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Beyond Marginality: Caste Hierarchy and The Irular Tribe in *Termite Fry*

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Abstract

The Irular, one of the major Adivasi tribes of India residing primarily in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, is conventionally positioned at the margins of India's caste-based social order. The food habits and work culture of the Irular create a distinct identity that both defines them and sets them apart from the dominant power structures of the society. Zai Whitaker, in her novel Termite Fry, brings the faultlines of caste-based hierarchies into critical examination while situating the relationship between the so-called upper and lower castes. The novel uncovers the inconsistencies in the boundaries that demarcate caste hierarchies by foregrounding the lived experiences of an indigenous community often rendered invisible in mainstream discourse. The novel provides a space for examining the paradigms of marginality and the given terms through which perceptions about it are constructed. Whitaker, in Termite Fry, represents the Irular not just as submissive sufferers but as having riches capable of creating their own place within and beyond the limits of caste hierarchy. Placing the identity of the Irular as a marginalised community merely struggling for basic rights is a reductionist lens that refuses to acknowledge the multidimensionality of their existence. Such a reductive framework fails to take the autonomy of their existence into account. Whitaker places the unchecked stereotypes about the marginalised people, like the Irular Adivasi, under scrutiny and embodies their distinct identity as crucial to the ethnic or cultural diversity of Indian societies. The narrative, moving beyond the binary understanding of marginality, frames a multifaceted representation of caste hierarchy in an Indian society as experienced by the Irular that complicates categorical readings of marginalisation. This paper offers a reading of Zai Whitaker's Termite Fry, and attempts to critically examine the commonly accepted terms of marginality through which the Irular are defined within the caste hierarchy.

Keywords: Irular tribe, caste-hierarchy, and marginality

Zai Whitaker engages with the exercise of rereading India's caste-based social structure through a nuanced portrayal of the Irular tribe in her novel, Termite Fry. Whitaker uses the cultural perspective of the Irular as a lens to examine the richness and plurality of indigenous traditions and values. In an Indian society governed by hierarchical rules based on caste, the Irular are treated as untouchable by the dominant caste groups. The idea of purity and pollution serves as a key principle in legitimizing caste hierarchy, which terms the lower castes or outcasts as inherently impure and, based on this assumption, imposes their exclusion from the social domain of the upper castes. Any physical contact between lower and upper castes is construed as contaminating that risks the ritual purity of the latter. However, the assumed totality of the caste system is filled with inherent contradictions. Drawing on these contractions, Partha Chatterjee, in his essay "Nation and Its Outcasts", looks into the complications associated with the structural arrangements through which caste hierarchy operates. He shows how the supposed totality of caste-based social order lacks coherence due to the shifting dimensions caused by the tensions within its own governing principles: "While the need to maintain purity implies that

castes must be kept separate (thus Brahmans cannot engage in the polluting occupations of menial castes), it also necessarily brings the castes together (since Brahmans cannot do without the menial castes if their economic services are to be provided). The unity of identity and difference – in this case, vide Dumont, the unity of purity and pollution – gives us the ground of castes as a system of totality. The being of caste is here shown as mediated; its existence is relative in terms of its interconnections with other existents within the totality of the ground" (Chatterjee 176). This frame of reference proves crucial when reading Whitaker's Termite Fry, where the everyday realities of the Irular shed light on the faultlines of caste hierarchy.

Central to the novel's plot is the Irular tribe residing in Tamil Nadu's Eastern Ghats, a "land of snakes, the hunting ground of the Irular tribe" (Whitaker 1). The Irular's contributions to the economic landscape are of greater value as they extend beyond the national level. Their skill and hard work merit worldwide acclaim, as products crafted from snakes they catch – such as jackets, bags, and shoes – are of global demand. The novel portrays the lives of the Irular community by narrating the subjective experiences of three generations – Thatha, his son and daughter-in-law, Karadi and Rani, and his grandchildren, Mari and Thenee. Like other Irular people, Thatha, the shaman (medicine man and spiritual healer) of Seneri, the fictional village in the novel, has an unmatched skill at catching even the venomous snakes, such as Russell's vipers. Although, like most people, Karadi's family makes a living by selling snake skins in the city, for Thatha, snake catching is more than a trade. According to him, the task of digging to catch snakes and termites needs considerable skills, and he notes that "the Irular inherit the art of digging the way high caste people inherit gold" (Whitaker 9). However, despite possessing the skills, the Irular tribe continues to face experiences of discrimination across many social and economic levels. Thatha, who possesses extensive knowledge of termites, draws parallels between the caste structure of the termites and that of humans – he would often "talk about the caste system among termites and end it with a joke. It was better than a human one, he'd say, because termites can switch castes, but we can't" (Whitaker 11). While Nature fosters fluidity and adaptation, human society, making caste inequality a medium of power practice, sustains the rigid boundaries of caste hierarchy. The "age-old rule" of forcing the Irular children to surrender fruits collected from public spheres indicates how domination, in the name of maintaining the purity of the upper caste, is exercised through the practices of subordination and humiliation. Such acts extend beyond the questions of identity and are indicative of how, in a caste-based society, access to essential resources and means of survival is regulated by those in control. Although the government and other private welfare sectors take initiatives to bridge caste inequalities, they are not effective enough, for various reasons, to reach the Irular community for their benefit. The novel depicts one such initiative, which eventually proves to be a futile attempt in Seneri: "This Enjo (NGO) built special wells that were supposed to be for all communities, regardless of caste or degree of darkness of skin or anything else. At least that's what their dorai had said at the opening function, pointing to the writing on the stone slab which they were taking photos of. He said the water was for everyone, and no one should be turned away. But Chithappa, the ace snake hunter and the spokesperson for the Irular of Seneri, knew that if they try to get water from the wells, it will just create problems, so why even try?" (Whitaker 35). Chithappa knows that this would cause a stir, and embarrassment, if the Irular demanded their right to the wells. Even though the wells are technically available, the Irular do not have access to them due to the caste-based prejudices. This subtle form of exclusion is a critical insight on how caste systems function, even in circumstances that may seem to surpass traditional social hierarchies. Different social science disciplines too identify the Irular as one of the primitive tribes – a term that expresses at once their socio-economic marginalisation and, more significantly, the predominant perspective on their identity in terms of alienation from mainstream society. To mark them as an inferior and backward group of the society is a reductionist tendency in locating the Irular culture on its own terms. Whitaker's remarks about the Jarawa in her "Foreword" to Andamans Boy, critique this

very tendency: "Because the Jawara don't watch TV and wear jeans or T-shirts, we brand them 'junglees' and feel they are inferior to us. Are they? To me it seems they are infinitely superior. Unlike us, they are totally self-sufficient and not depended on others for their needs" (Whitaker). Whitaker's use of alternative perspectives makes it possible for her to position the Jarawa's self-reliability as an instance of a distinct quality rather than as inferior. The eating of termites, for example, seems primal or bizarre to an outsider; among the Irular it's both food and art. A cultural marker of difference, the eating of termites is celebrated here as evidence of cultural pride, transforming something that might appear alien in other contexts into something embedded in the collective identity of the Irular. The act of eating termites is narrated with such elegance that it emerges as a pure delicacy: "What a mad scene! Every now and then Karadi popped a few into mouth, wings sticking out like a living moustache. Rani held the bag open and ate some too, but their children had learnt that this was an art, and they could give you a sharp nip on the tongue. They would wait until the termites were roasted and safe" (13). This line of reference celebrates the termite-eating of the Irular as an essential part of their everyday reality. Indeed, such food habits are regarded as impure by the privileged caste groups of the society but in Whitaker's portrayal they become a point of reasoning to the Irular's cultural continuity and richness, imbued with indigenous values. For example, the Irular refer to animals as "people" (Whitaker 21); this practice both subverts and challenges the caste order—granting subjectivity to a rat or a snake threatens the categorical ontological boundaries. Rather than locating themselves within caste-defined subjectivity, the Irular generate an alternate mode of being in which boundaries collapse and kinship extends beyond human life. Thatha laughs and asserts that "forest knowledge must be shared because it is world knowledge" (Whitaker 11) when questioned by other members of the tribe who believe that sharing Irular knowledge about snakes or medicinal plants with a college teacher recording it on a tape recorder would lead to its plundering. This mode of considering Irular knowledge of ecology as universal scrutinises the institutionalised marginalisation of the tribe and questions their exclusion from important intellectual debates.

The novel is set in the 1970s, a period of economic upheaval for the Irular community. The government's ban on killing snakes under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 disrupted the tribe's age-old trade in snake skins and left their traditional way of life in a state of uncertainty. The art of digging of the Irular, in the face of technological advancements with which they are hardly familiar, becomes a source of exploitation for the snake dealers. Since Thatha cannot read numbers, the dealers in the city easily cheat him with the use of new weighing machines for snake skins. For the Karadi family, for whom even the thought of purchasing torches for night-time termite hunting is unimaginable, adapting to weighing machines becomes essential if they are to profit from their snake-selling business in the city. Nonetheless, the subsequent ban on snake killing is a challenge they never anticipated. Yet, even against the backdrop of economic crisis and perpetual social alienation, the Irular in the novel continue to uphold their collective pride and values with dignity. The Irular's work skills are their strength, something that no one can take away from them, not even the upper castes. The irony is that even though the government bans snake killing, the demand for snake venom will continue (and it has!) that exposes the economic forces in play along with the caste interdependency. Since the Irular, in addition to their deep knowledge of medicinal herbs and ecology, are skilled in catching snakes alive, their role in the preparation of antivenom becomes essential to local dealers. Prabhu, one such dealer, who, like other upper caste people, "would never eat side by side with an Irular" (Whitaker 85) under normal circumstances, now seeks out the Irular of Seneri and its neighbouring villages, to persuade them into a snake-catching deal. Prabhu also runs an Ayurveda lab in Tambaram, where various types of kizhanghu (elephant yam) produced by the Irular were in high demand due to their effectiveness in treating "a new disease that was invading some countries including India" (Whitaker 38). However, despite being aware of kizhanghu's value, Prabhu was unwilling to offer the Irular a fair price. And Thatha "was tired of these high caste crooks, and this Prabhu was

definitely one of them" (Whitaker 100). This sense of disgust of Thatha and other Irular is rooted in the long history of discrimination at the hands of upper-caste communities. The Irular decides not to pursue the deal with Prabhu for extracting snake venom, despite the fact that such an agreement would provide mutual benefits. In this instance, they choose not to engage in reciprocal terms with the upper castes. And the Irular are fully aware of their strength and leverage as skilled workers, though they sometimes experience phases of financial vulnerability – "one constant in Irular lives among many uncertainties and fears had been the snakeskin business. If you got thrown out of a village – usually because of caste tensions or some new government rule or action, such as when Orathur village became part of a highway – you could start somewhere else, and the move was easier because there were snakes everywhere. Your livelihood and business went with you." (Whitaker 110). However, Prabhu's mixing up with the Irular in an effort to win their favour bears witness to a reversal of power-dynamics in play. Prabhu is now ready to bow before those whom he considers impure. Caste hierarchy, thus, rests on a contradictory totality – purity conditioned by pollution, exclusion sustained by dependence. Partha Chatterjee elaborates on this by stating that "essence of caste, we may then say, requires that the labouring bodies of the impure castes be reproduced in order that they can be subordinated to the need to maintain the bodies of their pure castes in their state of purity" (Chatterjee 194). The Irulars' decision not to sign the agreement reflects a refusal to be reduced to profit-maximizing agents without receiving the due respect and dignity for their labour. The Irulars' unapologetic decision, in the end, not to go with Prabhu's deal, reflects their self-determination in decision-making, which, in effect, places them beyond binary relations as a marginalised community that seeks approval or recognition from the upper castes to validate its existence. Thatha is portrayed as a proud figure, who also has a compassionate side, which shows a balance between strength and empathy. Thenee is an ambitious and intelligent Irular girl who stands out because of her ability to think beyond conventional limits, which makes it possible for her to gain admission to a school. The Irular society, much like many upper-caste societies, is a masculinist one. Like any community, they have their strengths and weaknesses. But the grounds on which they are labelled as inferior and thereby discriminated against are imbued with hypocrisy. The attempt to make a clear distinction between what is pure and what is polluted is futile, as the two concepts frequently overlap and influence one another. The dependence of the upper castes on the bodily labour of the Irular is itself indicative of the caste structure that so deepens the very contradiction of simultaneous ubiquity of pollution and purity, dependence and separation.

The intricate relationship between the so-called upper and lower castes, thus, reveals the complexities of power structures in a caste-based society. Whitaker's representation of the Irular in Termite Fry challenges our received notion about the marginalised status of an Adivasi tribe like the Irular by offering a more nuanced perspective on their identity within the broader social context. Such an engagement with the question of marginalisation, disrupts the typical, one-dimensional view of Adivasi communities as simply oppressed or isolated. Instead, in Whitaker's depiction, the Irular, despite their marginalisation, navigate their own cultural identity and subvert the power dynamics that typically define their relationship with the mainstream society. Through their knowledge of the environment and spiritual ethics, the Irular in Termite Fry draws the readers' attention to the stereotypes to be put in question that seek to subjugate them, offering a vision of identity rooted in cultural pride and ethical specificity. The Irular's unique ways of livelihood are portrayed by Whitaker with a touch of gracefulness, which moves beyond the twofold framework of the dominant and dominated. Their way of living, which showcases harmony with Nature, self-governance and community ethics, exemplifies the richness of their traditions that cannot be exhausted by a simple narrative of domination. Whitaker's portrayal of the Irular unsettles the unchecked norms through which their identity has historically been defined as marginalised. By shifting the lens of caste-hierarchy through which we come to terms with the realities of the Irular, the narrative opens up new avenues for critically examining the inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in the caste system. Through

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this approach, the novel not only critiques caste as a form of social hierarchy but also explores how the very notion of marginalisation is often constructed by those in power. By delving into the depth of the power-structure, Whitaker, in Termite Fry, creates space for an inclusive understanding of the social belonging of the Irular – one that goes beyond the confines of caste-based definitions and allows for more fluid, complex articulations of identity.

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