

The story of caste: old and new

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to discuss the Indian caste system and a few concepts with relation to it. The ideas and frameworks that surround it are caste, jati, sanskritization, caste mobility, passing and caste-passing which will be examined too. All these will be deliberated from sociological, anthropological as well as historical perspectives. Therefore, this paper offers an overview of the caste system and through it we are also introduced to other elements like caste mobility, suitability of marriage partners, social and personal relationships that are determined by one's caste are some of the issues brought to fore in this research. Caste mobility whether, it is discussed overtly or lies only as a dormant idea, but nevertheless visible to the Indian or society exclusively or the world at large is an important part in Indian society. The act of either moving up or moving down the caste ladder is not a new issue in India or in Indian fiction and other discourses. This paper shows that there have been efforts made by certain castes or groups to move up the caste ladder. Nevertheless, these attempts involve groups, not individuals. How individuals can pass up the caste ladder will also be discussed using the African-American racial passing paradigm. The act is labeled as caste-passing by Halimah Mohamed Ali (2006, 2011) in her research on this issue. The term is a neology created by her via this research.

Keywords:

caste, jati, sanskritization, caste mobility, caste-passing.

Citation:

Ali, Halimah Mohamed (2016); The story of caste: old and new; Journal of Social Sciences (COES&RJ-JSS), Vol.5, No.4, pp: 459-474;
<https://doi.org/10.25255/jss.2016.5.4.459.474>.

1.INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a few concepts with relation to the Indian caste system and the ideas and frameworks that surround it caste, jati, sanskritization, caste mobility, passing and caste-passing. All these will be discussed from sociological, anthropological as well as historical perspectives. Thus, this paper offers an overview of the caste system. Through the overall idea of the caste system we are also introduced to other elements like caste mobility, suitability of marriage partners, social and personal relationships that are determined by one's caste are some of the issues brought to fore in this research. .

Caste mobility whether, it is discussed overtly or lies only as a dormant idea, but nevertheless visible to the Indian or society exclusively or the world at large is an important part in Indian society. The act of either moving up or moving down the caste ladder is not a new issue in India or in Indian fiction and other discourses. This research shows that there have been efforts made by certain castes or groups to move up the caste ladder. Nevertheless, these attempts involve groups, not individuals. The reason for this will be made clear later in this paper.

However, there is a concept called caste-passing which was introduced by Halimah Mohamed Ali in 2006 in Malaysia through her Ph. D thesis titled "Orientalism from Within: Pandering and Catering to the West in Three Contemporary Indian English Novels" which was later published as a book in 2011 with the title *Orientalism from Within: Arundhati Roy and Her Contemporaries*. These works are concerned with three Indian-English novels and discuss the caste system as well as the act of caste-passing. One of the novels selected for this research presents individual caste mobility. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996) presents the sons of an Untouchable cobbler, having the caste name Mochi, pass up the caste ladder after they train as tailors, and take the caste name Darji. Since individual mobility is seen as impossible in India, this research refers to the passing paradigm present in African-American discourses that discuss the act of passing undertaken by some African-Americans to explain the act that is carried out by the Mochis. By blending caste and passing, it has created the neologism caste-passing to illustrate an individual's act of climbing up the caste ladder. Nevertheless, this research is not an effort to construct a new theory of caste. It is indeed a new way of looking at the act of caste mobility initiated by individuals without the help and support of their caste brethren to escape poverty and prejudice.

This paper is on the other hand is the discussion of the caste system and the act of caste-passing. It will provide the basic information on caste, passing and caste mobility, sanskritization as well as caste-passing.

2. CASTE

This section will discuss the history of the caste system, the ideology that supports it and its divisions. It will also illustrate why it is still practiced in India and how it has evolved since it was introduced. Sociologically much has been written about caste and the caste system.

Research points out that the colonialists initiated discourse and investigation on the caste system in order to understand Indian society. It was also a means used to strengthen their hold on India (Sharma, Ursula 1999). It is generally believed that the Aryans brought the

caste system into India in about 1500 BC. According to Romila Thapar (1966) *A history of India* "Aryan...is a linguistic term indicating a speech group of Indo-European origin..." (Thapar 1966: 27).) It is a name used to refer to the Nordic people who came to India. This research indicates that the term has been universally accepted as referring to race because of its frequent use.

The caste system is a means of division. Initially the Aryans were separated "into three social classes, the warriors or aristocracy, the priests, and the common people" (Thapar 1966: 37). Taboos concerning marriage and eating habits did not exist. These were implemented because the Aryans wanted to set themselves apart from the Dasas, who were the native inhabitants of north India. They feared that assimilation might deprive them of their Aryan identity. Thapar (1966) informs us that the main difference between the Aryans and the Dasas were their skin colour. The Dasas were darker than the Aryans (Thapar 1966: 39). J.H. Hutton (1963) *Caste in India* states the Aryans are reported to have had "fair hair and blue eyes" (Hutton 1963: 6). However, India's history shows that assimilation between the races did occur.

The term caste has undergone a lot of controversy among academicians and researchers. Caste in Sanskrit is referred to as *varna*, meaning colour (Thapar 1966: 39). The word caste that is in use now comes from the Portuguese (Hutton 1963; Lamb, Beatrice Pitney 1968; Stern 1993). According to Hutton the word caste signifies "breed, race or kind" (1963: 47). Hutton argues, "...a *varna* is very far from being the same thing as a caste, the Hindi word for which is *jāti* or *jāt*" (1963: 48). Given the controversy it is difficult to define caste or to explain it.

This paper will illustrate how caste divisions came into existence. It is argued that in the beginning caste stratification occurred between the Aryans and non-Aryans (Thapar 1966: 39). The Aryans are said to be twice-born castes, which consists of the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors and aristocrats) and the Vaishyas (traders). The fourth caste the Shudras (cultivators and servants to the three upper castes) is descendent of the Dasas. Thapar states that initially the Vaishyas were the cultivators, but later social mobility turned them into traders and landowners and the Shudras took their place as cultivators.

The coming into being of the four *varnas* or castes is mentioned in the Hindu religious text the *Rig Veda*. Thapar (1966), Robert W. Stern (1993) *Changing India: bourgeois revolution on the subcontinent* and Tharoor (1997) *India from midnight to the millennium* all quote the myth of creation from the *Rig Veda* to explain the basis of the caste system. Thapar (1966: 39-40) quotes the translated version by A. L. Basham:

When the gods made a sacrifice with the Man as their victim...When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they divide him? What was his mouth, what were his arms, what were his thighs and his feet called? The Brahman was his mouth, of his arms were made the warrior. His thighs became the vaishya, of his feet the shudra was born. With Sacrifice the gods sacrificed to Sacrifice, these were the first of the sacred laws. These mighty beings reached the sky, where are the eternal spirits, the gods.

The ideology supporting the caste system is called *varna dharma*. It upholds the idea of religious purity and also social order among the different castes. According to the hymn, the world and *varna dharma* were created simultaneously.¹ From the hymn we see that

man is divided into different castes and the caste hierarchy depends on which part of the body the caste is derived from. The doctrine of varna dharma emphasises that “mankind is created unequal” (Stern 1993: 56). However, the caste system in its tenets is not about suppression or oppression. It is a system based upon communal strength, each man having a duty to perform towards God and his fellow human beings. My research shows that what started as a noble idea turned out to be oppressive to certain members of the system with the passing of time.

2.1 Varna Dharma

This subsection discusses the Hindu doctrine of varna dharma. It is supported by the idea of dharma, which connects the individual to the duties that he has to perform. Hinduism postulates that it is a person’s karma or fate to be born at a certain social level. He has to fulfill his dharma or duty in this life in order to be born at a better station in the next life.

Varna dharma remains an overall framework in the Hindu caste system. As the society evolved, new groups came into India and were initiated into the caste system and are referred to as jatis. Thapar (1966) prefers to call jatis, sub-castes; meaning that varna is the main caste. However, Stern (1993) and Hutton (1963) argue that caste is jati whilst varna is the framework of the whole system. Varna can be viewed as the mechanism that divides the castes into large groups. Jati plays the part of the day to day functioning of the whole system. There are “thousands of jatis” in India (Hutton 1963: 60). Jatis are “commensal group[s] whose members only dine with each other and on food prepared only by one another...” (Hutton 1963: 61). Due to the food taboo, marriages are not arranged within the varnas, but within the jatis. Emile Senart concludes that only those who are allowed to intermarry can eat together (Senart 1975: 39). Whether marriages are dictated by the food taboo or vice-versa, the fact is caste has dominated Indian life for centuries regardless of the political climate. Since the framework discussed by Thapar is universally accepted, this thesis will employ it to analyze the text.

Modern India still holds fast to the practice of the caste system, which was introduced thousands of years ago. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, states that the caste system has “...survived not only the powerful impact of Buddhism and many centuries of Afghan and Mughal rule and the spread of Islam, but also the strenuous efforts of innumerable Hindu reformers who raised their voices against it” (Nehru 1960: 241). Nehru’s statement that was made from his observation of pre-independent India can still be applied today. According to Hutton (1963: 2):

Even a change of religion does not destroy the caste system, for Muslims, who do not recognize it as valid, are often found to observe it in practice, and there are many Muslim castes as well as Hindu; and when some reforming body breaks away from Hinduism and repudiates caste, it becomes something like a very new caste of its own. Jews and Christians also in India often form castes or bodies analogous to castes.

Stern (1993) argues that though the “ideologies” of the jatis are Hindu they are “Indian” (1993: 241). This is due to the fact that apart from Hindu jatis, there are Christian, Muslim, Jew and Sikh jatis as well in India. Nehru’s, Hutton’s and Stern’s statements are fascinating. They observe that the caste system not only survived the *attack* of numerous cultures and religions upon its stronghold in the Indian cultural context, it also managed to seep into these foreign cultures and religions. The caste system should be as powerful in

India. Senart (1975) points out the power of caste by arguing that the influence of Islam did not dominate or destroy the system; it infiltrated into the Muslim population (1975: 13).

There are many literary texts like Mulk Raj Anand's 1930s classic *Untouchable*, Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1948), Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winner *The God of Small Things* (1997), Vikram Seth's magnum opus *A Suitable Boy* (1991) and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996) discuss the idea of the caste system, stratification and untouchability. Apart from caste stratifications, the novels also portray the dilemma of the Untouchables – those outside the four groups in their relations with the rest of the caste society in India.

Since Untouchables are a group that is excluded from the four varnas they make a fifth group. However, Nehru states: "...no group not even the untouchables, are outside the framework of the caste system" (1960: 251). Like the four varnas that are divided into different jatis, the Untouchables too have their own jatis. Their community also practices marriage and inter-dining taboos and they have their own hierarchical system (Stern 1993; Lamb 1968). Therefore, they are a part of the caste system though they are outside the four varnas. My research shows that Untouchables do menial work such as scavenging, sweeping the roads, removing the skin of dead animals, and attending the funeral grounds. Because of their occupation that is considered to be polluting by the four upper castes they are treated with contempt by the higher in the hierarchy. Even if in this modern day and age the jatis do not practice some of the occupations mentioned above they are still regarded as Untouchables because they are born into the Untouchable jati. The segregation that happens within the Untouchable society is highlighted in Vikram Seth's *ASB* and Rohinton Mistry's *AFB*.

3. DISSENTING VOICES

This section will discuss efforts that have been carried out to challenge the caste system by those who have been victimized. The struggle has involved politicians as well as individuals and groups.

Although the caste system seems to be stagnant and its influence overwhelms the Indians and their way of life, it has been challenged and undergone criticism. Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. Ambedkar voiced their grievances against the atrocities that were inflicted by unjust caste practices upon lower caste groups and Untouchables. The influence of these pre-Independent political leaders affected the thoughts and writings of contemporary Indian writers of the time. Thus, there were many literary works with caste related themes produced. Criticism and pressure by the politicians, social reformers and writers of India upon the practice of untouchability finally led to it being outlawed. It was legally abolished in India on 29 November 1948 by the Constituent Assembly (Eleanor Zelliot 1991: 69). The 1950 Indian Constitution promises all Indians equal opportunities regardless of their caste, religion or gender. Special attention is given to the Untouchables and backward classes to pull them out of poverty.

The caste system as seen today from a modern point of view and environment is oppressive. Yet, it is amazing why those oppressed under the system do not retaliate to the extent that it is possible to overthrow or annihilate it. The reason that this has not happened is simple: religious dogma and to an extent as pointed out by Dipankar Gupta's

(2000) the theory of the Indian middle-class's dependency on the poor to ensure its life style. Gupta's theory can be easily proven via some Indian-English texts, like those discussed by Mohamed Ali (2006 and 2011) in her works as mentioned above. Mohamed Ali argues that although it has been more than fifty years since Untouchability was outlawed in India, yet fictions that deal with the caste system, especially the plight of the Untouchables in India are still being produced. Many Indian-English writers still produce narratives that present caste atrocities and injustices. However, according to her Rohinton Mistry endows his Untouchable characters with agency in the novel *A Fine Balance* via the act of caste-passing. It is employed to free the marginalized individuals from subjugation. To understand the concept of caste-passing it is necessary to understand the concept of passing. This will be discussed in a later section.

3.1 Sanskritization

Sanskritization is a term introduced by M. N. Srinivas to refer to caste mobility in his book *Religion and society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952). His rationale of choosing the term "Sanskritization" over "Brahminization" is because some "vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins and the two other 'twice-born' castes" (Srinivas 1962: 42). Another explanation is that different groups of Brahmins have different habits. Since Sanskritization includes all Brahmins, he does not have to specify which group of Brahmins he is referring to (Srinivas: 42-43). In the next paragraph I explain what it is.

Sanskritization is a process that certain jatis in India go through to claim an upper hierarchy than is accorded to them by birth. A group has to "model or remodel their behaviour - dietary and commensal, familial and occupational, sartorial and so forth - on the behaviour of another local *jati* which is generally regarded in the region or village as enjoying the twice-born status to which the claimant *jati* aspires" (Stern: 67). Yet, even the process of Sanskritization does not guarantee a successful pass. Groups that want to pass may face opposition from both the higher jatis and jatis of parallel social standing (Stern: 67). Therefore, it does not solve the prejudice of casteism.

Despite being a mode of classing-up for lower castes Sanskritization is viewed as "a form of slavery," and not the answer to their problems by certain Untouchable groups in Lucknow (Khare 1995: 161). This perspective is presented in R.S. Khare's essay titled "The body, sensorial, and self of the powerless: remembering/"re-membering" Indian Untouchable women". Though his respondents are Untouchable women, he argues that the slant is not gender biased because the women represent their community. The Untouchables do not want to imitate upper-caste behaviour and way of life. Khare argues that it is difficult to pigeonhole an Untouchable in today's India, because though they are discriminated they fight against it and the categories that they are put into. The Untouchables challenge traditional ways though they are uncertain of the outcome. Since Untouchability and discrimination against the Untouchables are not over they fight their battles albeit in their own way because they know they matter (Khare: 161-163). One of them is their criticism of Khare and individuals like him that I discuss below.

In addition to viewing Sanskritization as a form of subjugation the Untouchables distrust politicians and "modern educated Indians" who they argue show "hollow-sympathies" (Khare: 148). Khare states that his informants insisted that he understand and write from their point of view, because they did not want to be exploited and used by the writer for his own ends. He quotes a respondent as saying, "Try to understand our joy and suffering

from where we are...” (Khare: 148). The Untouchables view the educated Indian as a bogus-protector of their rights and “They sometimes found the educated Indian more ignorant, condescending, confusing, and dangerous than an orthodox Hindu. To some radical reformers, the modern educated Indian was “the new usurper and peddler of the sufferer’s voice” (Khare: 148). Can the perception of the Untouchables be applied to the selected works of fiction? Perhaps the writers who are modern educated Indians utilize the suffering and predicaments of the Untouchables because they know it can sell their books. Misery of the down trodden is a formula applied by the writers to enhance the marketability of their work.

The views of the women are not to be taken lightly. Sociological works are not the only discourses that exploit the Untouchables. Their plight is depicted in the three novels analyzed by Mohamed Ali (2006 and 2011). The exaggerated suffering and redundant pictures are means used to pander and cater to the taste and expectations of a Western market. D. Gupta, labels this as Orientalism from within. Indians become spokespersons for the West and deliver stereotype and exotic images of the natives for the West. Since the West still holds them to be true they are willing to pay an Indian to downgrade his nation (Gupta: 20-21).

4.PASSING

In this section I discuss the term passing, its origin and its significance. I will introduce the different types of passing and why they are performed. I will concentrate on the African-American racial passing because of its resemblance to caste-passing. The passing paradigm and how it is defined in the American context will also be introduced. I end this section with my rationale of the neology, caste-passing, that I have created for the purpose of this research.

Passing in the context of this research refers to an act carried out by individuals to cross set boundaries in order to adopt a new identity. These boundaries can be those stated by the law, by society or by religion. There are many types of passing, one of which is gender passing. Gender passing involves an individual to cross-dress and live as the opposite sex. For example a woman who wants to be known as a man will dress in men’s clothes and behave like a man. Cross-dressing may not necessarily underwrite a person’s sexual preference or indicate his or her psychological set up. An individual may wear the attires of the opposite sex because of economic reasons. He or she may want to gain employment that is only available to the opposite sex.

Gays and lesbians can also be passers. Their passing is labeled as sexual passing. A gay man passes sexually if he poses as a heterosexual male in public. A lesbian passes if she pretends to be a heterosexual female. A heterosexual person may also be passing if he or she pretends to be a homosexual. Race passing requires a person to discard the race that he is born into and identify with another race. The concept of passing in this research is borrowed from this model of passing.

Racial passing is a phenomenon present in American racial politics. In the United States of America a man with one percent African ancestry is defined as black or African by the law no matter what his skin colour or facial features are. This has succeeded in producing a corpus of writing in America that is known as passing discourse.

African-American racial passing discourses deal with individuals who are identified by the law as black, but otherwise look White. The identity crisis is a result of slavery. Those who are familiar with American slave stories would be aware that White men used Black slave women sexually. These women bore Mulatto children. Years of miscegenation between African-Americans and Whites succeeded in producing children that inherited their white ancestors' skin colour as well as features. Their physical features allow these racially mixed individuals to pass into the White world inconclusively or when it suits them.

G. Reginald Daniel (1992) in an article *Passers and pluralists: subverting the racial divide* in root, states that because passing involves so much secrecy it cannot be stated when it precisely began. The general belief is that originally passing was constructed by blacks to escape physical oppression that was brought upon them by slavery, and later by the White man's bias against the black man. Both Elaine K. Ginsberg (1996) and Martha J. Cutter (1996) agree that passing also occurs due to ambition, to get a better paying job, to have more privileges for example better housing and living conditions and also all sorts of social benefits that would be grudged a black man or woman (Ginsberg 1996; Cutter 1996). Gayle Wald (2000) *Crossing the line the line: racial passing in twentieth-century U.S. literature and culture* believes that passing is no longer necessary in present American society. However, Daniel (1992) argues that because of its secretive nature no one can determine if racially mixed blacks have stopped passing. A person who is inventive can pass as many things. Passing should not be confined to the three types already mentioned. It involves disguises, either endowed by nature i.e. skin colour, facial features or man made: clothing, language and cultural practices. Therefore it can be concluded that passing involves creativity and agency.

Passing should also not be seen as an act of classing up. Peter Hitchcock (1994) in an article in *Modern Fiction Studies* titled *Passing: Henry Green and working class identity*, suggests, "What is often naturalized in "passing" is the notion of classing-up...the idea that breaking dress codes - dressing up, dressing for success, etc. - is primarily a desire for upward mobility in order to gain a room at the top...." (4). Nevertheless, there are individuals who pass down the class ladder (Hitchcock: 4). Passing down the class ladder may also be a means to gain privileges that are only awarded to the lower class group.

Who is a passer and why does passing occur? Ginsberg (1996) claims that a passer actually trespassers by crossing social boundaries to take on a new identity in order to escape oppression to gain the privilege of another identity ((Ginsberg 1996: 3). Oppression is the main reason for the occurrence of passing amongst the African-Americans.

In the American context, successful passing occurs only when an individual leaves his community for good. Adrian Piper (1996), in a paper *Passing for white, passing for black* reveals that passing requires a person to disown his family, friends and his past the very moment that he takes up his new identity and enters the white society (Piper 1996: 244). Martha J. Cutter (1996) argues that passing is not only connected to race, it is also a means used to be treated as a human being and an equal by others (Cutter 1996: 75). Both arguments are applicable in the Western context because the society is an individualistic society and individual identity matters more than group identity. When applying this

argument to caste passing one must consider the fact, social groups play a large role in the everyday lives of Indians. Social mobility is not a new thing in the caste system, historically jati groups have moved up the scale, either by improving themselves economically, or the position being awarded to them by the king (Lamb 1968, Hutton 1963 and Stern 1993). In the caste context, as has been revealed above, mobility does not mean breaking ties with one's community and family. When caste movement occurs it has to be in a group due to religious and cultural dogmas that surround the Indian way of life.

4.1 Passing Paradigm

Although passing is a borrowed term from another continent when applied to caste movement in India, it helps to characterize a social movement that has not been clearly labeled, though it is discussed by sociologists, historians, ethnographers, as well as depicted in works of fiction. The passing paradigm which I use to read the act of caste passing in AFB has only come into being in the 1990s, although there have been passing fictions or passing discourses traced as far back as the days of slavery in America. This paradigm is quite new and has yet to be exhausted by researchers.

Diana Rebekkah Paulin's *Staging Miscegenation: Re Viewing Cross-Racial Liaisons in United States Drama and Fiction* (1999) and Andrea Kelsey Newlyn's *Righting the Racial Code: Narrative and Race (Nineteenth Century, Twentieth Century, Passing Texts, Transracial Narratives)* (1999) explore race-passing literature. Paulin questions static notions of black and white racial binaries by using late nineteenth and early twentieth century American drama and fiction. She suggests that the crossing of racial boundaries should not be reproved but promoted.

Newlyn (1999) in her thesis concentrates on transracialism, rather than passing. She situates her thesis within passing discourse, but she explores the relationship between narrative and race by using texts that depict transracial movement - movement from black to white or white to black. She argues that passing texts are set within the paradigms of racialised economies, whereas transracial texts both reproduce and challenge these paradigms.

Paulin's and Newlyn's works indicate that both use passing discourses to read American literary texts that deal with the question of race i.e. black and white binaries. But Newlyn goes a step further, she uses the passing paradigm, that is passing from black to white and applies it to texts which she labels as transracial, that work both ways. The characters are either whites that take up black identity or blacks that don white identity.

Transracialism is also present in Gayle Wald's *Crossing the line: racial passing in twentieth-century U.S. literature and culture* (2000). Wald juxtaposes race and academic knowledge and argues that, "...both are social product[s] mediated by histories and culture" which they "translate and interpret" (Wald 2000: 2). Wald states that racial passing came into prominence as an object of academic study since 1986 when Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) was republished. Ever since then racial passing has generated much debate and discourse within academia. Wald analyses racial passing narratives to show the flexibility and powerfulness of race and she argues that the act of passing reflects "a strategic appropriation of race's power" (2000: 10). I go on to explain the relationship between race and caste.

Race and caste are similar entities in the sense that humankind is born into them. Only later in life the influence of either race or caste is realized and challenged. Although sociological and ethnographical writings on caste and caste-passing have been identified, I have not come across any research that has been carried out on the representation of caste-passing in Indian-English fiction or Indian fiction. Apart from that the sociology and ethnography research that concerns caste mobility have not looked into nor have they juxtaposed the African-American based racial passing paradigm with caste mobility in India due to its newness.

4.2Caste-passing

In this section I will discuss the term caste-passing that has been developed with the help of the passing paradigm. In contrast to the studies mentioned this research does not use the terms social mobility and sanskritization for certain reasons. Firstly social mobility is a very loose term. It can be used to refer to class movement as well as caste movement. Sanskritization, which was introduced by M.N. Srinivas in 1952, concerns social movement within a caste, but only upward caste movement, that involves, religious rituals and habits which are modeled upon the Brahminical way of life. Yet the novels under research do not portray caste movement that concerns Hindu or other religious activities. Caste-passing that is used in this research refers to an upward movement - a improving one's social position, that will be identified as passing up. Passing down refers to the act of ascending the caste ladder, may occur because an individual has been excommunicated by society or due to the fact that she/he wants to gain privileges, which are awarded to the subaltern society. However, this issue is not tackled in this research. Caste-passing that is discussed in this study is more a social economic phenomenon rather than a religious circumstance.

Though differing from sanskritization it does not mean that caste-passing is uncomplicated. Unlike African-American race passing it does not involve simple binary categories i.e. black-white, man-woman or heterosexual-homosexual. The varna is divided into many jatis, so in order for a passer to identify with a varna he has to identify with a jati first, the main reason for sanskritization. In India a man or a woman is nothing without associating himself/herself with a group. His/her life from the moment she/he is born until she/he dies includes rituals that involve his/her social group or jati. These rituals may probably not be conducted by members of other jatis, because of the purity-pollution theory. In AFB though the characters called the Mochi brothers pass from cobblers to tailors, they only do it to escape poverty and oppression. However, when it comes to choosing a marriage partner, the girl that is selected for Narayan is from her own caste. Thus, this emphasizes the importance of caste to the Indian life style as has been discussed above.

Passing, when it is connected to the caste system raises doubts about the sanctity of a system that has been in use for centuries. Applied to the caste system passing implies that caste is not static. One does not have to wait for death to change one's status in life. It can be done in this life, though the boundary crossing may cause chaos in a society. Passing provides a society with agency to create a difference. This is postulated in a few Indian novels i.e. through Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

The notion that surrounds caste-passing is that it can dismantle an institution as old as

caste. Nevertheless, it is not shown as successful in the fiction. The writer, extends or recycles the theme that has been explored by older writers like Mulk Raj and Bhabhani Bhattacharya. The author is pandering to a Western audience and markets caste-passing. Nevertheless, it is rendered hopeless in the fiction. Since, the West does not picture the Other as successful, the age-old stereotypes of Western Orientalism of the inferior native that is suffering are reproduced in *A Fine Balance* by Mistry who resides in Canada.

However, there is a concept called caste-passing which was introduced by Halimah Mohamed Ali in 2006 in Malaysia through her Ph. D thesis titled “Orientalism from Within: Pandering and Catering to the West in Three Contemporary Indian English Novels” which was later published as a book in 2011 with the title *Orientalism from Within: Arundhati Roy and Her Contemporaries*. These works are concerned with three Indian-English novels and discuss the caste system as well as the act of caste-passing. One of the novels selected for this research presents individual caste mobility. Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1996) presents the sons of an Untouchable cobbler, having the caste name Mochi, pass up the caste ladder after they train as tailors, and take the caste name Darji. Since individual mobility is seen as impossible in India, this research refers to the passing paradigm present in African-American discourses that discuss the act of passing undertaken by some African-Americans to explain the act that is carried out by the Mochis. By blending caste and passing, it has created the neologism caste-passing to illustrate an individual’s act of climbing up the caste ladder. Nevertheless, this research is not an effort to construct a new theory of caste. It is indeed a new way of looking at the act of caste mobility initiated by individuals without the help and support of their caste brethren to escape poverty and prejudice.

5.CONCLUSION

This research on the caste system shows that to write about caste is to write about India. The fictions that deal with caste and caste passing themes use these to offer elements that are indigene to India, which are exotic to Western gaze. Caste is a crucial part of India and this paper explores how it is diversified.

This paper has discussed the concepts related to the Indian caste system and the ideas and frameworks that surround it such as caste, jati, sanskritization, caste mobility, passing and caste-passing. They have been discussed using the sociological, anthropological as well as historical perspectives. It is an overview of the caste system including caste mobility, suitability of marriage partners, social and personal relationships that are determined by one’s caste,

Caste mobility whether, it is discussed overtly or lies only as a dormant idea, but nevertheless visible to the Indian or society exclusively or the world at large is an important part in Indian society. The act of either moving up or moving down the caste ladder is not a new issue in India or in Indian fiction and other discourses. As discussed above there have been efforts made by certain castes or groups to move up the caste ladder. Nevertheless, these attempts involve groups, not individuals, unlike the African-American racial passing. .

Notes

¹ Stern provides a detail explanation of this in Stern, Robert W., *Changing India: bourgeois revolution on the subcontinent*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, 54-56.

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