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Pursuing Possibilities: Future, Solidarity, and the Literary Imagination in Anti-Caste Narratives

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Abstract

In a world of injustice and inequality, envisioning a better world gains importance. The crisis we face today has alerted us to our subsequent responsibility, which involves a dismantling of the vertical hierarchies of dominance and dwell in horizontal interconnectedness. Interventions in literary disciplines constantly alert us to these crises, simultaneously giving us an impetus to hope for and build a better future. One such intervention is the rise of Dalit discourse in literature. The emergence of Dalit literature is a remarkable example of addressing inequalities and fostering solidarities. In imagining futures through this literature, the emerging genre of speculative fiction serves as an important point of enquiry.

What role does caste play in imagining a better future? What are the aesthetics and ethics of Dalit speculative fiction in the context of future becomings? Guided by these questions, in my paper, I will work closely with the stories in the recent anthology, The Blaft Book of Anti-Caste SF (2024). The stories in this anthology are powerful tools for critical reflections concerning the worlds and their hierarchical oppressive systems. Through this paper, I intend to analyse how speculation becomes a political gesture in anti-caste thought, whose aesthetics, unfurled in the immediate, are seeped in the possibilities of an inclusive and just world, a world yet to come. I am interested in exploring the utopian consciousness in anti-caste speculative fiction, which moves away from escapism and stays grounded in reality.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Speculative Fiction, Futures, Anti-Caste, Solidarity.

Introduction

In an age of global crises and planetary risks, the visions of building a better world have taken a centre stage. The inequalities and injustices that wrap us at every level, demand a call for a just and equitable society. However, any call for justice, especially in the South Asian context, is not possible without addressing the discrimination on the basis of caste and working towards its annihilation. The Dalit intervention in literature has alerted us towards this crisis. The rise of anti-caste discourse in literature gives us an impetus to hope for and build a better future.

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Anti-caste literature and culture, according to Misrahi-Barak et al. (2020), "invokes the rich and complex legacy of oral, folk and performative traditions of the Dalit communities. It locates the Dalit in the larger universe of other communities, of many legends and of nature." (p. 8). In light of the above observation, it becomes important to go beyond the realist representations and understand caste through fiction where the politics is encapsulated within the aesthetics of this literature.

In this context, the emerging terrain of speculative fiction serves as an important point of enquiry. Speculative fiction provides that infinite space for imagination to unfold its magic, rooted in Dalit lived realities, without slipping into escapism. It talks of the futures that open up through memories of the past. This past that is burdened with the trauma of oppression, carries a retrospective importance that holds a claim on us. Here, the idea of a better world stems from a utopian consciousness that demands a recognition of the past. This consciousness is not removed from the real and the rational, rather, it carries what Omvedt (2019) calls, "reason and ecstasy" with ecstasy involving "hope and fervent emotion aroused by the possibility of a utopian society" and reason defining "the road to utopia" (p. 10). In her essay on caste discrimination and untouchability in the Hindu social order, Viswanath (2016) puts an emphasis on the importance of recognition and notes, "recognition of discrimination is a necessary first step towards a more just social order" (p. 270). When we turn to anti-caste futurisms that demand a just and equal society, we are constantly reminded of this recognition.

In this paper, I intend to undertake the study of a few selected stories from the fairly recent anthology, titled, *The Blaft Book of Anti-Caste SF*, edited by RT Samuel, Rakesh K., and Rashmi R.D. Published in 2024, this anthology presents a collection of thirty-two short stories, poetry, graphic narratives, and so on. For a long time, the domain of speculative fiction in India has been dominated by Anglophone writers from elite backgrounds whose narratives tend to glorify mythological imagery without addressing the inequalities they perpetrate, entirely erasing caste from the narratives (Samuel 2024, p. xiv). Moving beyond this homogeneity, the form of this anthology exhibits fluidity. It is a mixture of genres within the umbrella term of speculative fiction. The form, refusing to be a "pure" genre, in a way, defies the purity that oppressors hold so close to themselves. It relishes in multiplicities through its very design. This is how the future needs to be imagined, not as a singular entity but as plurality. A heterogeneity of voices enter into play that speak of not just a collective plurality, but also of a plurality that exists within the self. Speculative fiction allows for this admixture, this assemblage, almost a rhizome-like structure to emerge. As a genre, it is that which escapes definition and is "marked by diversity" (Gill 2013, p. 72). According to Kim Wilkins (2012), speculative fiction allows for an inclusion of that which escapes the norms and "provides almost infinite scope for putting elements in play because it deals openly with that which is fantastic and unfamiliar" (p. 39).

The cover of the anthology itself indicates the vision of utopia with Ravidas's 'Begumpura', a place without pain and sorrow, written in capital letters on a blue humanoid illustration of Ambedkar's back, perhaps suggesting that in following Ambedkar, we are being driven towards that future. The futurity in Ravidas's utopia emerges out of the everyday struggles. It is, according to Omvedt (2019), manifested as a very "earthly utopia" (p. 106), rejecting capitalism and dominance, and envisioning a borderless space "*where none are third or second—all are one*" (p. 107, emphasis in original). Begumpura could, as Samuel (2024) suggests, "easily slide into the ranks of the most famous speculative fiction worlds of literature and screen" (p. xix). The aesthetics of anti-caste thought, then, is tied to the notion of unrealised potential and future becomings for a long time. The stories in this collection are not simply fantasies, rather, they are powerful tools for critical reflections concerning the world and its hierarchical oppressive systems. In this paper, I will analyse four stories, namely, "God's Garden" written by Gautam Mandal and translated by Ipsa S. and Pratiti Ketoki, "The Kitchen Glob" by Yukti Narang, "The R.V. Society for Promotion of Underground Sci-Fi Writings" by Rahee Punyashloka, and "Switch" by Gitanjali Joshua.

Need for Ethical Futures

Gautam Mandal's "God's Garden" is a tale and critique of the marvel of science, set in a futuristic and posthuman scenario. While the story revolves around scientific experiments that are made to unite with God, or rather, the "Supreme Being" of the Universe, it is the persistent darkness of oppression that takes centre stage. This darkness fails to leave the core of the society, resulting in their God abandoning them.

Placed in a dystopian background, the setting of the story radiates a gory and bloody aura with "No sun, no moon, no sky" and a certain moist stickiness pervading the atmosphere, falling "in a slow drizzle, like blood dripping from a poked wound" (p. 17). This sticky imagery appears in other stories as well. In a dark funeral-like procession, people from different worlds unite to witness the auspicious day of the Supreme Being setting foot on earth. Their divine offering is Irabon, "a wonder of advanced science" who is both male and female, carrying the collective history of the planet in their DNA. In order to make a most extraordinary offering, the scientists had mixed the blood of the elite aristocrats with the blood of the poorest, most downtrodden castes in Irabon's genome. But this intermixing is seeped in the darkness of oppression whereby Irabon is treated like a "caged animal" created only to be sacrificed. This system resonates with the traditional ritual offerings that thrived on the exploitation of the downtrodden. What had been happening for centuries, on the pretext of religion and God, is now taking place in a speculative future with the manifestation of God as Supreme Being, backed by scientific experiments.

Despite the numerous intermixing experiments and efforts involved in offering Irabon to the Supreme Being, a skepticism resonates throughout, "would God "accept" Irabon?" This skepticism is rooted in the casteist practices of untouchability that constantly demands "purity" and singularity. In the Supreme Being's contact with Irabon, the Being reveals that they, the Guardians of the Universe are "we" and not "I", at once defying the idea of singularity and opening up multiplicities.

While the Supreme Being pronounces to Irabon that there is no hierarchy between them, on touching Irabon's horizon of memories they are left bewildered and agonised by the hierarchical oppression and the centuries of pain. Unable to locate the cause, the Being asks, "But what is this, Irabon? Why is there such grief in these artificial memories of yours? Why is your birth stained with such oppression and shame?" (p. 23). In witnessing the harrowing image of the most downtrodden castes whose blood was mixed in Irabon's DNA, the Being further asks,

> Who are these people, Irabon? Your ancestors? Thousands of years of grime, exhaustion, and slavery- such torture! This history was unknown to me!…The pain is spreading through my consciousness like some dangerous infection. My senses are unsettled; I am shaken. (p. 23)

Even in a futuristic posthuman scenario, God cannot bear this grief, not even briefly. How do we, as a society, answer for the centuries of oppression?

The story ends with God declaring their unworthiness to grant Irabon a place in the garden of biotechnological life preservation, whereas humans celebrate their victory of making successful contact through Irabon, unaware that their God has forsaken them. In a speculative future where humans have sought a way to reach the "Supreme Being", the notion of caste still haunts. The story, through its narrative design and intricate set up, makes us realise that an advanced scientific future cannot be achieved by sidelining centuries of oppression. This wound demands a moral medicine and an ethical responsibility on the society's part.

Affective Circulation in Literary Imagination

In Yukti Narang's "The Kitchen Glob", the glob, a tiny sticky substance, sticks to the narrator and demands her to feed it. The sticky imagery reappears reminding one of the stickiness of

caste and its affects that refuse to leave. Sara Ahmed (2014) talks of the stickiness of emotions in her analysis of affective economies, whereby "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" leading towards a sociality of emotion (p. 8). Emotions stick and circulate with our movement and contact with people and things. This stickiness can be extended to caste, in both its affective and performative dimensions which materialises in Narang's story.

The glob is a sticky substance that keeps sticking around the narrator and demands her to feed it. Revolving around the theme of exploitation, the story exposes the forceful takeover of someone else's hard-earned labour. The glob has to be fed daily without complaint because the narrator fears that it might harm her family. She labours all day and spends all her savings on feeding it, as if the glob owns her labour. The narrator notes, "We have a hierarchy system. It owns my house now" (p. 184). However, what starts as helplessness and fear, ends in resistance and defiance. The gluttony of the glob becomes its demise. The narrator starts overfeeding it and finds a sense of joy in the glob's suffering. She notes, "It feels like I'm wearing a big smile. I had forgotten what smiling felt like. It's good to remember happiness. Happiness is strength and it feels like home" (p. 186). Joy becomes an alternate affect to fear. There's hope amidst this despair, when the narrator asserts her determination to be the owner of her existence and not let the glob dictate her life. In her resolve to overfeed the glob, the narrator goes to the supermarket. Her time in the supermarket, away from the sticky and domineering presence, feels like a utopia. The narrator notes, "I admit I was roaming about like a free person, as if in a dreamland, a utopia where people say "sorry" and "thank you"...I did not cry today" (p. 187). The basic courtesy and greetings of "sorry" and "thank you" feels utopian to the narrator, making her realise the importance of acknowledgement and validation and their persistent lack in her life.

Towards the end the narrator seems to have developed a critical consciousness when she encounters the glob again. The last line, "I wait to see what happens if I do not share" (p. 189), reflects defiance on the narrator's part. Even though she is gripped by fear, she is determined to not let the glob own her again. The narrator's triumph over such a sticky and all-consuming presence shows that even in the pervasive presence of caste, the building of consciousness, of resistance by the oppressed provides hope for a better future. The ending leaves the reader with a sense of hope, a step beyond oppression and towards possibilities. The story highlights how the very act of thinking against oppression becomes a political and transgressive act. In a caste-ridden society speculation itself becomes a transgressive act with hope as a guiding force aiming for solidarity. Hope, the affect whose temporality is the future and ontology is the ontology of the not-yet, lingers in these writings. Literature, especially fiction, becomes important in this context. It exposes the complexities of violence and oppression propagated through everyday things, in the symbolic order through its use of the symbolic, like metaphors and imageries, enabling us to envision a better future.

(Re)claiming Narratives

In a review of this anthology, Amritesh Mukherjee (2025) writes, "There is an inherent power in the act of imagining futures, when done by marginalised entities. The power of speculative fiction lies not just in its ability to predict the future but also in its willingness to break from the present. For the historically silenced, this rupture is personal. Necessary. Survivalist." Another story from this collection illuminates this aspect of imagining futures. Rahee Punyashloka's "The RV Society for Promotion of Underground Sci-Fi Writings" throws light on narrative erasure and how it is countered through literature. In the revolutionary overthrow of the "Upper People" by the "Stoics", a new world order is established where the tiniest of details in the archives are examined thoroughly, bringing to plain sight the "concealed objects". Before the revolution, the "Upper people" used theological mandates to justify their superiority over others and used it as a weapon of exclusion, especially against the people from the "Underground". But in the new world order this exclusion is challenged and countered

whereby, "Scholarship is no longer an academic exercise; it is an act of truthmaking" (p. 340).

R.V. echoes the initials of Rohith Vemula, who, as it is known, wanted to become a writer of science like Carl Sagan. While the story does not reveal the full form of R.V., the descriptions point towards Rohith Vemula. Like Vemula's resistance and his last letter, in the story "it was R.V.'s books that allowed them [the Underground people] to dream of a radically different world" (p. 341). The story in a way, marks the move "from shadows to the stars" that Vemula dreamt of and fought for, leaving behind hope wrapped in resistance for Dalit students.

This hope is reflected in the promising abstracts that the narrator retrieves from the dossier of science fiction writings from the Underground. These proposals present various speculative scenarios. The first abstract, "PFA/Pure Fictional Association", presents the idea of "illegal genetic modifications" to erase the differences between the Uppers and the Underground people. The second, titled "Bird Trap", is about an oral folklore of bird trappers, strongly based on the idea of narrative with chapters "written in multiple voices" (p. 345). The third abstract, "Killing Time", plays with the conventional notions of time, narrative, and morality, mocking the institutions of law and justice as run by artificial intelligence. The fourth interesting abstract, titled "Shore Sin 3: Murder at the Altar", presents itself as part of a series on murder mystery. This element of metafiction that Punyashloka's story introduces, speculations within speculation, ends on a hopeful note with its "call for submissions" seeking more writings from the Underground. Through this call, possibilities open up for the Underground people to stake their "claims on this genre vehemently" (p. 348). And through this story, we get an insight into the role that fictional narratives play in worldbuilding. It allows for that defamiliarisation of the world by introducing new elements in play. Thus, in speculative fiction we see how the hierarchies are turned, twisted, and also dismantled. In the context of anti-caste futurisms, the observation on new and inclusive futurisms by Chattopadhyay (2021) stands true. He asserts, "The appearance of these new futurisms goes beyond the question of generic borders and into the realm of political resistance – by proposing futures otherwise cancelled or denied by authoritarian regimes" (p. 14). The rupture created by such futurisms undoes the teleological concepts of "nostalgic utopia or future dystopia" (Chattopadhyay 2021, p.16) and provides a ground for recognition of past traumas.

Fostering Solidarity: On Empathy and Experience

Speculation turns out to be a political act, imagining a better world facilitated through empathy by addressing inequalities and fostering solidarity. Empathy plays a key role as it works against the logic of otherness and takes an ethical significance, being "a necessary condition for us to live well in the world" (Clohesy 2013, p. 3). Empathy is greatly facilitated through the literary imagination, as Martha Nussbaum (1995) argues, emphasising on the importance of works of fiction, like novels, that broaden one's moral imagination. This is visible in the story "Switch" whose main theme revolves around facilitating empathy through scientific means and building solidarity. Joshua's story highlights the importance of empathy in praxis. Merlyn, a Dalit woman and Ponni, a Brahmin man access each other's experiences by switching their brain impulses through technology. They hope to build political solidarities through their scientific invention, a solidarity that is generated not at a superficial level, but through embodied experience. The motive behind the experiment is conveyed through these lines in the story, "This is the whole point: *embodied experience*". Embodied experiences are important as the body has its own mind carrying deep imprints of trauma. The affective state of caste leaves Dalits, in what V. Geetha (2009) calls, "a state of permanent dissociation" from oneself (p. 97). Dalits are constantly in a state of precarity, owing to the affective state of humiliation whereby they suffer an "ontological wounding" when their "being…is disallowed the knowledge of its integrity, its claims to self-respect, then a profound crisis besets the self" (Geetha 2009, p. 95). In this context, a superficial solidarity will never work.

The story highlights how difficult the world is for those who do not align with these

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heteronormative Brahmanical-patriarchal discourse at two specific points. First is when Merlyn replies to Nazia's question on what she would do if she were to inhabit Ponni's body. Merlyn replies,

> I want to know how it feels, not to have people look at me like an intruder…not to have them glance away when I mispronounce some word…not to *know* that I don't belong…not to have them hush up conversations about reservation…not to be asked not to eat non-veg near the lab. But I also wouldn't know what *to* do. How to actually fit in. I've spent my whole life trying to fit in with the 'smart' ones…but over the last three years here, I've finally learnt to like being *me*. (p. 387)

And the second is when Ponni unintentionally says to Bari, who is a non-binary, "You've no idea how comfortable it is in our own bodies" (p. 387) and immediately goes on to clarify that he did not mean it in terms of gender. We are reminded of the privilege a cis-upper caste male holds within the heteronormative setup. How do we address these unbearable traumas when imagining better futures? Fiction enables readers to get an insight into alternative perspectives, allowing for a liminal space where solidarity can be achieved beyond hierarchical divisions. This liminal space facilitates an engagement beyond societal limitations and with our emotional capabilities, strategically allowing the writer to build a solidarity network with narrative experimentations.

While the idea of facilitating empathy through switching embodied experiences is an interesting one, the story also alerts us towards this solution being viable only with the willingness of people. This is highlighted through Nazia's specific statements that express her concerns over technological solutions. Nazia goes on to say, "Technological solutions to social problems can only partially work. It shouldn't be necessary for us to share experiences this viscerally in order to feel empathy for other people" (388). And later in the story, she reiterates this point and notes,

> it only works if you're willing to try to see someone else's perspective. It's a tool for those who already want to further their empathy. Perhaps that vulnerability, that willingness to be changed…perhaps that is what solidarity is made of. (p. 392)

Caste, as a state of mind requires, what Ambedkar (2013) calls "a notional change" (p. 65). Only scientific achievements or political reforms cannot address this change.

Conclusion

Imagining futures requires one to imagine change, a change that also addresses the past. As Chattopadhyay (2021) notes,

> Futurisms are the change, and foster change: and bidirectionally, change happens simultaneously to the past – as the histories of the many that have been unacknowledged or erased – and to the future, as futures that become possible when these many other histories are also recognized and acknowledged. (p. 11)

Annihilation of caste is one such futurism. And the aesthetics of anti-caste speculative fiction cater to this futurism that unfurls in the immediate, and is seeped in the possibilities of an inclusive and just world, a world yet to come.

In their sociological study on the embodiment of caste, Gorringe and Rafanell (2007) observe that "Caste-based practices 'become the norm because they are lived and performed on a daily basis" (p. 108). Caste has a performative nature unfolded in everyday activities. Therefore, speculating different futures in this context ends up being a disruption of this everyday performance. Thus, it becomes an act of resistance. In imagining a better, almost utopian future, it is our ethical responsibility to address the inequalities that have haunted us in the past and persist in the present. It is important to imagine inclusive and radical futures and work towards building it. Narrative plays a key role in this world building and speculative fiction emerges as an important genre in this context. R.T. Samuel, in her introduction to this anthology, highlights the importance of speculative fiction in anti-caste thought. She notes,

> The object of speculative fiction has always been to familiarise us with the strange and

make strange the familiar. It is a genre where imagination is embodied. In the context of South Asia, where caste has embedded itself into the fabric of reality for thousands of years, any attempt to envision an alternative or to defy its terrifying strictures is to make a rupture in reality. (Samuel, 2024, p. xx)

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