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The Mountain Man and the Politics of Pain. Dalit Personhood, the Caste System, and 'Scar Cultures'

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Abstract

Ketan Mehta's 2015-film *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* tells the story of Dashrath Manjhi, a Dalit from a small village in Bihar, India. The villagers' access to the closest hospital in Wazirgani, the nearest town is blocked by a nameless mountain, resulting in the death of the protagonist's wife, Phaguniya. Phaguniya's grieving husband copes with this loss by spending twenty-two years to single-handedly cut a road through the mountain.

In this paper, I will discuss Mehta's film – which is based on real events – as an expression of what Pramod Nayar calls 'scar cultures'. Here the mountain symbolises the protagonist's grief and becomes a spatial signifier for India's traumatic, post-colonial upheavals in general, and the realities of the caste system in particular. Mehta refuses to transform this tale of man versus mountain into a heroic biopic. While Manjhi's struggles and the attendant goal exceed the ordinary, this character still appears marginalised and is used to shed a light on the pain on the Dalit community around him. He becomes a vehicle of representing those caught in the shadow of the caste pyramid. More importantly, *The Mountain Man* tells a painful narrative and depicts dissolving identities, cultural fragmentations, and social disruptions.

Keywords

Borders, caste, compassion, Dalit, (cultural) identity, pain, scar cultures

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1. Introduction

In 2020, Sumeet Samos, a rapper from Odisha, India, described his artistic style and his activist goals as follows: "My bars are like Dashrath Manjhi, they break mountains, caste mountains [and] barriers."[1] Both, Samos and Manjhi, are Dalits, members of the lowest stratum of the caste system. In his lyrics, Samos refers metaphorically to the barriers, obstacles, and discrimination resulting from growing up in this socio-religious position by comparing himself to Manjhi who became a local hero, first, and then garnered renown on a national level, second. The reason for his fame is a rather unusual achievement. Manjhi, who passed away in 2007, lived in a small village called Gehlaur which is located in the Indian state Bihar. This village did lack access to a nearby city as a mountain range blocked direct connections between the two places. As a result, Manjhi's pregnant wife, in a moment of physical crisis, failed to reach the city and its hospital resulting in her death. After this shock, the grieving husband decided to single-handedly cut a road through the mountain to finally provide the village access to the adjacent town. He did so without communal or governmental support. After twenty-two years of solitary labour, Manjhi completed his task, and as a result was transformed into a symbol of selfless dedication. In the public eye he was turned into a "rock star and film muse"[2] and a "Superman"[3]. Only rarely did the media's hagiographic discourses remark or expand upon the fact that this newly constructed national 'hero' lived his life as an outsider. This was the result from the still pervasive logic of the caste system, rendering invisible this Dalit's pain, as indicated by the name 'Untouchables', which is a metonymy for invisibility. Still, this Dalit serves not only as a hero to other Dalits like Samos. More importantly, Manjhi was transformed into a cultural signifier that invites compassion with Dalit pain, as the act of Manjhi grinding down this mountain can be read as a subversion of the very etymology of the term *Dalit*. This is echoed by Eleanor Zelliot's argument in her study *From Untouchable to Dalit* namely that Dalits are "those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way."[4] When it comes to *The Mountain Man*'s

1 Jyoti Kalash: Rapper Sumeet Samos Turuk Explains the Politics that Shapes his Art. In: *Medium* (August 19, 2021). https://medium.com/@jyotikalash/rapper-sumeet-samos-turuk-explains-the-politics-that-shapes-his-art-cd53f31b4b1e (20.3.2023).

2 Nandini Ramnath: Dashrath Manjhi, Rock Star and Film Muse. In: *Scroll.in* (July 21, 2015). https://scroll.in/article/742669/dashrath-manjhi-rock-star-and-film-muse (26.7.2023).

3 Anuj Jukmar: Chiselling Heroes. In: *The Hindu* (August 20, 2015). https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/chiselling-heroes/article7561217.ece (26.7.2023).

4 Eleanor Zelliot: *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi 1996, 267.

protagonist, Manjhi, he himself is a Musahar, which loosely translates as 'Rat Chaser' or 'Rat Eater'. Musahars are mostly landless farm labourers and make up about 1.5 percent of the two-hundred million Scheduled Castes in India. In Bihar, one of India's poorest states, they form 10% of the local population. One central cultural text representing Manjhi's life is, as said, Ketan Mehta's film *The Mountain Man*[5] at the centre of which one finds the protagonist toiling on the nameless mountain. Mehta represents the mountain as a suture between past and present, loss and acceptance, exclusion and inclusion and an India old and new. Both spaces are located next to each other – the distance is only four miles. But the deadly mountain extends the distance to forty miles, which translates into decades of halted progress. To some locals it feels like independence never happened: "Thirteen years of independence and not a whiff of change."[6] On one side of the mountain, a new India emerges, as illustrated by a decidedly secular constitution, rule of law, commerce, schools, journalism, and healthcare. On the mountain's other side, the film depicts an India stuck in the past, hardly affected by independence and governed by a feudal system which especially exploits the lower castes.

Challenging this binary vision, I will read this cinematic mountain as a "site of trans-cultural identity formation, where ambiguous identity, fragmentation of identity and hybridity reside".[7] This sense of fragmented identity is expressed by the film's protagonist Manjhi who acts as a go-between between cultures, castes, and classes. He fights, stumbles, and endures repeated physical and emotional pain. This is a man who neither metaphorically nor literally reaches the mountain-top but forces his way through it.

While the film itself appears rather conventional in its plot and aesthetic choices, it still can be approached as a remarkable intervention into the iconography of caste by placing a Dalit centre-stage. Whereas Dalit literature, particularly in its auto-biographical mode, saw a proliferation over the last two to three decades, visual media depicting Dalits have been less numerous. I will discuss the film's decision to put an 'Untouchable' person into the limelight and I will analyse how the film communicates the protagonist's pain. I will argue that *The Mountain Man* creates a sense of compassion and empathy with Dalits who have been largely overlooked in the Indian cinematic sphere and beyond.

5 Ketan Mehta (Dir.): *Manjhi: The Mountain Man*. India 2015.

6 Mehta, Mountain Man, 00:39:00.

7 Azila Reisenberger: Suture as the Seam Between Literatures. In: *Journal for the Study of Religion* 19 (2006), 125-137, 134.

More importantly, this article explores the means of presenting and communicating pain and suffering. Manjhi's labour – a performance of physicality and a transcultural communication of pain – is an example of a theoretical approach called 'scar cultures'[8]. This approach I will apply to the film at hand, its use of symbolism and its visual modes that interchangeably are reminiscent of realism and more surreal depiction. With Pramod Nayar I want to argue that "a particular kind of body on the screen which represents suffering is an act of representation – discourse – that triggers a sentimental response from us. […] The social/common knowledge is what scar culture develops, extends and thrives on through the emotional dominant of 'suffering bodies'."[9] Nayar continues:

> The representation of suffering gives a voice to those who suffer, while alerting us, witnesses, to the need to alleviate such suffering and attempt to reorder the conditions in which suffering takes place. The politics of scar cultures is the construction of a 'movement': inward from the external image towards us, and the outward movement of our emotional responses to the victim in those images.[10]

I will, firstly and centrally, introduce and analyse the film within its socio-cultural, political, and religious contexts. Secondly, I will link these contexts to the film's communication of pain and suffering. Finally, I will argue that this approach results, in the words of Nayar, in an "embodied aesthetic of suffering"[11] which not only invites but almost forces an empathetic response with the pain depicted on screen. An overtly Western (academic) gaze – particularly one that attempts to avoid biases and tries not to replicate stereotypes – is more likely to overlook or to be blind to the theme of caste, as will be shown below. Hence this reading of the *The Mountain Man* will not only offer a close reading of the film itself, but also be mostly based on theories and contributions of scholars of caste, particularly an emerging community of Dalit scholars.

8 See Pramod K. Nayar: Dalit Poetry and the Aesthetics of Traumatic Materialism. In: *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 22 (2015), 1-14, 2.

9 Pramod K. Nayar: Scar Cultures: Media, Spectacle, Suffering. In: *Journal of Creative Communications* 4 (2009), 147-162, 147.

10 Ibid., 148.

11 Nayar, Dalit Poetry, 2.

2. *The Mountain Man* and/as Dalit Cinema

The history of the caste system and its terminology is as long as it is complicated. The definition of the caste system has been notoriously difficult, for several reasons: firstly, because of its often-intersectional nature; secondly, the varied realizations thereof across a country as diverse as India; thirdly, various definitions come from European academic perspectives whose approaches are more or less orientalist in nature. Fourthly, it has been argued that British administration and its attempt at creating a census of British India, may have resulted in an increased caste-consciousness, as Ranganathan argues: "Imperialism did not invent caste in India, but it did cement, modernize, and racialize it to churn capitalist profit."[12] Fifthly, and finally, descriptions of the caste system – so a recent argument goes – have been mostly presented through a Brahmanical gaze, be it in literature, cinema, or academia. The effects of the system, however, are clear: "Caste is a social construct that stratifies human beings and their humanness. Caste has been wielded in the service of pre-modern, colonial, and racial capitalist projects throughout the world."[13]

The term Dalit appears instead to be slightly more straightforward. Malini Ranganathan explains the etymology of the term 'Dalit' as follows:

> The Marathi word for untouchable, "Dalit", so assigned by the caste abolitionist Jyotirao Phule in the late 1800s, roughly translates to "broken" or "ground down". Officially, Dalits fall within a census category of "Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe", a more expansive category that accounts for about a quarter of India's total population, as also a bureaucratic category for managing affirmative action programs. The term Dalit, more political than administrative, was popularized among politically conscious groups during the first half of the 20th century and was used explicitly in opposition to the demeaning and infantilizing terms "Untouchable" and "Harijan".[14]

As opposed to the emergence of Dalit literature over the last four decades, Dalit Cinema, that is cinema by or based on Dalits, is more of a recent development. Laura Brueck explains that "the origins of Dalit literature as a self-conscious creation of a new literary genre, dominated by the themes of exploitation and political awakening as well as a realist

12 Malini Ranganathan: Caste, Racialization, and the Making of Environmental Unfreedoms in Urban India. In: *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45 (2022), 1-21, 6.

13 Ibid., 5.

14 Ibid., footnote 1, 15.

aesthetic peculiar to a modern Dalit perspective, are only about two decades old."[15] *The Mountain Man*, as will be shown below, adapts these themes on the level of plot, while its aesthetic choices alternate between such a realist style and few surreal passages.

Mehta's *The Mountain Man* spans decades and presents an image of post-independence India, from the time of Partition to the present. In doing so, the film comments on the fact that, despite India becoming an increasingly globalised nation, discrimination against Dalits increased rather than decreased: "[A]s many studies show, atrocities against Dalits have continued to grow in proportion to India's accelerated economic growth under its liberalisation policies in the globalized world economy."[16] In line with this argument, the film depicts the life-story of its protagonist and tells about the birth of an independent, post-colonial nation-state and its emergence as a global player. Importantly, however, *The Mountain Man* does so by telling this national narrative through the lens of some of its most discriminated and excluded communities – the Dalits. As such, *The Mountain Man* is quite literally a 'history from below', an account of those subaltern who rarely figure in historical archives.

Before discussing the film's depiction and communication of pain and its attendant attempts to create a sense of compassion, a concise plot-summary is in order. This summary is intended to further highlight how the pain and suffering that constitute some of the main underlying conflicts and plot-devices can be read as a form of scar cultures. Initially, the film introduces Dashrath Manjhi as a child, growing up in a village called Gehlaur. Since his alcoholic father is unable to pay off his debt to the village's feudal leader, he offers to sell Manjhi into bondage. To avoid a life of subservience and servitude, Manjhi flees from the village to return after years of labouring in mines. He returns on the very day the Indian Constitution outlaws 'Untouchability', yet he quickly realises that this legal act changes nothing. He may arrive with a new sense of self, as expressed by his vibrant clothing, only to be immediately re-integrated into the existing hierarchies and to be reminded of his place. This plot-element is reminiscent of processes in Dalit cultures described by Aparna Vyas and Minati Panda as a series of three consecutive steps: recognition, deconstruction, and reinterpretation: "Recognition implies perceiving the state of

15 Laura Brueck: The Emerging Complexity of Dalit Consciousness: The World of Dalit Literature is more than the sum of its Stories. In: *Himal Southasian* (January 1, 2010). https://www.himalmag.com/dalit-consciousness-literature/ (19.3.2023).

16 Debjani Ganguly: Pain, Personhood and the Collective: Dalit Life Narratives. In: *Asian Studies Review* 33 (2009), 429-442, 432.

'being' or awareness about one's socially sanctioned position in the hierarchy of caste […] which is followed by its deconstruction that traces the root of the degraded self-images in the dominant ideology."[17] Reinterpretation, the third step, Vyas and Panda read as a form of agency that attempts the reshaping and renegotiation of Dalits "vis-à-vis the upper cast Indian society."[18]

On the same day Manjhi returns, he rekindles his love with his childhood friend, Phaguniya Devi, now a young woman. Both, after some courtship, marry, start a family, and raise kids. In the aforementioned dramatic incident, the pregnant Phaguniya falls while attempting to cross the mountain and is lethally wounded. Due to the distance to Wazirgani, the nearby town, she dies while giving birth to a girl. Caused by this traumatic experience, Dashrath single-handedly sets out to carve a path through the hill, which in the film is depicted more than an attempt to cope with his pain. He completes this labour of love after 22 years of solitary work.

The Mountain Man attempts to balance various approaches and readings of this narrative: firstly, the film is hagiographic in the sense that it feeds into existing discourses that heroise Dashrath Manjhi's labour. Secondly, the film makes clear that Dashrath's decision to break the mountain is an attempt to work through the loss of his love, a task that results in him neglecting his young children and old father. Thirdly, and most importantly, *The Mountain Man* connects this individual trauma to the experiences and depictions of violence against the Dalit communities. This discursive decision is reminiscent of what Debjani Ganguly considers a "double movement." Dalit narratives "witness on behalf of a suffering community and keep alive the singular, non-universal nature of Dalit pain through an aesthetic that is not wholly translatable into the lexicon of rights and justice."[19]

Before discussing how *The Mountain Man* connects these discursive strands and communicates Dalit pain and suffering, it is necessary to frame the film as Dalit cinema to illustrate the cultural importance of depicting Dalit pain in the first place. I will use the term 'Dalit cinema' in two senses: first, to refer to films about Dalit- and caste-experiences; secondly, to designate films and narratives that are told by or, at least, narrated with the help of Dalits. Both uses of the word, consequently, raise different questions to processes of signification, representation, and participation.

17 Aparna Vyas, Panda Minati: Reification of Collective Victimhood: Dalit Narratives, Social Repositioning and Transformation. In: *Psychology and Developing Societies* 31 (2009), 106-138, 111.

18 Ibid.

19 Ganguly, Pain, Personhood and the Collective, 429.

When it comes to Indian cinema – which in and by itself is already too broad a category for an industry this varied and diverse – Dalits were and are hardly involved in either dimension of the term 'Dalit Cinema'. As Manju Edachira argues: "Indian cinema largely keeps invisible or negates the presence of Dalits, as they are either ignored or stereotyped in the narratives while being largely absent in film production."[20] If at all, Dalits are mostly employed for menial and manual labour on film-sets but hardly ever given a voice when it comes to creative processes. Consequently, Indian cinema is claimed to be complicit in maintaining pervasive and discriminatory caste-ideologies. Suraj Yendge, a Dalit scholar, argues that "[t]he mainstream Indian cinematic sphere, with few exceptions, has been responsible for sustaining a dominant caste hegemony."[21] And Edachira claims that Indian cinema does not present the 'full picture' but merely an upper-caste and upper-class gaze on Indian life, a gaze which in turn is communicated as a metonymy for the whole nation.[22] Dalits in the film business are fairly invisible and thus excluded from the public gaze: "A 2015 study by the Hindu revealed that Dalits, who number nearly two-hundred million in India, were non-existent in Indian cinema. Of the three-hundred Bollywood movies released in 2013 and 2014, only six of the lead characters were backward caste characters, and none were Dalits."[23] While this lack of Dalit representation in the cinematic sphere is still a concern, it seems to be changing slowly. Films like *Kaala*[24], *Article 15*[25], *The Mountain Man* or the short-film *Pistulya*[26] are part of a development that places Dalits at the centre of cinematic – and notably mainstream – narratives. These films refuse, as Yendge argues, to "elide [...] caste as a theme by subsuming it within categories of 'the poor', 'the common man', the hard-toiling Indian or, at times, the orphan".[27]

Still the prevalent invisibility of Dalit (pain), Dalit scholars argue, extends to institutions that should critically evaluate and intervene in these forms of representation, an invisibility that also raises questions concerning existing biases and blind spots of

20 Manju Edachira: Anti-Caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema. In: *Economic & Political Weekly* 55 (2020), 47-53, 49.

21 Suraj Yengde: Dalit Cinema. In: *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41 (2018), 503-518, 503.

22 See Edachira, Anti-Caste Aesthetics, 48.

23 Yengde, Dalit Cinema, 512.

24 Pa Ranjith (Dir.): *Kaala*. India 2018.

25 Anubhav Sinha (Dir.): *Article 15*. India 2019.

26 Nagraj Manjule (Dir.): *Pistulya*. India 2009.

27 Yengde, Dalit Cinema, 505.

post-colonial studies at large. Within the context of Indian academia, particularly the humanities, scholars like Prashant Ingole argue that academic discourses in India are largely Brahmanic, that is, tied to members of the upper caste. According to Ingole, Dalit cross-disciplinary domains remain underdeveloped resulting in the fact that "available mainstream approaches in humanities and social sciences in India could not grasp the intensity of Dalit pain and anguish."[28] In consequence, Ingole mentions the importance of "De-brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space"[29] to allow for new and necessary perspectives. The above-mentioned myopic perspective, in the argument of Jengde, extends to Western academia, which, on the one hand, is interested in the effects of socio-political power-relations and the resulting injustices, but does not look beyond the post-colonial self-marginalisation of Brahman academia to be fully aware of the still existing injustice of the caste system. In Suray Yengde's words: "As I have argued elsewhere, Indian Brahman academia, in the eyes of the dominant West, succeeds in presenting itself as marginalised; on the other hand, it commits un(ac)countable atrocities by evading the Dalit discourse and hiding the self-privilege in an oppressive caste society which is very unlike history."[30] Consequently, for the longest time caste discrimination was hardly an explicit concern in the production of film, whether on the extra-textual level, that is the production of movies, or on the intratextual level, that is the narratives themselves. The Hindi film-industry, according to Yengde, maintains its hegemonic hold over the existing implementation of the caste system and its representation on screen.

While *The Mountain Man* does celebrate a Dalit as the central protagonist it does not go as far as actually casting one to play the main role. Nawazuddin Siddiqui, the main actor, is Muslim.[31] Despite the film's focus on a Dalit experience, the lack of Dalit actors and producers raises the question whether the film can be read as an expression of what has been called *Dalit-chetna* – that is Dalit consciousness. Brueck paraphrases the related arguments concerning the (self-)representation of Dalits as follows: "Others make it

28 Prashant Ingole: Intersecting Dalit and Cultural Studies: De-brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space. In: *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 1 (2020), 91-106, 93.

29 Ibid.

30 Yengde, Dalit Cinema, 507.

31 Given the current Indian government's anti-Muslim politics under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, this casting carries nonetheless a political significance, see Dexter Filkins: Blood and Soil in Narendra Modi's India. The Prime Minister's Hindu-nationalist government has cast two hundred million Muslims as internal enemies. In: *New Yorker Magazine* (December 2, 2019). https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/12/09/blood-and-soil-in-narendra-modis-india (8.8.2023).

clear that Dalit consciousness is something only a Dalit can possess, grounded as it is in the notion of 'pure experience' – i.e., that only living as a Dalit can give rise to Dalit consciousness."[32] If one accepts these premises, two questions are particularly relevant for discussing *The Mountain Man*: firstly, if one were to transpose this debate – since Brueck writes about Dalit literature – from solitary writing to a collaborative art-form such as film, what would or should a film-production look like that does express a Dalit-*chetna*? Which positions – screenwriters, producers, actors – have to be filled with Dalits to make a film fulfil this requirement? In other words: "Can only Dalits experience and epitomise Dalit *chetna*? […] who has the ultimate authority to speak, not as an individual, but as a representative of the community."[33]

Secondly, and more pertinent to this article's discussion, can this 'pure consciousness' ever be communicated to or understood by non-Dalits by means of (narrative) empathy? Simultaneously, one is reminded of Carolyn Padwell's warning to avoid projections by privileged subjects, which "risks obscuring their complicity in the wider relations of power in which marginalisation, oppression and suffering occur."[34] In light of these discourses, a film like *The Mountain Man* may superficially appear like a crowd-pleaser. However, by repeatedly visualizing Dalit pain and thus interrupting 'cinematic pleasure' – more on that term below – the film presents itself as an important intervention, at the very least by visualizing Dalit pain.

3. Visualizing Pain – 'Scar Cultures' and Empathy

Even though the caste system has officially long been abolished, its different forms of discrimination are still ongoing. In 2009, Ganguly asserts that "one incontrovertible fact remained: the persistence of violence against the Dalits, the one-seventy million ex-untouchable castes, the detritus of subcontinental history for over two millennia."[35] Eleven years later, Ingole argues similarly: "Constitutionally, untouchability and discrimination based on caste have been abolished, but caste is still a visible and persistent problem, cul-

32 Brueck, The Emerging Complexity of Dalit Consciousness, n. p.

33 Laura R. Brueck: Dalit Chetna in Dalit Literary Criticism. In: *Dalit Perspectives. India Seminar* 558 (February 2006). https://www.india-seminar.com/2006/558/558%20laura%20r.%20brueck.htm (18.3.2023).

34 Carolyn Pedwell: Decolonizing Empathy. In: *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 1 (2016), n. p. https://samyuktajournal.in/de-colonisingempathy-thinking-affect-transnationally/ (5.8.2023).

35 Ganguly, Pain, Personhood and the Collective, 430.

turally ingrained in the social sphere."[36] In line with these arguments one can stress that the prefix 'Un-' in the word 'Untouchable' refers to a series of processes of making a large and diverse group of individuals invisible. To argue with Ganguly, "Dalits, at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy in India, were not only the earlier untouchables but also unhearables and unseeables. These impositions on human senses demonstrate that caste is embedded in the sensorial regime."[37]

The Mountain Man translates this sensorial regime onto the screen, by showing its protagonist in almost constant physical and psychological pain. This film is filled with sweat, blood, wounds, thirst, hunger, and heat, and thus highlights extreme sensory experiences. In this approach, the film serves as much as a biopic, retelling the life of Dashrath Manjhi, as it is a tableau of post-independence India. The film presents a detailed look at its exceptional protagonist, the eponymous 'Mountain Man' while simultaneously transforming him into a representation of Dalit pain and the proposed realities of life as a Dalit in Bihar. Consequently, the film walks a thin line between illustrating a general experience by means of an exceptional individual life.

As said, the narrative begins thirteen years after the Indian independence and the departure of the British colonisers. Discursively and ideologically, however, the film is hardly concerned with the British and their perception of and impact on the caste system. If anything, the film presents a form of self-critique that highlights the responsibilities of the Indian government and society in addressing the social stratifications and the effects of the caste system. This system was abolished by the Indian constitution, but its logic is still very much in place. Ranganathan argues regarding the intersection of caste and economy that

> [t]he practice of untouchability as applied to labour is highly opportunistic for wealth accumulation. This fact was not lost on the British colonial regime, which conscripted the logics of caste into projects of agrarian accumulation. Consider, for instance, the tight interconnection between land tenure, bonded labour (typically performed by Dalits), and agrarian productivity in Tamil Nadu. [The Indian state of Tamil Nadu has a particularly high percentage of Dalit citizens.] It was profitably exploited by the British East India Company starting from the early nineteenth century.[38]

36 Ingole, Intersecting Dalit and Cultural Studies, 97.

37 Edachira, Anti-Caste Aesthetics, 48.

38 Ranganathan, Caste, Racialization, and the Making of Environmental, 6.

The film's exposition represents a post-independence India that remains alongside the partition of Pakistan and India internally divided by caste. This setting highlights the reciprocal nature of economic status and the caste system. The nameless mountain range separates not only the protagonist's home-village and the nearby town. The mountain divides an India, new and old. And the film effectively depicts the intersections of caste and class. The village and its environs are described the "most backward region of India"[39]. Here the officially abolished caste system is alive, particularly one that is based on economic exploitation, named *jati* – as opposed to a caste system primarily based in religious practices, named *varna*. The exposition depicts a Dalit being disciplined for daring to wear shoes. As a punishment, the feudal leader orders these shoes to be nailed into the subaltern's feet.

Recent works on caste take a "sensorial turn" to understand the embodiment of caste and how it affects society.[40] In the words of Edachira, "caste as a sensorial regime is intrinsically linked with aesthetics, and it affects the sensory experience."[41] Thus, anti-caste aesthetics has the potential to significantly rupture the sensorial regime of caste. As cinema is perceived as an audio-visual medium, unsurprisingly, studies on it have generally favoured the study of sight over other senses. Also, to foreground the question of caste in cinema, "it is significant to discuss the concept of gaze, especially from other oppressed locations."[42] *The Mountain Man* – if not on the level of production – subverts and transforms the prevailing Dalit imagery and the viewers' gaze. In the film the constant dialectics of hiding and re-emerging, fleeing and returning are one of the central threads running through the movie. Consequently, as argued above, *The Mountain Man* presents a cinema of psychological and physical pain that is not merely voyeuristic. The depicted pain becomes a form of emphatic communication of the Dalits suffering and forces the audience to take on this cinematic gaze on subalternity. In Nayar's words: "Their emotional dominant of pain, imminent victimisation, trauma and impending damage trouble us in our minds and hearts with their realism because they make us aware that the visual

39 Mehta, Mountain Man, 00:04:00.

40 See Gopal Guru, Sundar Sarukkai: *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory.* New Delhi 2012; Joel Lee: Odor and Order: How Caste is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria. In: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37 (2017), 470-490; Aniket Jaware: *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. Hyderabad 2019.

41 Edachira, Anti-Caste Aesthetics, 48.

42 Ibid.

depicts some real flesh-and-blood human who is suffering."[43] The subversive political acts of Dalit Cinema lie in representing the 'invisible' bodies of the subaltern castes on screen. Additionally, they create an emphatic and sentimental gaze. Diana Eck reads, in her seminal study on the Hinduistic ritual gaze called *Darsan*, a ritual that has been applied to Indian cinema as well, this form of seeing not only as "a form of touching, but a form of knowing"[44]. To see the 'Untouchable' on screen erases the prefix 'un-'.

The Mountain Man appropriates themes of Dalit oppression as found in *Article 15* or other films. Let's take, e.g., the recurring theme of bodies emerging and submerging, appearing and disappearing, becoming visible and invisible. One such example can be found in British director Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008)[45] where the film's child-protagonist emerges from faeces in an outhouse, desperately holding onto an autograph of a Dalit actor. The film casts Dalit children as actors which intra-textually celebrate a Dalit actor that managed to escape poverty by means of the film-industry. This trope is reminiscent of Yengde's argument that "Indian films are chaotic trans-imageries indicating the current desires of a disordered India that tease the subaltern by offering the promise of unreachable dreams."[46]

The film *Article 15* follows an urban detective from New Delhi who uncovers the truth behind the brutal murder of Dalit girls in a rural village called Lalgaon. The film uses a scene of emergence, similar to *Slumdog Millionaire*, however, depicted in slow-motion. The audience observes a Dalit man cleaning a latrine, repeatedly emerging from and submerging himself in the brackish liquid. This highly detailed realism is especially important since otherwise the film communicates violence mainly implicitly – by means of visual metonymies such as ripped out hair, ropes used to tie up the girls, and bloodied and torn linoleum. In doing so, *Article 15*, firstly, trains the audience to take on the Brahminic detective's gaze to deduce the crime from these signifiers. Additionally, the film presents the realities of the caste system as a daylight-crime by showing the nameless worker toiling in the heat of the day. This very specific form of cinematic realism is, as argued, not only reminiscent of Dalit literature but is claimed by Dalit scholars as necessary to raise awareness of the realities of casteism. The Dalit writer Ajay Navaria, for example, as

43 Nayar, Scar Cultures, 150.

44 Diana L. Eck, Diana L. Darsan: *Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Delhi 2007, 9.

45 Danny Boyle (Dir.): *Slumdog Millionaire*. England, India 2008.

46 Yengde, Dalit Cinema, 516.

paraphrased by Brueck, "colourfully compares the realist aesthetic of Dalit literature to the necessity of lancing a cyst on the body of Hindu society; while the material that such a cyst releases may be off-putting, its cathartic release is necessary for the healing of the social body."[47]

The Mountain Man presents the painful hierarchy of the caste system also in spatial terms and by repeatedly using images of emerging, rising, and falling. Firstly, Manjhi is forced to flee his village as a child to toil underground in the mines. He then returns to his home to work again for one of the feudal leaders. Here he observes how a friend and co-worker falls into a fiery pit used for brickmaking. To not stop the production of bricks the overseer leaves the man to die and stops others from helping him. Importantly, this atrocity is shown through the Dalits' gaze who see their friend and family member slowly die in front of their eyes.

The Mountain Man also changes this iconography of submerging and emerging: one scene depicts such an emergence from mud as symbolic re-birth. As mentioned above, Manjhi, after escaping the village as a child, literarily works underground in the mines only to re-emerge in the sunlight and to metaphorically work his way upwards. A similar example can be found after Manjhi and his future wife Phaguniya are fleeing her family, which disapproves of their relationship. As a last refuge, Manjhi and Phaguniya hide below the surface of a pool of mud, only to slowly re-emerge as husband and wife. This scene of joy recalls Zelliot's argument that some Dalits reframe their identity by recasting themselves as "the sons of soil"[48]. More importantly, the protagonist's spatial transgressions are subversive acts of highlighting and breaking caste-restrictions. Physical space, especially for Dalits, represents and implements symbolic hegemony. Malini Ranganathan argues that:

> For Ambedkar [B.R. Ambedkar, influential activist against the caste system], caste untouchability, which locks people into an exploitative cycle of human labour, landlessness, and indebtedness, was sustained not only by social distancing, but, crucially, also by spatial distancing and demarcations of property. The village well, the temple, and even roads were considered off limits for Dalits [...] their very shadows and spit seen as contaminants.[49]

47 Brueck, The Emerging Complexity of Dalit Consciousness, n. p.

48 Zelliot, From Untouchable to Dalit, v.

49 Ranganathan, Caste, Racialization, and the Making of Environmental, 6.

In a central scene of *The Mountain Man*, a drought forces the villagers to leave the village only for Manjhi to remain. Close to dehydration the Dalit seeks shelter and water in the dry village-well. This scene depicts the parching man as dehumanised, on all fours, desperately looking for a drop of water. To place him such in a space that is forbidden for him is a powerful symbol, while simultaneously highlighting the desperation required to even dare such a transgressive act.

These repeated transgressions of caste-rules translate to the film's tonality and style, leading to often rapid tonal changes. For example, when Manjhi returns from exile, he – and the film's viewers – encounter a colourful group of people dancing on the marketplace to celebrate the legal end of 'untouchability'. This scene, reminiscent of similar joyful Bollywood tropes, however, quickly turns into a moment of frenzy when violent villagers attack the dancers to stop them from entering a temple. These interruptions and tonal shifts can be read with Ranjit K. Kumar, who is building on Lalitha Gopalan's work, as "Cinema of Interruptions". Kumar argues that: "Indian films can be understood as an assemblage of interruptions that halt the linear narrative and flow of the film."[50] Indian cinema is characterised by interrupted pleasures, such as extended dance scenes. And audiences find pleasure within these interruptions and not despite them. In *The Mountain Man* these interruptions, however, almost serve the function of a Brechtian alienation effect by re-focussing the viewer' gaze on the discrimination and pain at display.

At another point in the film, the realism transforms to magic realism, when the mountain metaphorically merges with an apparition of Manjhi's dead wife dressed in a sari of pure white. The white colour of Phaguniya's dress expresses a purity which subverts the hegemonic iconography of 'Untouchability'. Viewers see Manjhi arm in arm with a vision of his wife, a scene expressively marked by a sense of love and joy. Yet immediately this short scene of respite is interrupted by and contrasted with Manjhi being bitten by a venomous mountain snake. As a result of the bite, to avoid lethal poisoning, he is forced to cut of his finger with the very tools he uses to break the mountain. Here the film not only seems to suggest that Manjhi's labour, which is rooted in trauma, ultimately leads to self-harm. Additionally, if one reads the mountain as a symbol for the caste system, this scene highlights how this fight comes at a painful cost. Finally, the detailed depiction of this self-amputation, once again forces viewers to engage with this highly affective form of Dalit pain.

50 Ranji K. Kumar: The Theory of Pleasure-Pauses: Making Sense of 'Interruptions' in the Indian Film Narrative. In: *Journal of Creative Communications* 6 (2011), 35-48, 35.

Unsurprisingly, the film's recurring alterations between a realist and a symbolic mode of representation resembles Dalit poetry. Nayar reads this rhetoric strategy as seen in Dalit poetry as "traumatic materialism" and offers an argument that also applies to the film at hand: "Metaphorisation and symbolization – the literary styles, so to speak, of the Dalit poetry discussed – amplify and extend the documentary-real because of the realist's seeming inadequacy to capture the unspeakable horror that lies beneath the corporeal trauma of everyday lives."[51] This very movement between realism and symbolism, the unwillingness to settle either on an aesthetic style or tone that helps to repeatedly foreground the depicted Dalit pain in the film.

4. Dalit Pain and Democracy

Before concluding this article, I will tie the film's representation of pain into a larger debate which relates Dalits, the caste system, and Indian democracy at large. What are the politics of representing Dalit pain on the silver screen? And how does this representation avoid being merely documentary or even voyeuristic? Here I would argue in line with existing scholarship that these forms of representation are not only a reality against which the ideals of an independent Indian democracy and constitution have to be judged. Even more so, the visual representation of Dalit pain and scar cultures can be understood as having a democratizing effect. Since what is depicted on screen are not merely victims of the caste system, but subjects that actively fight for political personhood in a democracy in which everybody, regardless of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity is equal.

In line with these considerations, one recurring question in contemporary scholarly discourses on caste debates how democracy and acts of caste-discrimination can, if at all, be reconciled with one another and whether a democratic system is inherently antithetical to the realities of the caste system. On the one hand, caste-discrimination is seen as proof that democracy has not fully come to fruition on the Indian sub-continent. From this logic, India is still seen as being in transition from one system to another, over seven decades after independence. This argument is expressed, for example, by Ingole who does acknowledge that at "present, it seems that the Indian society is transitioning between caste and democracy. Because of the constitutional safeguards, Dalits and other

51 Nayar, Dalit Poetry, 3.

oppressed sections of the society can rise up against caste exploitation."[52] As Ingole's argument perceives the democratic system as a goal yet to be achieved, rather than a present reality, this argument does acknowledge the impact of India's post-colonial institution on politics intended to alleviate caste-discrimination, however imperfect the implementation thereof may be.

On the other hand, one way to a political and public acceptance of Dalit personhood, can be achieved by visualizing and acknowledging Dalit pain. This potentially liberating aspect of Dalit pain appears to be grounded in the dialectic conjunction of seemingly oppositional concepts, namely by rendering victimhood active and transforming individual experiences into communally shared ones. Aparna Vyas and Minati Panda argue in line with that: "[c]ontrary to the passivity embedded in the term 'victim', collective victimhood experienced by the Dalits is highly active and agentic."[53] This dialectic also applies to a Dalit like Manjhi. As illustrated above, the word 'Dalit' quite literally means to be 'broken' or 'ground down'. Manjhi's actions of grinding down the literal mountain (as well as working on the trauma this mountain figuratively represents) highlights this notion of active victimhood, of pain being transformed into an invitation to compassion and empathy. These representations importantly transform Dalit pain from a potentially voyeuristic spectacle of victimhood that would leave Dalits as passive objects, into an act of transformative suffering. The focus on Dalit personhood as represented by figures of suffering, which "unsettle[s] the celebratory mood of late modern Indian democracy" [54] is then read as a necessary step towards achieving democracy for all.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, *The Mountain Man* can be read with Nayar as follows: "Eye-witnessing retains the immediacy of the event, making us physical spectators to the suffering. This is what is produced by the realist mode. But bearing witness requires something more, an aesthetic that demands that we go beyond the immediacy of the event to the unspeakable behind it."[55] The film is filled with symbols of physical pain: with sweat, blood, rashes, cuts,

52 Ingole, Intersecting Dalit and Cultural Studies, 93.

53 Vyas and Panda, Reification of Collective Victimhood, 106.

54 Ganguly, Pain, Personhood and the Collective: Dalit Life Narratives, 431.

55 Nayar, Dalit Poetry, 11-12.

with hot days, freezing nights, with hunger and thirst. Despite some mis-placed computer-generated imagery, the most important political gesture of the film is its physicality, and the ways it communicates and employs this physicality and pain to invite an emphatic bond between audience and protagonist. This form of empathy may appear voyeuristic at times, but Dalits not only become visible but also a form of embodied cinema of empathy – a cinema that merges the documentary with the symbolic. Such a depiction of pain and compassion is not only necessary to alleviate this pain and to address injustices but to create a democratic system that is just that, and, as argued above, democratic for everybody. This reading then gives the depiction of Dalit pain a discursive angle that offers a sense of agency. Enduring, witnessing, and acknowledging pain thus transforms passivity into agency and apathy in compassion. While this pain persists, it also democratises.

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