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Negotiating caste, gendered and colonial subjectivities in the neoliberal academy

Zusammenfassung

Verhandlungen von Kaste, genderspezifischen und kolonialen Subjektivitäten in der neoliberalen akademischen Welt

Dieser Beitrag zeigt hegemoniale akademische Normen, denen Forschende unterworfen sind, und wie diese die mit ihrer Subjektposition verbundenen Privilegien erkennen. Ich berichte vom schwierigen Verhandeln meiner Privilegien, insbesondere der Kastenzugehörigkeit, im Kontext meiner Marginalisierungserfahrungen als ‚*Frau aus der Dritten Welt*' in der europäischen Wissenschaftswelt. Diese wettbewerbsbedingte Unsicherheit ist Ausdruck einer neoliberalen Logik von Unternehmertum und Verantwortung sowie der kastenbasierten Logik von *Verdienst und Verdienen*. In der Wissenschaft als Feld der Wissensproduktion ist Macht historisch in den Händen einer kleiner werdenden Elite verfestigt. Konkurrenzdenken und Unsicherheit führen zu eigennützigen Forschungsmethoden, wodurch hegemoniales Wissen produziert und der (politische) Forschungskontext außer Acht gelassen wird. Kaste wird mit Geschlecht, Kolonialität, Fähigkeiten, Sexualität und Ethnie (sowie weiteren Subjektivitäten) als intersektionaler Koproduzent von Ausgrenzung thematisiert. Das Aufzeigen der kastenbasierten imperialistischen Logik ist wichtig, um Privilegien zu entschlüsseln, die Elitismus und Ausgrenzung in Wissenschaft und Wissensproduktion hervorbringen.

Schlüsselwörter
Kaste, Neoliberalismus, Subjektivierung, Privilegien, Wissensproduktion

Summary

This paper highlights how researchers are subjugated through hegemonic academic norms and how they simultaneously recognize the privileges attached to their subject positions. I illustrate difficulties in negotiating my privileges, particularly of caste, and my experiences of marginalisation as a '*third world woman*' in the European academy. Such competitive insecurity is illustrative of both neoliberal logics of enterprise and responsibility as well as caste-based logics of *merit and deservingness*. Academia as a field of knowledge production historically consolidates power in the hands of a shrinking set of elites. Attitudes of competition and uncertainty produce subjects that turn to self-interested modes of acquiring and analysing data, thereby producing hegemonic knowledges, which ignores the situatedness and politics of the research context. Caste is addressed together with gender, coloniality, ability, sexuality and ethnicity (among other subjectivities) as an intersectional co-producer of exclusion. Invoking caste-based imperialist logics is essential for unpacking the privileged subjectivities that produce elitism and exclusion in academia and in knowledge production.

Keywords
caste, neoliberalism, subjectivation, privilege, knowledge production

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1 Introduction

The academy in its various forms and manifestations produces the academic who in turn co-constructs the academy. The relationship, co-constitutive as it is, is often deceitful, neglectful, stressful and demanding, rewarding and importantly forever in the making and unmaking. It is possible to be fully immersed and accept all the terms that are offered for being a specific kind of academic (for example entrepreneurial, well-published and highly networked) from the first orientation class at a PhD program, and it is also possible to keep hesitantly accepting some of these terms whilst one negotiates one's prospects, privileges and senses of self. The present work is a confluence of similar conversations that I have had with myself, during the process of writing my doctoral dissertation and crafting a somewhat volatile yet necessary sense of personhood during my formative years as an early career scholar. Through an illustration of experiences, particularly those of interactions with academic peers in India and Switzerland, I discuss the nuanced process of being formed as a subject, within a (neoliberal[1]) academic environment (Davies 2005). I present how the experiences of marginality as a '*third world woman*' researcher in Swiss academia led to questioning of caste privileges obtained from social stratification in India (I belong to an "upper" caste). I elaborate on how intersecting privileges and marginalities may provide a platform to reflect on and change the research practices and ethics fostered by us. In these accounts, caste status plays a central role in addition to gendered and neoliberal academic discourses, in producing anxiety, competition and insecurity. As I will argue, there is a key difference in the way that caste and neoliberal subjectivities function for a privileged subject from an "upper" caste[2]. Neoliberalism makes individuals responsible for their socio-economic success and failure (Duggan 2012) thereby producing a sense of precarity and a loss of support or community (Bansel/Davies 2010). The gendered neoliberalised academia produces a sense of hyper-visibility and requires women to take responsibility for their career tracks, through discourses of productivity, efficiency and competition (Liption 2017).

Discourses of competition and insecurity are also produced within caste-based regimes (Yengde 2019). The caste system constructs "upper" caste people as a privileged class and through generations of practised defence of this privilege (Teltumbde 2018) produces a presumed sense of precarity for "upper" caste persons. This makes privileged "upper" caste people, like myself, exaggerate our senses of victimhood (Yengde 2019) and reproduce competition and insecurity within the academy. As a *third world*

1 The invocation of neoliberalism in this paper comes with a specific reference to the Foucauldian idea of an economic tribunal (Lemke 2001), a meaning-making system where subjects and institutions are regarded as market actors and all aspects of life are produced through economic values of efficiency, enterprise, freedom and autonomy (Brown 2015). I posit that as academics, our subjectivities may increasingly be shaped within and through neoliberal logics (Berg/Huijbens/Larsen 2016) and this poses challenges to our engagement with discourses of social justice.

2 The deisgnations of "upper" and "lower" caste are questioned here by putting them in quotation marks. These are not categories – the words "upper" and "lower" signify the imperialist presumption that one caste (or set of castes) is superior than another. However, this is the very oppressive and stereotype that has been challenged historically by "lower" caste people. Thus the quotation marks on both "upper" can "lower" indicate historically constructed categories that are being problematised and challenged.

woman[3] academic, I experience precarity with simultaneous experiences of privilege through caste. Therefore, my life as an academic swings between these systems of power, privilege and marginality. It is through simultaneous engagement with the intersecting aspects of my subjectivity – in terms of gender, caste, coloniality, ethnicity and class among others – that I am able to envision a resignified subject in myself – one that is reflexive of the power and privilege involved in the processes of research and in the production of "knowledge"[4].

The findings and discussion section of this paper presents the possibilities of resignification in the discourses of caste, hierarchy and neoliberalism. Overall, I ask the question how can the thwarting of privilege in one setting be the cause of investigation and checking of privilege in another? How can we, through parallel inquiries into our intersecting subjectivities ensure we can scrutinise our privileges, not only as academic producers of "knowledge" but also as social actors and beings?

This work is unique in the manner of its simultaneous engagement with narratives of caste and neoliberalism, presenting the importance of the caste lens in analysing insecurity and competition within the academy. The aim is to generate discussions with scholars interested in issues of intersectionality, positionality and enquire into modes of subjectivation that could lead to the self-motivated questioning of unchecked privilege – not only of caste but of gender, ethnicity, coloniality, ability, age, gender identity, sexuality and class among other situated forms of privilege.

2 Literature and theoretical review

Brunila and Valero (2018) locate academic anxiety with the increasing sense of precarity in neoliberal academic institutions, where academic subjects are constantly produced as insufficient, through neoliberal enterprise logics and ways of governing. Holland, Lorenzi and Hall (2016) relate this anxiety partly to how performance assessment is quantifiably measured and organised within neoliberal institutional spaces. Loveday (2018) analyses this anxiety as a growing precarity in employment contracts. In particular, the gendered dimensions of such precarity and fatigue (Poggio 2018) are produced not only through the commodification of labour leading to gendered differences in hiring, pay and promotion but also due to constant scrutiny of our abilities to produce *neutral* "knowledge" (Harding 1995).

However, particularly in the Indian context, I posit that apart from gendered and neoliberal ideas of performance, scrutiny, competition, responsibility among others

3 The categories of *third* and *first* world are non-homogenous and are treated as such by the author – particularly in presenting caste-based differences. However, in this paper the term third world woman is invoked by the author to explain her lived experience of being an outsider (a woman from a *third world country*) in Switzerland.

4 In order to question the fixed notion of there being one single unified and recognized scientific "knowledge", I use so-called scare quotes around "knowledge" for the purpose of questioning the dominance and fixity of Western epistemologies which regard Western paradigms as the only ones capable of producing reliable "knowledge" and Western subjects as the only reliable bearers and producers (often extractors) of such "knowledge". This questioning of "knowledge" is in line with both poststructuralist (Bacchi/Goodwin 2016) and decolonial (Quijano 2007) schools of thought.

(Fernandes 2018), the historicity of the caste system is exigent to be regarded as co-constitutive in experiences of anxiety. There is a history of oppressor regimes associated with "upper" castes due to our complicity and direct perpetration of forced occupational and educational segregation (Ambedkar 1935; Irudayam/Mangubhai/Lee 2014), constructed ideas of *merit and deservingness* (Teltumbde 2018) and concentration of wealth by "upper" caste people (Jangam 2017). I argue further that for researchers privileged through social stratifications such as ethnicity, caste, class, physical ability, sexuality and gender identity the precarity of the neoliberal academy is an important state of flux, to encourage reflection on other privileges. I am not implying that we ignore or neglect the fear of underperforming or the narratives of *deservingness* and the sense of urgent efficient work, financial precarity or material vulnerabilities that neoliberal regimes have instilled in us. Rather I suggest that specific attention to our subjectivation as subjects of precarious and insecure labour may help us to engage more deeply and substantially with the taken-for-grantedness of our privileged meaning systems.

This paper takes a critical and poststructuralist turn concerning the inquiry into subjecthood and modes of subjectivation for academic scholars (Flynn 2017). We are produced through discourses of both privilege and marginality. With Butler (1997), I argue that a subject's conditions of existence are produced through power and that the possibilities of resignification, resistance and alteration are also produced through the subject's engagement with and embodying of this power. Additionally, with Ambedkar (1935), I argue that the caste system instils a false sense of superiority and quashes the democratic imagination of the "upper" caste members of society – distorting the very basis of equality (Waghmore/Contractor 2015). This inherent superiority in turn generates an illusion of mastery (Alcoff 1991) thereby confining "knowledge" production in the hands of a narrow elite and producing some self-appointed *elite* subjects as more *viable* and *worthy* knowledge bearers/producers than others (Pathania/Tierney 2018).

The confinement of "knowledge" production privileges has been studied from the lens of gendered power – Harding (1995) notes that feminist knowledge may often be pronounced less value-neutral or less objective than conventional research. Further, the notion of objectivity in research has been questioned by critical (Gannon/Davies 2007), feminist (Haraway 1989), intersectional (Collins 2003) and decolonial (Quijano 2007) scholars. I follow these scholars in critiquing the intersectionally discriminatory academic practices that allot lower epistemic credibility to "knowledge" produced by caste-oppressed scholars.

Systems such as coloniality, ethnicity, caste and ability produce an illusion of a deserving body and a worthy bearer/producer of "knowledge" (Pohlhaus 2017). Teltumbde (2018) writes in the context of India's economy that caste-free neoliberalism is a myth. As much as discourses of competition are causing a widespread sense of precarity and insecurity in most of us, "lower" castes in India, dispossessed of land and capital and increasingly pushed into informal (exploitable) markets, are produced as *uncompetitive* (Teltumbde 2018). Neoliberalism has been observed to enmesh together with contextually situated forms of oppression (Ong 2006) such as caste, ethnicity and coloniality – and in the case of caste, it combines to strengthen its oppressive tendencies through powers of freedom, merit, enterprise (Teltumbde 2018) and interconnections of discourses of *merit, deservingness, competition* and *ethical research*.

Methodologically, an approach called *thinking with theory* (Jackson/Mazzei 2013) is applied here. The memos and notes written during my thesis are plugged into theoretical foundations of subjectivation (Butler 1997), gender (Ivancheva/Lynch/Keating 2019) and caste as an oppressive epistemological paradigm (Ambedkar 1935, 2022). The form of inquiry and writing professed here is critical and reflexive (Jones/Calafell 2012). I present a personal narrative inquiry to bring out the "selves behind the projects" (Halberstam 1998: 63) and reflect on my writing, research and doctoral journey to ask how I have produced the "knowledge" and what exclusions were (or continue to be) produced through my caste privilege. The expected contribution of this form of writing is to engage with reflexive ethics that dislocate the overdetermination of objectivity and, through the reflections on my experiences, acknowledge the presence of hierarchy, social stratifications and inequalities within academic cultures and spaces (Hammonds 1997).

During the course of my doctoral degree, I had to contend with the exclusions I perpetrated within caste-based discourses and the possibilities of resignification therein. I have since come to believe that it is perhaps more fruitful to place discussions of dominance and subversion right alongside instances of privilege and strategic collaboration within academia to balance out our narratives and illustrate how discourses of privilege and marginality work. While discourses do put limits on allowability and constitute us as specific subjects – within our very reproduction of these discourses – lie possibilities of resignification and the potential to act upon the power that acts upon us (Butler 1997).

3 Caste-based and neoliberal power systems

India has a system of affirmative action that is referred as the *quota* or the *reservation system* (Subramanian 2019). This system grants a fixed percentage of seats in all state-run organisations (including educational institutions) to those historically and currently experiencing oppression based on caste. These policies of reservation were and continue to be vehemently opposed by privileged "upper" caste persons on the grounds that they defy the norms of merit and only those considered to be truly deserving and worthy of entry into prestigious institutions must qualify through fair competition and not a quota. This belief is unfounded on real data and ignorant of the continued statistics of violence, rape, economic and social dispossession done by "upper" caste persons unto lower caste people (Jahnavi/Sathpathy 2021).

3.1 Merit and deservingness

When I began my doctoral degree, one of the first things a colleague told me was to thank God there is no quota for "lower" castes in the PhD intake system. This statement uttered by an "upper" caste person – on the lack of quotas – indicates not only relief about the presumed idea of absolute merit prevailing in this institution but also the physical absence of the bodies of those marginalised through caste – thus making it a fiefdom of "upper" caste impunity (Pathania/Tierney 2018). There is a history of oppressive exclusion of lower caste people, even when admitted through quotas, in India's

higher education institutions (Sukumar 2023; Rukmini 2019). I do not fully agree with the statement, but what I did identify with was my own *deservingness* to be at this prestigious institution for my PhD. Neoliberal discourses of enterprise and competition led me to believe that the hard work I had put in to secure an admission deserved recognition. Caste mentalities on *merit* were interwoven with neoliberal logics of enterprise.

At another gathering soon after my intake into this (largely) "upper" caste institution we screened Chimamanda Adiche's TED talk *The Dangers of a Single Story*[5] during a discussion on India's caste system. At the end of the talk when asked for feedback, one of my "upper" caste colleagues exclaimed:

> "[T]his was a brilliant talk and it only goes to show that it is high time that lower caste people stopped sticking to their story of oppression and let go of the reservation quota system. We have wasted much of our time and energy in our youth to get admissions into educational institutions that took in less meritorious people because of quota system. We deserved those seats and now they are occupied by incompetent people." (Thesis memo dated 12 April 2019)

This person was joined in agreement by many others in the class. Once again, I did not agree but I also did not show my disagreement lest I loose the goodwill cultivated with them. While I was aware that silence makes us complicit (Chrispal/Bapuji/Ziestema 2021), the value of speaking up never outweighed the fear of loss of a network (Shahjahan 2019), the fear of angering even one person from the caste-neoliberal university order. I was the Butlerian subject seeking "the sign of its own existence outside itself" (Butler 1997: 20). My caste identity was solidified only through confirmation from others like me whose approval and validation of my existence was made to appear as a coveted achievement.

The historicity of the caste system includes oppression, deprivation and deliberate, organised acts of exclusion by "upper" caste persons (Narula 1999). The scope of such violence, at the physical, psychological and interpersonal level extends beyond the reservation system which appeared relatively recently in the history of caste dynamics (Teltumbde 2018). Yet, the "upper" caste society, particularly academic and educational systems, hold reservations as the central warrant to support our ongoing apologist and exclusionary institutional mechanisms. In context of neoliberal and racial regimes of power, Davis (2011) notes a similar phenomenon whereby women on welfare bear the brunt of judgement and societal violence in neoliberal policies making their position precarious. Similar experiences with respect to class are noted in the European context in the work on the cultural transmission of social inequality (Andersen/Hansen 2012). According to Bourdieu (1986, 1996), the culture of elite classes can be mimicked to variable extents, by others, and the success of students in educational systems depends not purely on notions such as merit but on their class and cultural capital.

While regularly subjecting "lower" caste others to scrutiny of *merit*, I was never, as an "upper" caste academic in an "upper" caste academia, questioned about my *deservingness* or the ethics (Rose 2012) and rigour of my research. However, this changed with my arrival in Europe. During my tenure as a postdoctoral scholar in Switzerland, I began studying comparative perspectives on *neoliberal nationalisms* – with India and Switzerland as my case studies. As a policy studies researcher and a person who has

5 Published at TED global in 2009. Date of access: 1 December 2023 at: https://rb.gy/zo740g.

lived and worked in both countries, I could identify many parallels between Indian and Swiss forms and manifestations of nationalisms. When I began introducing this work to my peers, I was asked if I felt comfortable researching a context so unknown (to me). Would the lack of knowledge about the Swiss context not make it difficult to uncover the complexities and peculiarities of the Swiss case?

The above encounter lasted about thirty minutes during which I was justifying to my peers, why this discomfort that they feel with a non-Swiss person doing research on *their context*, has been a routinely sanctioned form of inquiry by Western paradigms of "knowledge" onto the *third world* (Escobar 2011). Such "knowledge" extractivism is what has helped keep the careers of many academics (including myself) alive and has won us accolades and rewards.

However, as I uttered these words, I became aware of the paradoxes of being a marginalised subject in the academic environment. As this *third world woman academic* subject, there is a historicity attached to my position that is at once resisted by this subject but that has also produced and sustained this subject[6] (Butler 1997). Among these paradoxes is a significant one regarding my *merit and deservingness* – I am an Indian academic who is a colonial *other* and therefore assumed to be not capable of offering insights on the West's epistemic zero point (Mignolo 2011). This produces me as someone only relegated to my own context and culture and lacking the objectivity to analyse the Western/European socio-political milieu. As a woman in a qualitative research context, I have also been at the receiving end of inquiries that question the objectivity and rigour of my research (Acker/Barry/Essweld 1983). Further, I am in a sense *not allowed* to make knowledge claims about *first world* lives and subjects because in the colonial "knowledge" paradigm, expertise flows from the global North to the South and cannot flow the other way around.

This insight when applied to the caste-based "knowledge" producing part of my subjecthood – offers a chance to reflect on my caste privileges. "Lower" caste scholars are often questioned about their objectivity while producing "knowledge" about the caste system[7]. They are not "a free subject of thought and action" (Said 1995, cited in Kapoor 2001: 562). Ambedkar (1935, 2022) describes at length the measures historically in place to ensure the continued exclusion of Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi (DBA)[8] persons. Acts of resistance by DBA communities have consistently been punished, while

6 It is important to recall that while I talk about my individual experiences, the idea of being a subject and of being subjectivated, as discussed by Butler (1997) involves understanding that a subject is not an individual but rather a "structure in formation" (Butler 1997: 10). The subject is a formation and reification of historical effects of various discourses. For instance, being an 'upper' caste Indian woman in European academia has various meanings that I did not choose but that were produced for me through the effects of various colonial, caste-based and gendered historicities.

7 Ruth Manorama, in conversation with Meena Kandasamy. Available at www.youngfeminists.wordpress.com/2007/12/27/on-caste-and-patriarchy-an-interview-with-ruth-manorama/.

8 *Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi* is a consolidated term often invoked by those who are part of anti-caste resistance. While the term *Dalit* invokes what we term as scheduled caste or those who are classified as belonging to "lower" castes as per the Government of India (excluding other backward categories), the term *Adivasi* refers to tribal or Indigenous peoples. The term *Bahujan* literally translates to "majority of the people" and is invoked to imply that caste is not just a concern for oppressed castes but for all (including the "upper" caste peoples). These terms are used across religions to denote oppressed castes. Description paraphrased from Valiammal Karunakaran's article in Medium. Published 14 July 2016, retrieved 6 October 2021.

an anxiety and constructed sense of vulnerability persists among "upper" caste people (Yengde 2019). Particularly DBA women's capacities as subjects of knowledge and their epistemic credibility are scrutinised (Rao 2018). Thus, gendered and caste-based systems of power produce intersectional discrimination for DBA women in academia (Renukuntla/Gundemeda 2023). I seek not to equate or co-opt the experiences of DBA women with my own, but to show how the experience of marginality as a *third world woman* scholar in Switzerland allowed me to problematize my privileges as an "upper" caste woman researcher in India.

3.2 Intersectionality of gender and caste

Competition-driven anxiety, combined with an institutionally confirmed belief in my superior status as a "knowledge" producer, further turned me towards self-interested modes of inquiry. For instance, I began misrepresenting entire communities, with a presumed sense of objectivity. This translated into the belief that incorporating caste in my thesis on sexual harassment at workplaces (SHW), was a choice I had to make.

"Adding caste analysis to an already complicated thesis data set appears difficult. It might be more sensible to include it as a couple of endnotes in the dissertation documents as it takes the focus away from gendered and sexual violence. Publication also might become tedious because I might have to explain the entire caste system in every research paper – the number of outlets that will publish this is also not sure. I think most American journals might not [publish it]."
(Thesis memo dated 21 December 2018)

Not only did I disregard the intersectionality of caste and gender, which are inextricable parts of each other in the Indian context (Anandhi/Kapadia 2017), but I was harbouring the illusion that objective research was possible to achieve by entirely isolating gender from caste and disregarding the important role caste status plays in the constitution of sexual violence in India (Geetha 2017). However, on the neglect of caste in my research questions and proposals, I was questioned while in Switzerland as a visiting doctoral scholar. While at the University of Bern, I was asked to partake in a workshop where I presented my thesis work on sexual harassment policies in India. I declared that I was aware that caste is important to this study, but that I was not sure of how to incorporate it in my work because I was not able to find any evidence on it. At this time, a Swiss scholar of colour studying anti-racism asked me:

"If you cannot find policy documents mentioning caste and its importance for gender-based violence, does that not imply a politics of neglect and stigma? I work on race and often not finding documents mentioning race signals to me a social imaginary that race has been solved as a problem. Such avoidance cultures translate into avoidant policies. This makes it even more important to study caste, don't you think?"
(Thesis memo dated 4 November 2019)

The brazen manner in which I was skirting past caste was not only spotted but this "open secret" (Sholock 2007: 128) was also made explicit. The illusion I had built around my own mastery and entitlement to do feminist research as a woman scholar, was questioned through the lens of critical race and anti-caste studies. I was made aware of the lack of intersectionality in my analysis and specifically of the neglect of caste and therefore the compromise on ethics in my research. Moreover, even though I called myself a scho-

lar of intersectionality studies, caste for me was something that happened "somewhere else" (Pandian 2002: 1735) – either in rural India or in informal work environments.

Further, within the Swiss context, as I could later observe, race and class were both functioning together with gendered inequality to produce experiences of marginality for students and academics (De Martin 2022). These were not just identity factors that could be observed in isolation to each other, but critically contributed to inequal experiences and structured marginality that I had neglected due to a lack of deliberation on positionality. The above exchange led me to remember that intersectionality and reflexivity are crucial to the feminist and critical methods I was invoking and that I would be questioned on my ethics and reflexivity.

Turning my attention to caste privilege allowed me to reflect on the intersections of gender, caste, race (among other marginalisations) and their attendant effects (Pereira 2019) on the ideas of *merit*. These systems of power rely especially on producing superior vs. inferior knowers (Fricker 2017) where the sense of entitlement of the superior produces a distorted idea of vulnerability. Being produced as an *inferior* knower as a *third world woman* in the European context, I began questioning my self-imposed superior status as a knowledge producer in the Indian context.

3.3 Research and publications

Having trained under the paradigm *publish or perish*, I began producing knowledge from sole the point of view of publishing it. If the idea did not appear marketable to a publishing house, I was not willing to undertake research on it, even if it was crucial to my research context. Butler's discussion of what she calls the *circuits of conscience*, finds meaning here.

> "Rather, I would suggest that the subject who would oppose violence, even violence to itself, is itself the effect of a prior violence without which the subject could not have emerged." (Butler 1997: 64)

What Butler refers to above as the "effect of a prior violence" is the violence of coloniality and the fixed definitions of "knowledge" (Quijano 2007) that I was trying to oppose. Thus, on the one hand, I had been trying to forge myself as a credible producer of "knowledge" in the Western paradigm, supported by caste-based ideals of *merit and deservingness*; on the other hand, I was ignoring ethical rigour and the importance of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) in my research practices. While engaging with my insecurities, I had entirely omitted from reflexive thinking (Rose 2012) the importance of caste-privilege in producing me as a knowledgeable subject.

Efforts to escape the neoliberal values of merit, positivity and hard work, meant admitting that hegemonic colonial, racist and sexist values deter possibilities of life and expression for marginalised communities. Acknowledging my marginalisation through discourses of racism meant also acknowledging my privilege through a dominant caste position and the presumed superiority of "knowledge" attached to it. This contestation proceeds at times with my reflexive self, noticing it as it happens. I catch myself thinking about how I read and reproduce "knowledge". Do I ever truly reckon with my privileged status and its benefits within academia? Do I use neoliberal precaritisation and commodification of academic policies and practices, as excuses for only undertaking

convenient research projects? Do I focus only on projects that have the potential for funding and publication – at the cost of ensuring rigour through reflexive research about my caste position?

Disabusing myself of the absoluteness of merit, hard work and enterprise was a slow process of recognising the historicity of my subjecthood in the caste-based, racial, colonial and gendered matrices of power. Academic insecurity and the rise of neoliberal academia makes it impossible to do epistemic justice (Fricker 2017). Caste privilege enmeshes with neoliberal academia to produce an epistemically unequal set of *others* – including gendered, caste-based, ethnic and religious *others* (Ambedkar 1935). Fashioning a sense of self (Lorey 2006) that regards ethical and rigorous knowledge production as an important part of academic achievement was a slow and painful process. An important part of doing research in critical and feminist praxis involved internal dialogue that could produce a sense of political love (Siegl/Jokela-Pansini 2017) beyond the confines of academic institutions. This meant including, citing, listening to and engaging with scholars of racial inequality, intersectionality, class inequality and caste oppression. It meant reshaping my assumptions about merit and cultural capital – not merely as measurement of abilities but as techniques of inequalisation (Bourdieu 1996) and resignifying it through the questioning of established bodies of "knowledge" (Ramdas 2020).

Neoliberal subjecthood is becoming impossible to escape as a third world researcher in a first world context – where the racial, gendered, caste-based superiority of the researcher may become more important than our work or the substance of our arguments. However, these practices serve as a constant reminder to keep self-confessing the epistemic privileges and their material consequences that have advantaged and supported my being at the cost of caste-based othering and violence in Indian academia.

4 Concluding remarks

The caste-based and neoliberal discourses I describe make me a viable and recognizable subject. However, I sense their incompleteness in subjectivating me and their inadequacy to describe the entirety of my being as an embodied researcher. The constant struggle to overcome these constitutive discourses is relatable through Butler's idea of exceeding one's subjecthood and struggling to escape it, characterized as the ambivalence of subjectivation.

> "To claim that the subject exceeds either/or is not to claim that it lives in some free zone of its own making. Exceeding is not escaping, and the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound. In this sense, the subject cannot quell the ambivalence by which it is constituted. Painful, dynamic, and promising, this vacillation between the already-there and the yet-to-come is a crossroads that rejoins every step by which it is traversed, a reiterated ambivalence at the heart of agency." (Butler 1997: 17f.)

The power and politics of the caste-based and neoliberal academy are not resolvable immediately, nor are they as simple as taking a side. At every step, there is a reiterated ambivalence. The arguments, questions, and dichotomies that tear me apart are at the heart of (my) agency. I contend that there is value in understanding and negotiating with our

privileges within the academy. Reflexive writing with attention to intersectionality has the potential to foster reflections on how power and social systems co-constitute us as (academic) subjects. Producing transparent accounts of our gendered, caste(d), colonial, heteronormative selves, helps us guide our research towards inclusive work. Such work may help put precarity in perspective and encourage us to cultivate workspaces of care, political love and solidarity (Okazawa-Rey, interviewed in Siegl/Jokela-Pansini 2017).

I would like to emphasize here that all the concerns of academic insecurity, contractual labour and the race to find a permanent position in a shrinking neoliberal university are important and the purpose of this paper is not to deny or belittle these concerns. Rather, through this paper I have reflected on how researcher subjectivity offers reflexivity and an epistemically just praxis – as necessary areas of focus in this milieu. In other words, I argue that precisely because neoliberal and caste-based insecurity is producing urgency and precarity, we must focus more on an ethics of care and justice to produce cultures of solidarity in ongoing crises of inequalities and inequities within academic institutions and broader systems of power.

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