



From Object to Subject: Subaltern Self-Fashioning in Yogesh Maitreya's *Water in a Broken Pot*

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Abstract

This paper examines Yogesh Maitreya's memoir *Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir* (2023) as a site of subaltern self-fashioning, in which a Dalit subject moves from being spoken about within casteist and Brahmanical discourse to speaking for himself through the act of life-writing. Drawing on subaltern studies particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's problematization of subaltern speech and Ranajit Guha's notion of history "from below" this paper argues that Maitreya's memoir performs a double movement: it documents the structural silencing of Dalit experience within family, campus, and intimate life, while simultaneously enacting the very form of resistance that undoes that silencing, namely authorship itself. The paper explores how memory, working-class labor, Ambedkarite philosophy, and romantic and social alienation function as instruments through which Maitreya reconstructs himself as a narrating subject rather than a narrated object. It concludes that *Water in a Broken Pot* exemplifies a broader Dalit-Bahujan literary practice in which autobiography becomes a counter-archive, disrupting what reviewers have called "Savarna silence" and reclaiming interiority, thought, and history for a community historically denied both.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Dalit Life-Writing, Self-Fashioning, Caste, Memory, Ambedkarite Consciousness

Introduction

In subaltern studies, the central and unresolved question posed most influentially by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is whether those positioned outside dominant structures of power and representation can access a voice that is heard, recorded, and taken as authoritative on its own terms, or whether they remain permanently spoken *for* by systems that produce them as objects of knowledge rather than subjects of it. Yogesh Maitreya's *Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir* offers a compelling literary response to this question. Maitreya a Dalit writer, poet, translator, and founder of Panther's Paw Publication, an independent press dedicated to Dalit-Bahujan literature writes not as an object of sociological or literary curiosity but as the author and architect of his own history. As publisher summaries note, the memoir moves through his working-class upbringing, his father's struggle with alcohol and his passion for cinema, factory labor, and the systemic exclusions of India's schooling and university systems, before arriving at

the political consciousness that shaped his turn to Ambedkarite thought and independent publishing.

This paper argues that *Water in a Broken Pot* is best read as an act of subaltern self-fashioning: a deliberate, narrativized transition from *object* the Dalit body/life as it is classified, pitied, ignored, or pathologized by a casteist social order to *subject* the Dalit mind as it names, remembers, and interprets its own experience. The memoir does not simply report caste violence; it reconstructs an interior life thought, aspiration, emotional and intellectual formation that dominant caste society has historically refused to grant to Dalit persons. As one reviewer observes, the memoir functions as "a call to recognise Dalits as a mind, a thinking-feeling mind". This paper traces that self-fashioning across three registers: the problem of subaltern speech and how Maitreya resolves it through reading and writing, labor and family as sites of both wounding and formation, and Ambedkarite consciousness as the ideological scaffold that transforms private pain particularly around love, alienation, and belonging into a public, historicized subjecthood.

Subalternity, Silence, and the Problem of Speech

Subaltern studies, as developed by the Subaltern Studies Collective and later theorized by Spivak, begins from the recognition that colonial and postcolonial historiography has systematically excluded the perspectives of peasants, laborers, women, and lower castes from the archive of "legitimate" history. Ranajit Guha's call to recover a "small voice of history" the fragmentary, often illegible testimony of those outside elite institutions a useful frame for Dalit life-writing, which similarly seeks to insert marginalized experience into a historical record that has either omitted it or distorted it through upper-caste mediation.

Spivak's more skeptical intervention complicates any straightforward claim of "giving voice" to the subaltern, warning that even well-intentioned representation can re-inscribe the subaltern's object-status by speaking *for* rather than *with* them. Maitreya's memoir resolves this tension formally: because it is autobiography rather than ethnography or sociological case study, the subaltern subject does not require a mediating interpreter. Maitreya narrates himself. This is significant precisely because, as one review of the memoir notes, "the Dalit in the world of letters is predefined," bound "within the structure of steel hierarchies that the Dalit needs to adjust". By writing his own account, Maitreya refuses this predefinition and claims the authorial position that caste society reserves for the dominant.

This refusal is enacted, within the memoir itself, through Maitreya's account of turning to reading and writing during a period of acute social isolation on his university campus. Estranged both from elite, upper-caste peers and from the moralizing expectations of his own caste community, he describes retreating into what he calls "the utopia of my desires, my ideas and my dream to write". Finding little in mainstream Indian writing in English that spoke to his condition, he turned to B. R. Ambedkar's own writing, particularly the autobiographical *Waiting for a Visa*. This turn is narratively significant: rather than remaining an object described by others' silence or others' pity, Maitreya positions himself as an active reader and interpreter, one who takes Ambedkar's text and reads it "in my way" to address his own emotional and intellectual crisis. This active, interpretive

relationship to a prior Dalit text rather than passive reception is itself a rehearsal of the authorial stance the memoir as a whole will take.

Memory as a Subaltern Method of Resistance

A recurring critical observation about *Water in a Broken Pot* is that memory itself functions as the memoir's primary political instrument. As one review argues, "memory becomes the only tool for Dalits to carve a space for themselves in history," and by "instrumentalising memory, the author is in fact embracing a larger subaltern method of resistance" (Feminism in India). This framing is central to a subaltern reading of the text: where dominant historiography erases or generalizes Dalit experience, Maitreya's memoir insists on the specificity of a single, remembered life its textures of home, longing, and loss as a form of counter-archive.

This is a crucial move in subaltern self-fashioning. To remember publicly, and to insist that one's private memory is worth the durability of print and publication, is to assert that a Dalit life possesses historical and aesthetic weight equal to any other. The memoir thus does not merely *contain* resistance as a theme; its very existence as an authored, published text is an act of resistance against what one reviewer calls "Savarna silence" the structural quiet that dominant-caste discourse maintains around its own complicity in oppression.

Maitreya's account of his relationships during his time at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) illustrates this instrumentalization of memory particularly well. He recalls, in granular and unsentimental detail, his loneliness after a relationship with a fellow student named Saira ended, his subsequent isolation from both elite campus culture and his own caste community, and his later relationship with a woman named Jasmine, whom he met in the "privileged part" of Mumbai around Bandra. These are not simply nostalgic recollections; by rendering them in such specific, sensory detail the last local train to Govandi, a shared cigarette at a café, the sound of a crowded pub Maitreya insists that this interior emotional life, ordinarily invisible or irrelevant within dominant caste narratives about Dalit men, deserves the same narrative attention as any canonical coming-of-age story.

Labor, Family, and the Wounds of Casteist Structures

Maitreya's account of his father is equally central to the memoir's exploration of caste's psychic effects. He describes the Dalit man as inhabiting a painful duality: powerless in public life yet, inside the home, driven to "dictate" and control, "a twilight of dilemmas" that the nation lacks the moral capacity to understand. Maitreya explicitly locates this contradiction in caste itself, arguing that it is caste's corrosive presence what he calls the "unhealthy caste that runs in the veins of this country" that produces this fractured masculinity, rather than personal failing (21).

This passage is significant for a subaltern reading because it refuses two dominant narrative modes simultaneously: a total-victimhood narrative that flattens the Dalit man into a pure object of pity, and a moralizing condemnation that would reduce him to his alcoholism. Instead, Maitreya writes of the men in his *basti* who were "later judged and reduced to being called 'bewadas' [drunkards]," while he insists on seeing in their "silent eyes the sign of horrified grief" grief that remained, in his words, undetected "in the autopsy of their lives" (21–22). The metaphor he offers for his relationship to his father is precise and devastating: "My father is the wound; I am the scar" (22).

This line captures the memoir's larger project of self-fashioning: the son transforms inherited pain into narrative form, and in doing so becomes the interpreting subject of a history his father could not himself narrate.

Maitreya extends this analysis through a reading of Bollywood particularly the 1993 film *Khalnayak* as a cultural mechanism offering the impoverished masses a "symbolic self" for revenge fantasy while carefully avoiding any "honest" naming of "the Brahminical value system" as the actual source of oppression (22). His father's repeated viewings of the film become, in Maitreya's retrospective reading, legible as an inarticulate reaching toward a language of rage and loneliness that caste denied him. Here again, the adult narrator performs the subaltern's transition from object to subject: what his father could only enact wordlessly through repetition and silence, Maitreya renders legible through analysis and prose.

Ambedkarite Consciousness and the Making of the Subject

Central to Maitreya's transition from object to subject is his sustained engagement with Ambedkarite thought. Reviewers note that the memoir traces "how writing and the Ambedkarite legacy shaped his political consciousness and his decision to go into publishing", and this shaping is most explicit in the memoir's account of his reading of *Waiting for a Visa*. Maitreya describes finding in Ambedkar not merely a political theorist of caste but "a profound person and a philosopher" whose treatment of his own life gave Maitreya "answers" to a personal crisis around love and belonging. Crucially, Maitreya frames caste society as one in which "love is not a spontaneous emotion" while "hate is," because caste structurally reserves "a feeling of revulsion against another" between groups. Reading Ambedkar, for Maitreya, becomes the means by which he reframes his own alienation not as personal failure but as a structural condition and, more importantly, as a condition he has the interpretive authority to name and analyze.

This is significant for a subaltern reading because Ambedkarite philosophy offers Maitreya not merely a personal coping mechanism but a systemic vocabulary one capable of naming caste as structure rather than misfortune, and of repositioning the Dalit individual as a political and emotional agent within a longer history of anti-caste thought rather than an isolated victim. Maitreya explicitly credits this reading with transforming his self-understanding: he describes no longer feeling "rootless," instead locating himself within a lineage of ancestral agony and resistance. Maitreya's founding of Panther's Paw Publication extends this self-fashioning beyond the memoir itself into institutional practice: having reclaimed his own interpretive voice through Ambedkar, Maitreya builds infrastructure for other Dalit-Bahujan voices to do the same. In this sense, the memoir's arc from silenced object to speaking subject is not merely individual but exemplary of a broader collective project of subaltern self-representation in contemporary Indian letters.

Conclusion

Water in a Broken Pot enacts, at the level of form and content alike, the movement from subaltern object to narrating subject that subaltern studies theorizes but often struggles to locate in accessible literary form. Where Spivak's skepticism warns against the risks of speaking *for* the subaltern, Maitreya's memoir sidesteps this risk by speaking *as* himself reconstructing memory, labor, family,



romantic alienation, and Ambedkarite political awakening not as raw material for external interpretation but as a self-authored history. The father/son passage examined above exemplifies this most clearly: Maitreya does not simply report his father's suffering but transforms it, through the metaphor of wound and scar, into a narrative he alone can tell. Similarly, his account of turning to Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa* during a period of acute isolation shows the subaltern subject actively constructing, rather than passively receiving, a framework for self-understanding. In doing so, the text performs the very subjecthood it thematizes: a Dalit "thinking-feeling mind" that refuses the predefinition caste society has historically imposed. Future scholarship might extend this reading by situating Maitreya's memoir alongside other contemporary Dalit-Bahujan life-writing to trace how self-fashioning through autobiography is becoming an established mode of subaltern historiography in twenty-first-century Indian literature.

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