, but through government and high-paying blue collar jobs. Owning material things for the first time: a home, a car, a retirement plan even feels wrong and undeserving, just because it was never our “karma” to be able to own such things. Guilty, because most of our community still lives under caste oppression while we enjoy the benefits of material wealth.

As an “Elite Dalit”, someone whose mother worked for the Indian government through a reservation quota, I got the privilege to study abroad. (A privilege only for a Dalit, not a Savarna, who already has access and resources to avail a better education.) Hearing about caste discrimination through my mother and her upbringing was the beginning of my understanding of casteism in India. The intersectionality between race and caste however, became apparent to me in higher education, at a postgraduate level. Compartmentalizing the multiple identities was easier when I was younger, but as I embraced myself, especially my trans identity, these marginalities of being a Dalit queer and trans person became increasingly difficult to wrap my mind around.

I was introduced to the Black Lives Matter movement at the age of eighteen at a predominately Black and Latinx public college. I felt like I belonged here because there were barely any white people. Students, teachers, and staff were mainly immigrants from all over the world and it felt like the right fit to start undoing racism. Aligning with Black and brown students to fight against white supremacy fueled a passion in me, but it did not feel like my fight. I was neither an immigrant, nor Black. Learning about systemic racism in the United States, I felt drawn towards Black liberation, but it did not fully connect with my identity. I did not face the racism that my Black peers endured in a white supremacist nation; instead, I bore the brunt of a racist and fascist immigration system which reinforces the model minority myth. The compliance of South Asian immigrants are used to stop the rise of Black people in integral parts of society like schools and universities, government, and the private sector. Furthermore, this system pits us against one another by perpetuating anti-blackness (which is already present in South Asian culture) to uphold white supremacy.

Like race, caste privilege became more visible to me during my time at a private graduate school where the student body and teachers are predominately white. This was a dream school I always wanted to go to, a place where I thought I belonged and would thrive in. Little did I know, it would be the cause of a major mental breakdown that was so destructive, I had to leave academia all together. I never attended any schooling in India and so I had no concept of first-hand casteism among Indians. It was a shock when I interacted with both white Americans and upper caste Indians. I didn't know what to make of the inferiority complex I started to develop, a constant need to please them and hide my own identity as a Dalit person. Still "in the closet", I was yet to come in to my queer and trans identity.

I had to carefully compartmentalize my Dalit, trans, and queer identities as I was navigating the complexities of higher education. This is not to say that I did not enjoy learning and discovering the brilliant minds of Black feminists and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's works--- but it was a painful and enriching experience that I was trying to understand all on my own. Having no community that I could relate to with all my marginalized identities completely, I had to selectively share my role and experiences. Since there was no trans, Dalit representation, I had to make that for myself and others who were at similar margins and shared similar experiences.

During a Social Work Practice class, students discussed their experiences of their field work placements, a space to share the emotional toll it takes to be a part of an environment that is filled with trauma, conflict, and often times helplessness. As students of the Social Work profession, we are taught to be empathetic, receptive, and provide support to the people we work with. A classroom filled with all white women, including the professor, one Chinese woman, one Mexican American woman, and one Indian person, listening to these white people talk about how awful they feel about their clients' situation (whether it was a case of domestic violence, homelessness, or mental health crisis) was not only infuriating, but painfully uncomfortable. It was hard not to roll our eyes at the white tears and refrain from calling them out on their privilege and hypocrisy. The classroom did not feel like a place for people of color to share their sentiments. Instead we leaned back in our chairs and waited for class to end so we would not have to hear any more sob stories from the oppressors.

I felt so white washed and guilty for even being part of this institution. These feelings turned into the worst anxiety I had ever experienced. Being well versed and knowledgeable about mental health and reaching out for help, it never felt like an option for me--someone who was there to help others with their mental health, by teaching healthy coping mechanisms and skills to improve their lives. So, when the professor decided to show Beyonce's album and film "Lemonade", a film that explicitly showcases the experience of Black women in a class where not one person was Black; it reinforced my belief that white people are insensitive and blind towards racism and their role in it. It was shocking and sad that our white professor had to

showcase this film to highlight the struggles of Black women. It felt like this video was being paraded around, just for show. Laughing casually at the “hot sauce in my bag” line and reducing the whole album to entertainment, it felt like a violation of the struggles of Black people. These white women probably had never interacted with someone of color, unless it was in a master/slave interaction or white savior complex.

It was no surprise that I then had to respectfully decline my classmates’ invitation to continue this ridicule at a group hang at one of their fancy homes on the upper east side. There was no place for me. I constantly felt othered and ridiculed with nothing I could relate to with them. Our lived experiences as people of color were belittled or became a learning experience for them. The classroom at this university tokenized me and other people of color by probing into our lived experiences, without any consideration about the emotional labor it takes to share our painful and unjust interactions with oppression. It was fascinating for them to be in a room with a person of color, a queer one especially. Feeling like a spectacle and some “exotic” being, all of these white students and faculty looked at people of color to educate them. What were we getting out of this painful interaction that WE ourselves were paying for? ---A whole lot of anxiety.

Racism was such a prevailing factor in all my interactions and experiences at this institution, that I did not know how to bring up the fact that I was a Dalit. People here still had not recognized their white privilege and complicity in systemic racism; how were they to then understand Brahminical supremacy and violence against Dalits? Race and caste do intersect, but in a global context, it is far more difficult to explain caste (in India and the US) to a white person. The only Indians I came across were in science and technical fields almost all of whom were Savarna and aspire to whiteness. There was no sense of community, let alone solidarity on this campus which eventually led me to leave.

As I was struggling to compartmentalize the various identities I held close to me, my awareness and acceptance of my trans identity came last and after my Dalit and queer identities. It felt like I had to put my trans identity on hold until I understood the other parts of who I am. Unable to identify and relate with the gender binary was hard to grapple with, but it was the most crucial part of my being. The shame and guilt of not fitting into society’s mold of what it means to be a woman and then realizing that it is not how I fully relate with was complicated. This manifested into horrible anxiety and deteriorated my mental health. With the help of support systems like mental health professionals and open-minded family members, I was able to fuse the multiple margins I was living at and use it for action and resistance.

This looked like socially transitioning to a gender identity I chose and felt comfortable with, accepting that my thoughts and actions would not be the same as white, upper caste, cis gender people. Indeed, transitioning to more masculine presenting felt like a betrayal of womanhood. I felt complicit in the oppression of my sisters, the same oppression I had experienced all my life. I am still grappling with the fluidity of my gender identity and what it means to be a trans non binary person. At times, I still question if I should force myself to live as a cis woman again, so that I am not seen as trans or man that implies toxic masculinity. I am recreating everyday what it means and feels like to be trans, and make more room to conceptualize nonbinariness. Repressing our emotions is what is expected from us, but as Living Smile Vidya states, it is important we recognize “transphobia as a form of Brahmanism.”

Eradicating the caste system and trans liberation go hand in hand. They both are about taking back the right to define ourselves from medical, religious, and political forces. The violence that these oppressed groups endure daily is not what we want to be known by, but by the resilience and strength we have to overcome barriers of separation from society. We construct our own gender identities and our own lives, not the Manusmriti nor the gender binary.

It is unfortunate that “it takes whiteness to give even Blackness validity” as Gloria Joseph says. This can be applied to Brahminism and Dalitness as well. It is only when cis upper caste people highlight the oppressed’s struggle that it is seen as legitimate and of importance. It is imperative to break this attachment to sexism and casteism that makes Dalits visible only in matters of violence, poverty, and reservation and portrays trans people as sexual deviants and inhumane. Blacks Feminists like Bell Hooks have called for an end to performative solidarity and activism. How do we fight oppressions that may not directly affect us as individuals? We need to strive for collective solidarity if we are to dismantle the oppressive systems that keep us from rising and sharing our powerful voices.
