

The Politics of Vulgarly: A Review of Shailja Paik's Work on Sex-Gender-Caste Complex

Archi Kulkarni

Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai

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"She threatened the Dalit social that sought to homogenize or repress the plurality and multiplicity of political action in her excessive, frivolous attempts to create new relations and new realities for herself by inhabiting both the vulgar and human."

– Paik, S. (2022) p. 38

Shailja Paik's seminal work, *The Vulgarly of Caste*, constructs a compelling argument about Dalit women's sexualities situated at the intersection of caste, patriarchy, and gendered labor. Paik (2022) establishes an astute critique of Brahmanical patriarchy by illustrating how Dalit women as practitioners of Tamasha negotiate socio-sexual labour of caste, the violence of Tamasha and their forms of resistance (p. 5). Paik's work is centred around the idea that Dalit women's bodies become sites of contestation for violence, resistance, and control. She employs a multi-method, interdisciplinary approach by drawing from oral histories, archival records, and feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks.

Paik places her study in an academic and popular culture space that did not situate Tamasha women within conditions of poverty, illegitimacy and violence of caste. She critiques how earlier literature "museumised"

Tamasha women by reinforcing stereotypes of sexual deviance and moral degradation. She notes, “in these studies, Tamasha is thus a commodity through which men’s emotions and masculine fantasies are created, circulated, and regulated (p. 6)” Paik constructs a social and intellectual history of the lives of Tamasha women through the pre-Ambedkar, Ambedkar and the post-Ambedkar periods. She builds an intricate argument that seeks to map the Dalit woman’s body operating between the spaces of “heterosexual desire, male sociability and sexual identity” created by a sexual-caste economy (p. 6).

The book tries to posit the Dalit sociality in the framework of *ashlil* – vulgarity, *manuski* – Ambedkar’s praxis to realise Dalit humanism and *assli* – genuine Maharashtrian identity formation for a new Maharashtra. For Ambedkar, the *assli* for the Dalit lay in the concept of *manuski*. However, as Paik notes, Tamasha women had no space in this idea of *manuski* as they had to abandon their *ashlil* enterprise for it. Interestingly, Paik notes that Tamasha women did find some space in the elitist conception of Marathikaran- however, this was marked by an effort to sanitise Tamasha of the *ashlil* in order to become the *assli*. Situated within the tripartite patriarchy of colonial rulers, Marathi upper-caste elites, and Dalit men, the Tamasha woman walks the tightrope between *ashlil* (vulgarity) and *assli* (authenticity). The novelty of Paik’s argument lies in her evident departure from Ambedkar-centered historiography that allowed her to explore the internal complexities existing within the Dalit community on gender and caste.

Paik in her first chapter- *Policing Untouchables and Producing Tamasha in Maharashtra* provides a historical and cultural construction of how Dalitness and by extension, dalit women came to be associated with vulgarity in a Brahmanical patriarchy that operated on the principle of purity-pollution. She contends that “Maharness” became inextricably tied to performativity and therefore, manifesting as spectacle for upper-caste consumption. The chapter traces how festivities and certain activities that were argued to be perfectly innocent, were in fact entrenched in caste violence that created a master-slave setup (p. 55). Paik delineates how caste slavery came to bring about Tamasha as a coerced sexual labour performed by Dalit Women. These women were objectified and made “sexually available” to dominant caste and touchable men. Their labor was simultaneously productive and dehumanizing which rendered it invisible within conventional labor frameworks. Paik astutely argues that “this was the cruel paradox—their labor reproduced their lowness and birth-based bondage” (p. 57). The colonial nexus of the British-Brahmani further shaped the Tamasha as sexually deviant under its puritanist- revivalist discourse. This chapter uses archival texts, colonial records and post colonial works to show the collusion between the colonialists and the touchable men to construct Tamasha as *ashlil* in the newly emerging contexts of nationalism, modernity and sexuality.

In Chapter 2- *Constructing Caste, Desire, and Danger* the author focuses on the regulation and control of women’s sexuality in the public and the private sphere utilising the instruments of

socio-religious and legal regimes. She explores this theme through the lives of Pavalabai Hivargaokarin (a dalit woman) and Patthe Bapurao (a brahmin man). She traces the history of Pavalabai whose interesting negotiations with the caste patriarchy to create fame and wealth out of a paradoxical life that came to become vulgar and human at the same time. This account of the couple is created through various folk songs, poems and vernacular literature.

In Chapter 3 and 4 Paik constructs the historical narrative of politics samaj and Dalithood that emerged under Ambedkar's leadership. She notes a complex duality emerging- the Dalit woman was stripped off her agency and reduced to an invisibilized subject and concurrently a socio-moral danger that threatened the Indian society and tradition through its deviance. This duality and its concomitant violence on the Tamasha women is encapsulated in the following- "stigmatized Dalit women were made to bear the entire weight of the Indian citizen's moral anxieties as well as caste slavery" (Paik, p. 65). Chapter 3 examines Ambedkar's theorization of Dalithood, *manuski*, and the imagined ideal Dalit woman where in, he foregrounded respectability over sexual agency. Chapter 4 focuses on the Ambedkarite Jalsa and shahiri in creating spaces of ideation and tension for Dalit activism.

The third part of the book constitutes of Chapter 5 *Claiming Authenticity and Becoming Marathi, Post-1960* and 6 *Forging New Futures and Measures of Humanity* which focus on the post-independence Dalit identity politics and its implications for the visibility and reconfiguration of Tamasha women within the emerging modern nation-state. Chapter 5 traces the appropriation of the Tamasha by the elite touchables, the postcolonial state government of Maharashtra and the film industry. While the project to reappropriate Tamasha was a collective effort by the agents of caste, state and capitalism, it was characterised by rampant sanitisation of the form, in order to construct an *assli* (genuine) marathi identity. In the last chapter, Paik calls for a Dalit feminist praxis that generates epistemologies based on lived experiences and the situated knowledge of Dalit women.

Paik concludes her book by queering the Tamasha and exploring the creative latitudes generated by gay and transgender communities that offer a critique of the heteropatriarchal foundations of Tamasha through newer performativities. In doing so, these communities have broadened the scope of art and culture by challenging the boundaries chalked out by caste patriarchy.

Analysis and Personal Reflections

Shailja Paik's book is a critical contribution to the literature around caste and gender. It excels at providing a meticulously detailed historical depth to the realities of Tamasha women. Its focus on the interlocking systems of caste, sexuality and patriarchy brings about a major contribution

to understanding how caste and gender hierarchies weave a complex system that controls Dalit women and their sexualities. Paik's departure from adopting an Ambedkarite lens allows her to explore the complexities of relations even within the Dalit community in their perspective towards the *assli*, *ashlil* and Tamasha.

Paik's central focus lies in the "vulgarity" which she posits within the purity-pollution principle of caste patriarchy. She draws out ingeniously the duality of Dalit women's bodies- the stigma of it and the sexual excess of it. In doing so, she exposes the double standards of the caste-patriarchy nexus.

This work is foundational not only for its historical analysis, but also for its critique of the existing frameworks that study Dalithood and Tamasha women. She challenges and identifies the gaps in the pre-existing Ambedkarite works, feminist works and postcolonial works. Her arguments posits the caste-privileged feminists as not being able to entirely capture the subjective materiality of Dalit women.

A key strength lies in Paik's interdisciplinary methodology, which includes within its scope a wide range of tools and sources. Paik most extensively uses oral histories and archival research, but is not limited by this. She further extends her analysis to the use of cinema, songs, folklore and other cultural literature. She is also able to draw attention to micro activities such as manner of speaking, body language, and dressing for instance. These illustrate the operation of caste on the day to day and bring the theory of performativity closer to its materiality. Thus, the book offers a deeply textured exploration of caste patriarchy, the symbolic weight of vulgarity, and the lived effects of purity-pollution politics. By placing the duality of Dalit woman and her body at the centre, Paik's attempt is to decolonise the doubly colonised Dalit body.

The epistemological richness of the work is further enhanced by Paik's own social location as a Dalit woman familiar with Tamasha traditions. Paik admits to have seen and listened to Tamasha and Jalsa songs growing up. As a Dalit woman who was well versed with the Dalit traditions and cultures, her sociological location is able to bring out the duality of the Tamasha women as the vulgar and the commodified.

Paik's book ends with a section on the queering of the cultural space of Tamasha. Although she allots only a concluding segment to this, there is enough scope generated for further studies to explore the relationship between caste, heteronormativity, sexuality and patriarchy.

Despite its critical value, the book's dense theoretical style may limit accessibility for non-academic audiences, a tension long acknowledged in subaltern studies. It may inhibit

activists, leaders, non-academic individuals and Dalits themselves from accessing, reading and engaging with this seminal work. Complex knowledge systems like those elucidated in this book more often than not remain dominantly in the academic and scholarly sphere and are not exposed to the groups whose experiences and routine life is the basis of such ideas and arguments.

Shailja Paik created a revolutionary piece of literature that has delved deeper into the intricacies of how caste-gender roles came to be performed by the Tamasha women. It is groundbreaking because it looks at an under-studied niche that is far more lower in rank as compared to the more popularly studied group of *devdasis*, or courtesans- which in itself is an epistemic violence committed by the scholarly community against Dalit women. Though regionally specific, the book's depth justifies its narrow geographic focus with its theoretical precision. Paik's depth is supplemented by theoretical concepts she borrows from Judith Butler on performativity, Pierre Bourdieu, Orlando Patterson on social death, and Sara Ahmed on the idea of stickiness. This forms the foundation on which Paik is able to construct the complex and multi-character identity and the world of the Tamasha woman.

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