

Performing Pain, Reclaiming Flesh: Erotics of Humiliation and Dalit Embodiment in Pornography, Performance Art, and Media Activism

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Abstract:

This research paper critically examines the complex relationships between caste, sexuality, and embodiment by exploring the various ways the Dalit body is depicted as a site of eroticisation, abjection, and political reclamation within the liminal realms of pornography, radical performance art, and digital media activism. Positioned at the intersection of biopolitical analysis, affect theory, and anti-caste epistemologies, the study investigates how pain and humiliation, historically embedded in the Dalit corporeal schema as tools of caste control, are both sensationalised within regimes of visual and sexual consumption and reimagined as strategic forms of resistance, affective re-inscription, and epistemic disobedience.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, Giorgio Agamben's theory of homo sacer and bare life, and B.R. Ambedkar's radical redefinition of dignity and emancipatory ethics, this paper examines the conditions under which the Dalit body navigates its hypervisibility and structural precarity within hegemonic representational economies. Through critical analysis of caste-coded pornographic tropes, the performative dramatizations of pain enacted in contemporary Dalit performance art, and the insurgent aesthetics of media-based activism, this inquiry highlights the erotics of humiliation as a volatile discursive field—at once disciplinary and transgressive. Refusing to reduce the Dalit body to a passive symbol of victimhood, the paper proposes an alternative hermeneutic of embodiment in which corporeality itself becomes a creative site of aesthetic resistance, emotional counter-production, and political re-signification. By reclaiming the very flesh historically marked with stigma and shame, Dalit artists and activists mobilise a radical erotics of caste abolition, one that redefines the body as sovereign, sensate, and subversive of the normative moral imaginaries that sustain caste hegemony.

Keywords: Dalit embodiment; caste and sexuality; pornography, radical aesthetics; counter-performance; representation and caste; caste-based violence

INTRODUCTION

The Dalit body has long served as a volatile semiotic space - marked by caste-based violence, layered shame, and epistemic suppression within the hierarchical moral framework of Brahminical society. Perceived both as polluting and disposable, it occupies a contradictory position: highly visible through its links to menial work, bodily suffering, and systemic subjugation, yet strangely invisible in its expressions of autonomy, erotic desire, and spiritual worth. This imbalance in representation, where the Dalit body is exposed to violation but denied recognition as a sovereign subject, calls for a critical examination of the mechanisms that control its visibility. What appears is not a neutral gaze, but a caste-dependent economy of spectatorship, where flesh is coded, disciplined, and circulated under regimes of caste

authority.

In the contemporary mediascape - which includes digital platforms, pornographic imaginaries, radical performances, and activist aesthetics - this visibility has increased in complex and often contradictory ways. On one hand, these emerging spaces provide Dalit subjects with opportunities to reclaim narratorial agency, re-assert pleasure, and challenge dominant representational codes. On the other hand, they frequently reproduce the very semiotics of humiliation and caste fetishism they seek to oppose. Pornographic economies, in particular, flourish on fantasies of subjugation and bodily alterity, re-inscribing the Dalit body within visual regimes that eroticise degradation. This ambivalence prompts important questions: Who controls the representational economy of Dalit flesh? Through which discursive tools is pain transformed into eroticism? And can shame be reinterpreted not as a form of social death, but as a space for insurgent re-signification? This inquiry is built around a triangulated theoretical framework: Michel Foucault's analysis of biopolitical governance, Giorgio Agamben's concept of homo sacer and bare life, and B.R. Ambedkar's fundamental critique of caste as a form of ontological imprisonment. Foucault's framework enables an analysis of caste not as a fixed social identity but as a disciplinary matrix that encodes, regulates, and hierarchises bodies through affective and spatial technologies. Agamben's idea of bare life, life stripped of political and legal value, resonates with the Dalit condition of being exposed to harm without institutional protection or social mourning. Nonetheless, it is Ambedkar who provides the radical normative centre of this study: his emphasis on dignity, embodied self-respect, and the abolition of caste grounds a counter-hegemonic ethics of liberation and bodily reclamation. By mapping the Dalit body across the realms of pornography, performance, and digital activism, this paper argues that visibility is not inherently liberating but remains a contested and confrontational space where power, desire, and resistance intersect. It is through this tension, between spectacle and sovereignty, pain and pleasure, shame and reclamation, that the Dalit body becomes a crucial site for rethinking the flesh not as a zone of abjection but as a centre for insurgent aesthetics and radical futurity.

EROTICS OF HUMILIATION: CASTE, PORNOGRAPHY AND SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE

The convergence of caste, sexuality, and violence forges a deeply rooted and ideologically potent link within South Asian cultural, legal, and literary imaginaries. From the normative rules of the Manusmṛiti, which established hierarchies of bodily purity and impurity, to the colonial ethnographic gaze that sexualised Dalit and Adivasi bodies as hypersexual, bestial, and primitive, the Dalit subject has historically been positioned at the intersection of disgrace and desire. Nothing highlights this convergence more starkly and vividly than in the figure of the Dalit woman, whose body bears the overlapping burdens of caste-based dehumanisation and gendered vulnerability. Her body, marked as both polluting and accessible, serves as a crucial site where dominant-caste masculinities affirm their dominance through acts of sexual conquest, ritual humiliation, and symbolic assertion.

This longstanding caste-sexual subjugation finds new expression in modern digital cultures, particularly within the algorithmically curated and legally opaque domain of online pornography. In this libidinal economy, the Dalit female body is not only depicted but systematically fetishised and commodified through various visual, linguistic, and narrative tropes that eroticise humiliation and embed caste hierarchies into the very framework of sexual fantasy. Tags such as "low-caste girl," "Dalit servant," or "untouchable whore" serve not only as search categories but as semiotic tools of caste-marking, embedding centuries of oppression into clickable content. These videos often dramatise scenes of sexual domination - featuring characters cast as Brahmin men, landlords, priests, or police officers - who assert control over women identified or implied as Dalit through cues of language, setting, attire, and occupational role.

These representations go beyond private fantasies to form an important cultural archive that performs, reproduces, and aestheticises caste. The pornographic frame becomes a powerful ideological tool through which structural violence is reanimated as titillation, and caste subjugation is turned into a consumable erotic spectacle. Caste fetishism, in this context, functions through a semiotics of degradation: emphasising servitude (e.g., coerced domestic labour), symbolic debasement (e.g., spitting, verbal abuse, slapping), and animalisation (e.g., poses and acts that make Dalit bodies appear

sub-human or bestial). These aesthetic codes operate within a wider libidinal economy that eroticises caste difference, reaffirming the hegemony of the dominant caste by transforming historical subjugation into sexual pleasure. Importantly, this process is not politically neutral; it repeats and legitimises hierarchical imaginaries of caste supremacy through affective consumption.

The production and circulation of such content must also be understood through an intersectional lens, where caste, gender, class, and sexual labour converge to create regimes of extreme precarity. Dalit sex workers, for instance, occupy a doubly commodified position: their bodies are exploited both by the capitalist imperatives of the sex industry and by casteist structures that deem them inherently vulnerable. Their presence in pornographic media often reflects material coercion rather than voluntary agency, shaped by conditions of structural unfreedom and economic desperation. Similarly, trans Dalit individuals face violent hypervisibility within pornographic imaginaries that merge casteism and transphobia, rendering their bodies into abject curiosities, simultaneously eroticised and dehumanised.

A survey of mainstream and user-generated pornographic platforms reveals the persistence of a deeply racialised and caste-inflected erotic imaginary. Tags such as “village slut,” “dirty maid,” or “low-caste bitch” are not neutral descriptors but ideologically charged markers that collapse systemic domination into private fantasy. These keywords encode social hierarchy into sexual desire, enabling consumers to re-enact caste domination within an intimate context. The digital pornographic archive, therefore, must be understood not merely as a site of pleasure but as a cultural-technological apparatus through which caste-based violence is aestheticised, normalised, and endlessly disseminated.

Humiliation is understandable and digestible within the realm of desire. Thus, what is consumed is not merely the spectacle of sex but also the reenactment of caste power through dramatic depictions of flesh. Ultimately, the erotics of humiliation must be viewed within the wider context of caste violence - where the visual economy of pornography not only mirrors social hierarchies but actively perpetuates and eroticises them. By depicting Dalit-coded bodies as objects of spectacular degradation, such content eliminates the possibility of erotic sovereignty, even as it creates a complex space for potential subversion, resistance, and critical counter-narratives - questions this study will examine in later sections.

PERFORMING PAIN: DALIT BODIES IN PERFORMANCE ART AND VISUAL CULTURE

In the modern landscape of Dalit performance art and visual culture, pain manifests not as a passive residue of historical violence but as a deliberate and insurgent form of expression. The Dalit body, traditionally regarded as impure, disposable, and socially exiled, becomes, through performance, a site of radical redefinition. It functions both as an archive and a voice, capturing the layered trauma of caste oppression while transforming that trauma into an aesthetic and political language of resistance. In this context, the Dalit artist occupies a liminal yet powerful position, acting as both a witness to the violence of history and the wound that bears its persistent mark. Pain here is not a plea for empathy; it is a rupture, a bodily challenge to a social order used to caste-inflicted suffering.

These performances often involve acts of bodily endurance, symbolic self-harm, or ritualistic abjection, not as spectacles of marginal victimhood, but as deliberate choreographies of disruption. Whether by walking barefoot across burning ground, remaining motionless under pressure, or marking the skin with substances such as ash, dung, or charcoal, the Dalit body documents its suffering as a counter-discursive act. These gestures serve as embodied acts of remembrance and reclamation, what could be called corporeal histories of caste. By making pain highly visible and publicly legible, such performances challenge sanitised narratives of developmental modernity and liberal multiculturalism that seek to erase or depoliticise caste. The performer’s body, no longer subject to Foucauldian discipline, instead becomes a tool of counter-discipline, a living text inscribing resistance on its surface.

This aesthetic politics of pain gains further theoretical resonance when examined through Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life - the state of existence marked by legal abandonment and exclusion from both political recognition and civil personhood. The Dalit body, historically confined to this zone of social death, is revitalised through performance not by

disavowal but by strategic re-embodiment. The performer asserts presence through excess, refusing invisibility by transforming the flesh into the site of truth-telling. In doing so, they challenge the necropolitical logics that render Dalit lives ungrievable, instead affirming their symbolic and political irreducibility.

This embodied reclamation is evident in the works of artists such as Subodh Kerkar, whose installations utilise remnants of exclusion, broken clay vessels, discarded footwear, and burnt debris, to materialise the spectral presence of caste violence. Although not explicitly Dalit, his use of marginalised matter enacts a politics of memory through aesthetic detritus. Conversely, Amol Palekar's late visual oeuvre and curatorial practices engage caste directly, often through fragmented anatomical forms and claustrophobic installations that evoke structural confinement and epistemic erasure. Independent Dalit performance collectives extend this praxis into the public sphere, enacting symbolic labour, mimicking animal servitude, or carrying burdens that allegorise the historical weight of caste. In each case, the flesh becomes the medium through which the social order is both mirrored and dismantled.

These performances resist assimilation into liberal aesthetics or discourses of cathartic pity. They aim to provoke emotional discomfort, challenge normative spectatorship, and reshape the viewer's ethical relationship with caste. By emphasising the marked, labouring, and wounded body in the civic sphere, Dalit performers transform pain into a political act, humiliation into semiotic power, and silence into embodied knowledge. Pain is not just displayed - it is weaponised. Through their performance, the Dalit body reclaims its presence, narrates its existence, and shatters the regimes that once sought to erase it.

MEDIA ACTIVISM AND EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE: REWRITING FLESH AND VOICE

Against the persistent structures of caste-based epistemic violence and representational exclusion, Dalit media activism emerges as a vital form of counter-performance, one that questions and redefines the dominant visual and discursive economies that have historically objectified, silenced, or spectacularised Dalit embodiment. In the digital era, platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, podcasts, and Twitter are not merely tools for dissemination; they become insurgent spaces where Dalit subjects reclaim agency over both voice and visibility. Here, the body is no longer presented as a passive site of humiliation but reimagined as a creative centre of narration, critique, and emotional resistance.

These digital terrains, characterised by their relative accessibility and participatory structure, promote a decentralisation of narrative authority. They offer alternative channels through which Dalit individuals - especially Dalit women, queer, and trans voices- can engage in what might be called epistemic resistance: reclaiming interpretive frameworks, affective vocabularies, and ontological self-definition. Initiatives such as Dalit History Month, Velivada, The Ambedkarite Pod, and The Blue Dawn exemplify a paradigm shift away from hegemonic media portrayals that commodify Dalit suffering. Instead, these efforts emphasise testimonial sovereignty, rejecting the binary of invisibility and hypervisibility imposed by dominant caste aesthetics.

Podcasts, vlogs, and oral archives, in particular, serve as sonic and affective repositories where the voice is not disconnected from the body but rooted in lived, situated experience. These intimate self-narration technologies challenge the voyeuristic gaze and restore agency to the speaker, making the voice both an epistemological and political act. They reconfigure subjectivity not through mimicry or assimilation but through refusal, rearticulation, and embodied presence. Central to this discursive shift is the intervention of Dalit feminist voices, which have decisively broken the erotic-pain binary that shapes caste-patriarchal imaginaries. Rejecting being categorised within frameworks of passive victimhood or hypersexualised deviance, Dalit feminist expressions reclaim desire, pleasure, and affect as vital sites of political action. Based on Ambedkarite ethics - particularly the focus on *atmabodh* (self-respect), dignity, and moral autonomy - these interventions promote a feminist politics of the body that is both decolonial, anti-caste, and emotionally liberating. The digital space is transformed into more than just a site of resistance; it becomes a space of reclamation: a place for joy, self-expression, relationality, and radical erotic freedom.

The conceptual framework of this praxis is clarified by José Esteban Muñoz's idea of disidentification - a performative

strategy through which queer people of colour navigate dominant cultural scripts by inhabiting and challenging them from within. Dalit media practitioners use a similar disidentificatory logic, transforming tools historically employed for surveillance and control into instruments of subversive world-making. Through irony, mimicry, remix culture, and strategic hypervisibility, they demonstrate that caste is not a naturalised identity but a historically contingent, ideologically maintained construct subject to critique and dismantling.

Ultimately, Dalit digital media activism performs a dual intervention, epistemic and aesthetic, that redefines standards of legibility and recognition. It reclaims the wounded body not as a symbol of deficiency but as a site of expression; the silenced voice not as a residual trace but as a resonant articulation of future possibilities. By reconfiguring flesh and voice on their own terms, Dalit digital actors do more than resist; they undertake a radical re-imagining of existence and what it means to be seen, heard, and felt beyond the confines of caste grammar.

THEORETICAL CONSTELLATIONS: FOUCAULT, AGAMBEN, AMBEDKAR

The exploration of Dalit embodiment - its epistemological excess, affective intensities, and political insurgencies - requires a theoretical framework broad enough to grasp its complex relationship with caste structures, sovereign authority, and historical violence. A triangulated engagement with the key ideas of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and B.R. Ambedkar offers such a framework, allowing a redefinition of the Dalit body not merely as a site of subjugation but as a space of ontological contestation and potentiality. Each thinker provides a conceptual pillar - Foucault's biopolitics, Agamben's bare life, and Ambedkar's radical humanism - which, when examined critically together, highlights the antagonistic logics of domination and the emerging discourses of resistance shaping Dalit corporeality.

Foucault's analysis of biopower - focused on controlling life through surveillance, discipline, and normalisation - renders caste understandable as a historically rooted system of bodily governance. The Dalit body, far from being merely excluded, is incorporated into a system of visibility and control where its prominent presence in workplaces is complemented by rigorous regulation in areas of desire, movement, and social interaction. Caste thus functions not only through legal and political exclusions but also through the molecular embedding of stigma, creating what might be called a caste-specific subjectivity: a body marked, managed, and made intelligible via systems of sanitation, shame, and spatial separation.

Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of homo sacer, the archetypal figure whose life can be violated without legal repercussions, further develops this analysis by emphasising the juridico-theological aspect of caste violence. The Dalit body, persistently subjected to spectacular and everyday forms of harm, inhabits a space of inclusive exclusion, where it is simultaneously controlled and abandoned by the law. This suspension from political and ritual recognition renders the Dalit subject as bare life, a life that can be ended but remains unacknowledged within prevailing moral imaginaries. The structural impunity surrounding caste atrocity is not abnormal but fundamental to a necropolitical order in which Dalit suffering is made both hyper-visible and ontologically disposable.

In radical counterpoint, B.R. Ambedkar advocates a corporeally grounded humanism that rejects both the transcendental idealism of abstract rights and the incrementalism of liberal reform. His vision affirms dignity as an embodied, affective, and sensuous state—a radical insistence on the right to pleasure, sexual autonomy, emotional life, and epistemic agency. Particularly sensitive to the intersectional violence faced by Dalit women, queer, and trans individuals, Ambedkar's thought reclaims the body as a site not only of pain but also of potential, visibility, and joy. His ethical framework shifts the discourse of liberation away from mere legal inclusion towards a revolutionary affirmation of embodied freedom.

Synthesising these theoretical trajectories, one can articulate a critical figure of Dalit flesh as both scarred and sovereign - historically wounded yet active in creating new political imaginaries. The Dalit body does more than just endure violence; it expresses, challenges, and reshapes the semiotics of caste through its rebellious presence. Far from merely being a victim, it stands as a site of ontological assertion and emotional world-making.

This convergence leads to a nascent Dalit ontology of embodiment - an analysis that emphasises affect, desire, and bodily

disruption as central to the praxis of caste abolition. It involves not only exposing violence but also theorising the Dalit body as a vital force that resists, mourns, desires, and envisions differently. Against the structural grammars of caste, it affirms the irreducible multiplicity and unruliness of Dalit life, both as critique and creation.

CONCLUSION

This concluding reflection aims to reconceptualise the Dalit body not merely as a symbol of caste-related injury or systemic dispossession, but as a dynamic space of epistemic rebellion and emotional potential. By examining the intersections of caste, embodiment, and cultural representation, the study advocates a critical theory of radical erotics - one that highlights pain, shame, and desire not just as echoes of oppression but also as disruptive forces capable of transforming prevailing aesthetic and political imaginaries.

Pain, as documented over centuries of caste-based violence, goes beyond mere suffering. Instead, it serves as a mnemonic record - an embodied archive through which histories of marginalisation are remembered, shared, and potentially challenged. Shame, too, must be reinterpreted. While historically used as a mechanism of caste control - creating silences, invisibilities, and the internalisation of social death - it can be reclaimed through performative, narrative, and aesthetic acts that reconceptualise it as a source of political voice and counter-hegemonic presence. Within this emotional framework, desire appears not as a private or pathologised emotion, but as an ontological affirmation - a rejection of abjection and a way of becoming otherwise. However, the project of reclaiming abjection and erotic agency raises ethical questions. Can one use the erotic without recreating the structures of casteist objectification or retraumatising? This remains a key tension in efforts to portray pleasure and sensual autonomy as sites of resistance. The danger of merely repeating the spectacle of suffering under the guise of transgression must be critically examined. Therefore, a radical erotic must carefully balance subversion and repetition, insisting on a politics of representation that considers form, context, and implication.

The stakes here go beyond mere representation; they involve redefining embodied existence itself. What does it mean to inhabit a Dalit body as an agent of desire, visibility, and self-definition, rather than as a figure of lack or excess? A radical Dalit aesthetics should not seek inclusion within mainstream frameworks of aesthetic legitimacy, such as notions of beauty, respectability, or erotic capital, but should instead imagine alternative sensory and symbolic orders where Dalit flesh is neither pathologised nor fetishised, but pulses with its own libidinal and political energy. Ultimately, the radical erotics of Dalit embodiment point towards a speculative horizon where contradiction is not an obstacle but a condition for future potential, remembering without being trapped by pain, desiring without succumbing to commodification, and enacting freedom as a rejection of caste's ontological script. In this radical refusal, corporeal, affective, and insurgent, lies the transformative possibility of a Dalit aesthetic that dares to imagine otherwise.

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