

The Reciprocity of Caste, Class, and Neo-Colonial Power Capitals: Rewritten Cultural Identities in Shyam Lal Jedia's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*

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Introduction

The caste system, a rigid and hierarchical social structure embedded in ancient Hindu texts, has perpetuated generational inequalities and restricted socio-economic mobility. Rooted in the Manusmriti, it classified individuals into hierarchical Varnas while entirely excluding Dalits, relegating them to the status of “untouchables.” Historian Romila Thapar, in *The Penguin History of Early India*, explains how caste served as a mechanism to institutionalize labor roles and justify exploitation, stating, “Caste was never just a religious mandate but also an economic strategy to sustain societal hierarchies” (Thapar 134). This framework condemned subgroups like the Bhangis to roles such as manual scavenging, a dehumanizing task that reinforced their marginalization.

British colonial rule entrenched these divides further by codifying caste identities into administrative systems. As Anupama Rao notes in *The Caste Question*, “The colonial state, under the guise of neutrality, institutionalized caste through census data, creating a rigid system that intertwined governance with social stratification” (Rao 59). This codification not only legitimized caste but also entrenched it within the socio-political structures of modern India. Partha Chatterjee, in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, argues that

“the colonial administration viewed caste as an immutable characteristic, embedding it into frameworks that denied mobility” (Chatterjee 154).

Despite India's independence in 1947, these colonial legacies persisted, with caste continuing to define access to education, employment, and social dignity. Economic liberalization in the 1990s, which promised equitable opportunities, instead widened socio-economic gaps. Christophe Jaffrelot asserts in *India's Silent Revolution* that neoliberal policies disproportionately benefited upper-caste elites, excluding Dalits from the economic gains of globalization. He writes, "Globalization in India acted as a sieve, filtering opportunities to the already privileged while marginalizing those at the bottom" (Jaffrelot 218).

Neo-colonialism compounds these disparities by embedding Western cultural hegemony into educational and economic systems. Edward Said's concept of cultural imperialism critiques how dominant Western ideologies marginalize indigenous identities, arguing that "imperialism's most insidious gift is its ability to convince the colonized that their culture is inferior" (*Culture and Imperialism* 54). Similarly, Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, highlights the psychological toll of neo-colonialism, stating, "The colonized subject discovers their freedom through acts of defiance against the imposed cultural order" (Fanon 37).

Shyam Lal Jedia's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* epitomizes such acts of defiance. The protagonist's rise from a stigmatized Dalit background to academic prominence challenges these systemic inequities. His declaration, "I wield my education not as a privilege but as a weapon against centuries of oppression," encapsulates the transformative potential of reclaiming cultural capital through education (Jedia 156). This paper situates Jedia's narrative within theoretical frameworks by Said, Fanon, and Manuel Castells to explore how rewriting cultural identities dismantles caste-based and neo-colonial oppression.

Historical Context—Caste and Class Dynamics in India

The caste system, which originated in the Vedic Varna model, was not merely a religious construct but also an economic mechanism that stratified society and limited mobility. Gail Omvedt, in *Dalits and the*

Democratic Revolution, explains that caste was designed to sustain economic exploitation, with Dalits serving as the foundation of this labor hierarchy (Omvedt 45). This systematic exclusion was evident in the roles assigned to subgroups like the Bhangis, who were confined to degrading tasks such as cleaning sewers. As Ambedkar poignantly observed in *Annihilation of Caste*, “Caste is not merely a division of labor; it is a division of laborers, ranked one above the other, perpetuating inequality” (Ambedkar 62).

British colonialism exacerbated these divides. The colonial administration, keen on consolidating control, codified caste identities through census records, turning fluid social categories into rigid classifications. Gauri Viswanathan, in *Masks of Conquest*, argues that “the colonial state’s obsession with categorization created a framework where caste became synonymous with identity, erasing nuance and enforcing rigidity” (Viswanathan 89). Jaffrelot expands on this, stating, “The colonial government’s fixation on caste census data legitimized and institutionalized caste as an administrative category, embedding discrimination into state policy” (Jaffrelot 122).

Post-independence reforms, such as reservations in education and employment, aimed to address these disparities but often fell short of dismantling systemic biases. Economic liberalization in the 1990s further complicated this landscape. As Jaffrelot notes, “Globalization prioritized capital over people, and caste became a filter through which opportunities were distributed” (Jaffrelot 218). Dalits, excluded from networks of economic privilege, found themselves further marginalized.

Jedia’s protagonist navigates these historical trajectories, embodying resistance against a system designed to exclude him. His rise to vice-chancellorship challenges entrenched caste-class hierarchies. As he reflects, “The walls of these institutions whispered tales of division, but I turned their whispers into echoes of equality” (Jedia 89). This journey not only critiques historical oppression but also asserts the possibility of rewriting one’s cultural and social identity through resilience and education.

Neo-Colonial Power Capitals and Cultural Domination

Neo-colonialism, while less overt than its predecessor, perpetuates systemic inequalities through cultural, economic, and political mechanisms. In India, this phenomenon intertwines with caste and class hierarchies, reinforcing exclusionary practices in education, employment, and governance. Edward Said's theory of cultural imperialism critiques the erasure of indigenous identities, arguing that "imperialism's worst and most paradoxical gift was its ability to allow people to believe there was only one real culture, and that it was European" (Said 33).

In post-independence India, neo-colonialism manifests through globalization and Western hegemony. As Partha Chatterjee notes, "The postcolonial state often becomes complicit in perpetuating colonial frameworks, prioritizing Western ideals over indigenous practices" (Chatterjee 171). These dynamics exacerbate caste-based exclusions, as Dalits, already marginalized, find themselves further alienated in a globalized economy that values capital over people.

Shyam Lal Jedia's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* critiques these neo-colonial frameworks through the lens of its protagonist. Born into a stigmatized caste, the protagonist's rise to academic prominence defies both caste hierarchies and neo-colonial exclusions. Reflecting on his journey, he asserts, "Western education sought to erase our histories, but I used its tools to rewrite my own narrative" (Jedia 156). This act of reclamation symbolizes resistance to neo-colonial domination.

Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, underscores the psychological dimensions of neo-colonialism, stating, "Decolonization is not merely political; it requires the dismantling of the colonized psyche" (Fanon 87). Jedia's protagonist embodies this dismantling, refusing to internalize narratives of inferiority imposed by caste and neo-colonial ideologies. His journey demonstrates how education, often viewed as a neo-colonial tool, can be repurposed to challenge systemic oppression.

Jedia's critique extends to cultural capital, highlighting how neo-colonial

systems prioritize Western norms over local traditions. As the protagonist observes, “Our culture was deemed primitive, our voices irrelevant, yet it is our stories that hold the power to disrupt these hierarchies” (Jedia 110). This assertion aligns with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument in *Provincializing Europe* that decolonization requires reclaiming marginalized histories and integrating them into global discourses.

By confronting both caste-based and neo-colonial oppression, Jedia’s narrative challenges the cultural domination that has long excluded Dalit voices. It asserts the necessity of rewriting cultural identities to dismantle these intersecting hierarchies.

Identity and Resistance—Theoretical Frameworks

The concept of identity is central to resistance movements, particularly for marginalized groups seeking to challenge systemic oppression. Manuel Castells, in *The Power of Identity*, posits that “resistance identity emerges when individuals redefine themselves in opposition to structures that marginalize and exclude them” (Castells 75). Shyam Lal Jedia’s protagonist exemplifies this notion, transforming his identity from a stigmatized Dalit to an academic leader.

Fanon’s theory of decolonization further contextualizes this transformation. He writes, “Liberation is a process of reclaiming agency, dismantling the internalized inferiority imposed by colonial systems” (Fanon 67). For Jedia’s protagonist, education becomes a tool of liberation, allowing him to subvert the caste hierarchies that sought to define him. Reflecting on his journey, he states, “I am no longer the scavenger they deemed me to be; my education has elevated me beyond their narrow definitions” (Jedia 156).

This reclamation of identity extends beyond the individual, serving as a collective act of resistance. As Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd argues in *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, “Rewriting identity is not merely about self-expression; it is about challenging the dominant narratives that sustain oppression” (Shepherd 89). Jedia’s narrative aligns with this perspective, offering a counter-narrative to caste-based historiographies.

Edward Said's critique of cultural imperialism also informs this discussion. He writes, "Cultural resistance involves reclaiming the narratives that have been silenced or distorted by imperial powers" (*Culture and Imperialism* 54). Jedia's work embodies this resistance, asserting the value of Dalit voices within academic and cultural spaces. As the protagonist asserts, "Our history is not one of defeat but of resilience, and it is time the world recognized it" (Jedia 110).

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, Jedia's narrative highlights the power of identity reclamation as a tool for dismantling systemic oppression. It demonstrates how marginalized groups can assert their agency and challenge the structures that seek to silence them.

Rewriting Cultural Identities Through Education

Education occupies a paradoxical position in Indian society, functioning as both a site of oppression and a pathway to empowerment. For marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, education has historically been denied or weaponized to reinforce caste hierarchies. However, as Gail Omvedt argues in *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, education also holds the potential to dismantle these hierarchies, serving as "the bridge between subjugation and liberation" (Omvedt 98). Shyam Lal Jedia's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* embodies this transformative potential, as the protagonist reclaims his identity through academic achievement.

Colonial-era educational policies, as noted by Gauri Viswanathan in *Masks of Conquest*, prioritized creating a colonial elite while excluding the marginalized. She writes, "Education under colonial rule was less about enlightenment and more about control, reinforcing pre-existing hierarchies" (Viswanathan 124). Jedia's protagonist navigates this historical context, reflecting, "The schools I entered bore the marks of exclusion, their walls echoing the silence of those like me who were never meant to belong" (Jedia 89). His ascent to the position of vice-chancellor symbolizes a reclamation of these spaces, turning tools of exclusion into weapons of resistance.

Education as a tool for rewriting cultural identities is also evident in the broader Dalit movement. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a staunch advocate for educational reform, famously asserted, “Education is the milk of the lioness; whoever drinks it will roar” (*Annihilation of Caste* 78). This sentiment resonates in Jedia’s narrative, as the protagonist uses education to challenge the stigma associated with his caste. Reflecting on his journey, he states, “My degree was not just an achievement; it was a declaration that my worth could no longer be denied” (*Jedia* 156).

Furthermore, Jedia’s work critiques the meritocratic rhetoric that often obscures systemic inequalities in education. Ajantha Subramanian, in *The Caste of Merit*, highlights how “merit is often a smokescreen for privilege, allowing dominant groups to monopolize opportunities while excluding marginalized communities” (Subramanian 203). Jedia’s protagonist confronts this bias, asserting, “Merit is not innate; it is the result of opportunities denied to many and handed to a few” (*Jedia* 176).

By reclaiming educational spaces, Jedia’s narrative challenges the cultural hegemony that has long silenced Dalit voices. As Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, “To reclaim one’s history is to reclaim one’s voice, to challenge the narratives that have sought to erase it” (Said 54). Jedia’s protagonist embodies this reclamation, transforming education into a tool for resistance and identity reconstruction.

Conclusion

Shyam Lal Jedia’s *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* offers a profound critique of caste, class, and neo-colonial power structures. The protagonist’s journey from a stigmatized background to academic leadership serves as both an individual triumph and a collective act of resistance. By navigating the intersections of caste and neo-colonialism, the narrative underscores the persistent inequalities within Indian society while also highlighting the transformative potential of education.

The protagonist’s assertion, “My journey is not mine alone; it is the journey of every Dalit who dares to dream beyond the margins,”

encapsulates the broader significance of his achievements (Jedia 196). His rise to a vice-chancellorship challenges entrenched hierarchies, proving that cultural and academic capital can be reclaimed.

To address the systemic issues highlighted in Jedia's narrative, several reforms are necessary:

1. **Policy Interventions:** Affirmative action programs must be strengthened to ensure equitable representation in education and governance. These policies should be extended to private institutions and industries, ensuring that opportunities are not limited to public sectors.
2. **Curriculum Reforms:** Academic curricula must incorporate marginalized perspectives, particularly Dalit histories and contributions. As Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd notes in *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, "A curriculum that excludes the voices of the oppressed perpetuates the very hierarchies it claims to dismantle" (Shepherd 98).
3. **Grassroots Movements:** Community-led initiatives should be supported to empower Dalit voices and promote local narratives. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *Provincializing Europe*, argues that "true decolonization begins at the grassroots, where marginalized voices reclaim their histories" (Chakrabarty 45).
4. **Representation in Leadership:** Institutions must prioritize the inclusion of Dalit leaders in academia, governance, and policymaking. Jedia's work demonstrates the impact of such representation, as his protagonist uses his position to challenge systemic exclusion.

In conclusion, Jedia's narrative serves as a testament to the resilience of marginalized communities and the power of rewriting cultural identities. It challenges both caste-based and neo-colonial oppression, asserting the agency of those who have long been silenced. As India continues to grapple with its historical legacies, narratives like Jedia's provide a roadmap for creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

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