

Dr. B R Ambedkar's *Waiting For a Visa* in Lens of The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Siva V¹, Dr. S. Balasundari²

¹Research Scholar, School of English and Foreign Languages, The Gandhigram Rural Institute, Gandhigram, Dindigul, TamilNadu, India, Email: vsiva0001@gmail.com

²Associate Professor of English, The Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University), Dindigul, Tamilnadu, India, Email: balasundarigru@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores Dr. B R Ambedkar's seminal work, *Waiting for a Visa*, through the lens of the hermeneutics of suspicion. The author argues that Ambedkar's text reveals a deep-seated mistrust of dominant cultural and political structures, and a desire to expose their hidden agendas. Drawing on the hermeneutic approach developed by Paul Ricoeur and others, the article examines the ways in which Ambedkar's writing engages with issues of power, domination, and ideology. By using the hermeneutics of suspicion, the article sheds new light on Ambedkar's work, offering a nuanced understanding of his critique of colonialism, casteism, and social injustice. The study concludes by suggesting that Ambedkar's insights remain relevant today, as we continue to grapple with questions of power and justice in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

Keywords: Dr. B R Ambedkar, hermeneutics of suspicion, discrimination, caste system, social justice, marginalization

Introduction

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was an Indian jurist, economist, politician, and social reformer who is best known for his role in drafting the Indian Constitution. He was born into a low-caste family in 1891 and faced discrimination and inequality throughout his life. Despite these challenges, he became one of the most influential figures in Indian history, advocating for the rights of Dalits (formerly known as 'untouchables') and other marginalized communities.

Ambedkar's contributions to Indian society were vast and multifaceted. He was a prominent leader of the Dalit movement, which sought to empower members of his

community through education, political representation, and social reform. He also fought for the rights of women and other disadvantaged groups, including workers and peasants. In addition to his political work, Ambedkar was a respected scholar and intellectual, earning a doctorate in economics from Columbia University in 1927.

Waiting for a Visa is Ambedkar's autobiographical account of his experiences with caste discrimination and poverty. The book describes his struggles to obtain an education and gain social acceptance, as well as the obstacles he faced as a Dalit in Indian society. It is a powerful critique of the caste system and a call to action for social reform. The book was written in 1935 before India gained independence from British colonial rule, and it remains a relevant and influential work today, inspiring generations of social activists in India and beyond.

The hermeneutics of suspicion is a method of interpreting texts, actions, and social structures that involves approaching them with a critical mindset and looking for hidden or underlying meanings. This approach assumes that dominant social structures and discourses may conceal the interests and perspectives of marginalized groups and that a critical approach is necessary to uncover these hidden meanings.

In the context of caste as an institution, the hermeneutics of suspicion would involve questioning the dominant narratives and discourses around caste and looking for the ways in which caste reinforces social hierarchies and reinforces power imbalances. For example, it might involve questioning the idea that caste is a purely religious or cultural institution, and instead exploring the ways in which caste has been used to justify economic exploitation, political domination, and social exclusion.

The hermeneutics of suspicion can be a useful tool for understanding caste as an institution because it allows us to question the dominant narratives and discourses around caste, and to explore the ways in which caste reinforces power imbalances and social inequality. By looking for the hidden meanings and interests behind caste, we can gain a deeper understanding of how caste functions as a social institution and how it can be challenged and transformed.

Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa*

Waiting for a Visa gives a vivid account of the discrimination and humiliation faced by the Dalits, the so-called untouchables, in India. The book comprises a concise opening section and six subsequent parts, which detail Ambedkar's encounters with untouchability, commencing from his early years. The initial part of the text narrates

the story of Ambedkar, a ten-year-old child, and his siblings traveling from Satara to Goregoan in 1901 to see their father. However, during their journey, they encounter discriminatory behavior at Masur that makes their trip seem risky and unfeasible. Ambedkar also reflects on the discrimination he experienced during his school days, where he had to wait for the school peon to get access to drinking water.

The second section describes the divisions present in Baroda based on caste and religion. When Ambedkar returned to India in 1918, he faced discrimination due to his lower caste and was not allowed to stay in Hindu hotels. He eventually found a Parsi inn but had to pretend to be a Parsi to be allowed to stay. However, he was discovered, and a group of angry Parsi men forced him to leave the inn. This experience taught him that being considered an untouchable by Hindus also meant being regarded as untouchable by Parsis.

The third section recounts an incident from Ambedkar's life where he was appointed to investigate oppression and complaints by untouchables in Maharashtra in 1929. He stopped in Chalisgaon to investigate a case of social boycott against untouchables and the villagers urged him to spend the night with them. However, the tongawalas refused to carry him, and the villagers had to arrange for their own tonga. An inexperienced person driving the carriage caused an accident while crossing the river, injuring Ambedkar and causing him to realize that even the tongawalas considered him untouchable. He observed that the untouchables of the village took an unnecessary risk with his safety due to their pride and respect.

The fourth section describes an incident that occurred in 1934 when Ambedkar and his friends visited the Daulatabad Fort in Aurangabad. They washed themselves with water from a tank at the entrance but were attacked by a group of Muslims who considered them untouchables and had 'polluted' their water. This incident showed Ambedkar that untouchables were not only discriminated against by Hindus but also by Muslims. Ambedkar used this incident as an example to demonstrate that untouchability is not limited to one religion, but is a problem that affects all religions.

The fifth section includes a letter that appeared in *Young India* on December 12, 1929, written by M.K. Gandhi. The letter tells the story of a harijan in Kathiawar whose wife fell ill after giving birth, but a Hindu doctor refused to treat her directly because of her caste. The doctor agreed to treat her indirectly, outside of the harijan colony and without touching her, bypassing the thermometer through a Muslim. The doctor gave her medicine but refused to see her again when her condition worsened, and she ultimately died.

And the final section describes the story of a Bhangi boy who secured a government job in Borsad, Kheda but faced discrimination and was refused accommodation due to being an untouchable. He faced discrimination at his workplace and was not even allowed to drink water. Matters escalated, and he was threatened by a mob, leading him to quit his job and return home.

in short, *Waiting for a Visa* recounts his personal experiences of social discrimination and struggles against caste-based oppression in India during the early 20th century. Caste-based discrimination: The book also highlights the deeply ingrained caste system in India, which resulted in the social, economic, and political marginalization of millions of people, especially the Dalits or 'untouchables.' It deals with diverse themes including:

- **Identity and self-worth:** Ambedkar's experiences of discrimination and oppression made him question his identity and self-worth as a Dalit. He struggled to find a sense of belonging and acceptance in a society that viewed him and his community as inferior.
- **Education and empowerment:** Education was a powerful tool for Ambedkar to challenge the caste system and empower himself and his community. He believed that education could bring about social and political transformation and create a more just and equal society.
- **Political activism:** Ambedkar was a prominent political leader who fought for the rights and dignity of Dalits and other marginalized communities. The book chronicles his journey from being a victim of discrimination to become a powerful voice for social justice and human rights.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

The term 'Hermeneutics of suspicion' refers to a critical approach to understanding texts or cultural artifacts that assume that these works are not transparent or self-evident but are instead shaped by underlying power dynamics and social forces. This approach seeks to uncover hidden meanings, ideological biases, and power relations that are embedded within a text or cultural artifact, by interpreting the work through a lens of skepticism and suspicion.

The concept of the hermeneutics of suspicion emerged in the 20th century as a response to traditional methods of interpretation that tended to take texts at face value and assumed that they were transparent and self-evident. Scholars such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx developed the idea that texts and ideas could be interpreted in ways that revealed underlying power struggles, hidden agendas, and unconscious desires.

The term 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was coined by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur in his book *Freud and Philosophy* published in 1965. Ricœur used the term to describe a method of interpretation that involves being suspicious of the text and looking for hidden meanings and underlying motives that may not be immediately apparent.

Ricœur applied this approach primarily to the interpretation of texts related to psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Nietzscheanism, but the concept has since been expanded to include other forms of critical analysis, including feminist and postcolonial critiques.

The hermeneutics of suspicion has been influential in fields such as literary criticism, cultural studies, and philosophy, and it continues to be an important tool for those seeking to uncover hidden meanings and power structures within texts and social systems

The term 'hermeneutics of suspicion' refers to an approach to interpretation that is commonly used in literary analysis. It involves reading a text with a critical eye, looking for hidden meanings, underlying power dynamics, and ideological assumptions that may be at play.

In literary analysis, a hermeneutics of suspicion can be applied to identify how a text may be reinforcing or subverting dominant cultural values and beliefs. For example, a close reading of a novel might reveal how the author's use of language reinforces certain gender stereotypes, or how a character's actions reflect larger social hierarchies.

This approach to literary analysis is often associated with the work of philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Derrida. These thinkers argued that traditional methods of interpretation, which relied on uncovering the author's intended meaning, were insufficient for fully understanding a text's complex layers of meaning. Instead, the hermeneutics of suspicion encourages readers to be more skeptical, to question assumptions and power structures, and to uncover the often

hidden ideological underpinnings of a text. This approach allows for a more nuanced and critical understanding of literary works, and helps readers to see beyond the surface level of a text to uncover deeper meanings and insights.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion in Analyzing *Waiting for a Visa*

The hermeneutics of suspicion is a critical approach that aims to uncover hidden or implicit meanings in a text, particularly those that may be indicative of power imbalances or social injustices. This approach is highly relevant when analyzing *Waiting for a Visa* as the text deals with issues of caste discrimination and oppression in India. Ambedkar, who himself was born into a lower-caste family, provides a powerful account of the discrimination and exploitation faced by Dalits in India during the early 20th century. Through his memoir, Ambedkar invites readers to engage in a critical analysis of the social and political systems that perpetuate caste inequality.

The hermeneutics of suspicion can be useful in analyzing *Waiting for a Visa* by highlighting the ways in which caste discrimination is deeply embedded in Indian society and culture. By questioning the underlying assumptions and power dynamics at play in the text, readers can better understand the ways in which caste inequality has been normalized and perpetuated over time. For example, readers can approach the text with suspicion towards the dominant caste groups and their representations of Dalits. They can also question the ways in which language and culture have been used to maintain social hierarchies and justify caste-based oppression. By taking a critical stance, readers can uncover the hidden meanings and power structures that underlie the text and gain a deeper understanding of the social and historical context in which it was written. The hermeneutics of suspicion can help readers to engage with *Waiting for a Visa* critically and reflectively, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of the complex issues of caste discrimination and oppression in India.

Application of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion to *Waiting for a Visa*

Waiting for a Visa is a memoir, which describes his experiences of discrimination and prejudice as a member of the Dalit community in colonial India. Ambedkar describes the various ways in which Dalits were excluded from mainstream society, such as being denied access to schools and public spaces. This exclusion was often based on their caste, which is a form of discrimination that is illegal in modern-day India.

The text uncovers the oppressive nature of the caste system in India and the experience of untouchables, who are considered to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The hermeneutics of suspicion approach would interpret this text as reflecting the underlying power dynamics and inequalities that exist in society, rather than taking the text at face value.

The hermeneutics of suspicion approach would analyze this text in terms of power dynamics and social hierarchies. It would highlight the ways in which the caste system is used to maintain the social and economic dominance of certain groups while marginalizing and oppressing others. The text shows how the untouchables are forced to perform degrading tasks for the upper-caste Hindus, without any hope of upward mobility or social mobility. It highlights how social exclusion and segregation are used to reinforce the boundaries between different castes and maintain the dominance of the upper castes.

“Foreigners of course know of the existence of untouchability. But not being next door to it, so to say, they are unable to realise how oppressive it is in its actuality. It is difficult for them to understand how it is possible for a few untouchables to live on the edge of a village consisting of a large number of Hindus; go through the village daily to free it from the most disagreeable of its filth and to carry the errands of all and sundry; collect food at the doors of the Hindus; buy spices and oil at the shops of the Hindu Bania from a distance; regard the village in every way as their home--and yet never touch or be touched by any one belonging to the village.” (Ambekar i)

It suggests that foreigners are aware of the existence of untouchability but are unable to fully comprehend its oppressive nature. It goes on to describe how untouchables live on the margins of the village and perform menial tasks for the Hindus but are never allowed to interact with them physically. This separation is enforced by social norms and practices, and the untouchables are excluded from the larger community.

The book can be interpreted as an attempt to highlight the discrimination and oppression faced by the untouchables in India by the upper-caste Hindus. The author recognizes that there are two ways to convey this message: through a general description or by providing specific examples of how untouchables are treated. The choice of providing specific examples indicates a suspicion that a general description may not adequately convey the severity and extent of the discrimination. By drawing upon personal experiences and the experiences of others, the author seeks to provide concrete instances that will illustrate the mistreatment of the untouchables.

“The problem is how best to give an idea of the way the untouchables are treated by the caste Hindus. A general description or a record of cases and of the treatment accorded to them are the two methods by which this purpose could be achieved. I felt that the latter would be more effective than the former. In choosing these illustrations I have drawn partly upon my experience and partly upon the experience of others. I begin with events that have happened to me in my own life.” (Ambedkar 1)

The narrator is recounting a story from a Dalit point of view, where they were mistreated due to their caste identity. The narrator, along with their siblings, is waiting at a train station to go to Koregaon, but their father or his servant did not show up. The station-master approaches them and assumes that they are Brahmin children, which is a higher caste, based on their dress and manner of speaking. When the station-master asks the narrator and their siblings who they are, the narrator reveals that they are Mahars, which is a lower caste that is treated as untouchables in the Bombay Presidency. The station-master’s reaction is telling: his face undergoes a sudden change, and he is overpowered by a strange feeling of repulsion upon learning of their caste identity. He immediately leaves them, which leaves the children feeling bewildered and sad. It highlights the reality of the caste system in India, which creates a hierarchy where certain communities are deemed superior and others inferior. The hermeneutics of suspicion is an approach to interpreting texts that challenge the dominant narrative and looks for hidden power dynamics and injustices. In this case, the station-master’s reaction to learning the narrator’s caste identity exposes the prejudices and discrimination that Dalits face. The story shows that even something as simple as waiting for a train can become a painful experience for Dalits due to their caste identity.

The hermeneutics of suspicion is a method of interpreting texts that focuses on questioning the dominant or surface-level meanings and exposing underlying power structures, prejudices, and assumptions. The fact that the children were well-dressed and spoke in a certain manner made the station-master assume they were Brahmins. This unveils to the idea that caste in India is primarily determined by birth and external appearance, rather than merit or individual qualities. This reinforces the notion that Brahmins occupy the top of the social hierarchy, while those considered untouchable are deemed inferior and excluded from social interactions. When the station-master learned that the children were Mahars, he was ‘overpowered by a strange feeling of repulsion.’ This suggests that the stigma attached to being an untouchable was so strong that it could elicit a visceral reaction in others. This highlights the pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination and the deep-seated prejudice that exists within Hindu society. The station-master’s abrupt departure after

learning about the children's caste reveals the precariousness of their situation. The children were stranded in an unfamiliar place with no means of reaching their destination, and they were vulnerable to the station-master's discrimination and neglect. This indicates how caste-based oppression can lead to marginalization and exclusion, resulting in tangible harm and suffering.

"We told him that we were bound for Koregaon, and that we were waiting for father or his servant to come, but that neither had turned up, and that we did not know how to reach Koregaon. We were well-dressed children. From our dress or talk no one could make out that we were children of the untouchables. Indeed the station-master was quite sure we were Brahmin children, and was extremely touched at the plight in which he found us." (Ambedkar 6)

The hermeneutics of suspicion exposes how the caste system in India is deeply entrenched in societal structures and values, perpetuating discrimination and inequality. The stanzas illustrate how even innocent children can be subject to caste-based prejudice and discrimination, highlighting the need for a more just and equitable society.

Another incident that the narrator Ambedkar had to pretend to be a Muslim to receive water suggests that the toll-collector was likely a member of a higher caste who would not provide assistance to someone from a lower caste. The toll-collector's curt response also implies a disregard for the narrator's request and the assumption that they should just find water on their own. Furthermore, the mention of other bullock-carts resting for the night at the toll-collector's hut implies that this was a common stopping point for travelers. The fact that all of the carts were resting for the night indicates that it was late and people were settling down for the night. However, the narrator and their brother were extremely hungry and in need of water, highlighting the challenges faced by marginalized communities who do not have access to basic necessities

Ambedkar highlights the power dynamic that existed between the touchable and untouchable classes, with the former exerting control over the basic needs of the latter. The narrator's dependence on the school peon to access water reflects the broader lack of agency and autonomy that Dalits faced in Indian society at the time. The fact that the narrator had to bring his own gunny cloth to school and carry it back home every day further underscores the systematic exclusion and marginalization faced by Dalits.

While in the school I knew that children of the touchable classes, when they felt thirsty, could go out to the water tap, open it, and quench their thirst. All that was necessary was the permission of the teacher. But my position was separate. I could not touch the tap; and unless it was opened for it by a touchable person, it was not possible for me to quench my thirst. In my case the permission of the teacher was not enough. The presence of the school peon was necessary, for he was the only person whom the class teacher could use for such a purpose. If the peon was not available, I had to go without water. The situation can be summed up in the statement—no peon, no water. (Ambedkar 9)

It reveals the deep-seated prejudices and inequalities that existed in Indian society at the time, particularly towards the Dalit community. The narrator's personal experience serves as a powerful indictment of the caste system and the need for social reform to address the structural injustices that continue to exist in Indian society.

Ambedkar describes the experiences of an unnamed protagonist who is a probationer in the Accountant General's Office. The protagonist is staying at an inn where he feels isolated and alone. The absence of any companionship in the inn, the darkness of the room, and the presence of bats are all described in a way that suggests the protagonist is experiencing fear and discomfort. From a hermeneutics of suspicion perspective, we can consider the social and historical context of Dalits in India. Dalits are members of the lowest caste in the Hindu caste system and have historically faced discrimination, oppression, and violence. In this context, the protagonist's experience of being alone in a dark and isolated space can be seen as a metaphor for the experiences of Dalits in a society that marginalizes them. In addition, the fact that the protagonist has no other place to go and is forced to stay in the inn can be interpreted as a reflection of the limited opportunities and choices available to Dalits. The fact that the protagonist seeks solace in books can also be seen as a reflection of the importance of education in empowering marginalized communities.

Ambedkar describes an incident in which a Dalit woman in Kathiawar fell ill after giving birth to a child. The Brahmin doctor who was approached for treatment refused to see her directly, as he considered Dalits to be impure. The doctor finally agreed to see her only if she was brought outside the Dalit colony and treated indirectly through a Muslim, without touching her. The doctor gave her some medicine, but when her condition worsened, he refused to see her again, and she ultimately died. Using the hermeneutics of suspicion in the context of Dalits, we can interpret this stanza as highlighting the systemic oppression and discrimination faced by Dalits in India. The

incident underscores the deeply ingrained caste-based prejudices that exist in the Indian society and how it affects the everyday life of Dalits. The Brahmin doctor's behavior is indicative of the structural violence against Dalits, which results from the privileged position of the upper castes in society. The doctor's refusal to touch the Dalit woman, even in the context of her sickness, reflects the notion that Dalits are untouchable and polluting to upper-caste individuals.

Furthermore, the doctor's willingness to treat the sick woman indirectly through a Muslim indicates the extent to which the upper castes would go to maintain their purity, even if it meant going against their own religious beliefs. The incident also highlights the lack of access to healthcare that Dalits face in India due to social and economic marginalization. In conclusion, the hermeneutics of suspicion in the context of Dalits help us understand this stanza as a critique of the deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination and oppression in India. It highlights the everyday violence and exclusion faced by Dalits, and the need for transformative social and political change to address their marginalization.

Ambedkar's autobiographical book *Waiting for a Visa* provides a clear example of caste-based discrimination and violence. Ambedkar, a Dalit leader, and his friends wash themselves with water from a tank at the fort entrance, only to be accused of polluting it by an old Muslim man. This leads to a violent confrontation with the local Muslim community, highlighting the intersectionality of caste and religious discrimination. Ambedkar's statement that a person who is untouchable to a Hindu is also untouchable to a Muslim and Parsi underscores the pervasive nature of caste discrimination across different religious and social contexts. The incident at the Daulatabad fort is not an isolated incident but rather a reflection of the systemic oppression faced by Dalits in India. In short, the hermeneutics of suspicion in the context of Dalits reveals how the incident at the Daulatabad fort is a microcosm of the larger caste-based power structures that underlie Indian society. This approach helps us to uncover the hidden dynamics of caste discrimination and to expose the ways in which it operates in even seemingly neutral situations. Moreover, the threat of violence and the need for the Bhangi boy to leave his job and return home underscore the precariousness and vulnerability of Dalits in Indian society. Overall, the stanza highlights the need for a critical and suspicious approach to understanding the experiences of Dalits and the pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination and oppression in India.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the lens of the hermeneutics of suspicion provides a valuable tool for analyzing B R Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa*. The suspicion towards dominant power structures, which is at the heart of this approach, allows for a critical examination of the various forms of oppression and injustice faced by Ambedkar and his community. Through this lens, we can see how Ambedkar's experiences of discrimination and exclusion shape his worldview and his approach to social and political change. By highlighting the underlying power dynamics and hidden agendas of those in positions of authority, the hermeneutics of suspicion invites us to read *Waiting for a Visa* as a powerful critique of caste-based oppression and a call to action for a more just and equitable society. By and large, this article demonstrates the value of engaging with literary works through critical frameworks that prioritize the voices and experiences of marginalized communities.

Ambedkar's insights on social justice and equality remain relevant today in the context of the hermeneutics of suspension because they challenge the dominant narratives and power structures that shape our understanding of society. His advocacy for affirmative action and reservation policies highlights the need to view social inequality objectively and recognize the systemic barriers that prevent equal opportunities for all.

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