



GENDER AS CASTE: TRADITION, PATRIARCHY AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN VRINDA NABAR'S *CASTE AS WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Vrinda Nabar's Caste as Woman offers an unusually accessible yet conceptually ambitious account of the cultural production of female subordination in India. Its governing insight is that gender can operate like caste: it is assigned at birth, converted into a hierarchy, naturalised through religious and social authority, reproduced through endogamous marriage and family discipline, and made to appear as destiny rather than history. This paper examines that insight through a close thematic reading of Nabar's discussions of the girl child, marriage, widowhood, dowry, wifehood and motherhood. It argues that Nabar's metaphor of the "female-jati" is most useful when treated not as an equation between caste and gender but as an account of their structural interdependence. The book reveals how patriarchy survives through a dispersed cultural apparatus comprising scriptural interpretation, ritual, family honour, popular media, domestic labour and women's own internalisation of prescribed roles. At the same time, its broad category of "Indian woman" requires an intersectional qualification because caste, class, religion and location do not merely add separate burdens; they produce distinct forms of womanhood. Read alongside B. R. Ambedkar, Uma Chakravarti, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Sharmila Rege, Nabar's work illuminates both the power and the limits of gender-as-caste as a feminist method. The paper concludes that the book's enduring contribution lies in relocating oppression from isolated acts of male cruelty to the ordinary institutions that manufacture consent, respectability and female selfhood.

KEYWORDS: Gender as Caste; Female-Jati; Patriarchy; Tradition; Indian Feminism; Female Identity; Brahmanical Patriarchy; Marriage; Dowry; Motherhood

INTRODUCTION

Vrinda Nabar's *Caste as Woman* is organized around a disturbing proposition: womanhood in India is not simply a biological identity upon which discrimination is later imposed; it is made into a ranked social status with its own inherited duties, boundaries, sanctions and rituals. The book therefore asks its readers to see patriarchy not only in spectacular violence but also in the ordinary grammar of social life. Blessings that privilege sons, rules of modesty, the urgency of marriage, the authority of the husband's family, the symbolic stripping of widowhood, dowry transactions and the glorification of maternal sacrifice appear separate only when viewed incident by incident. Nabar joins them into a system. Her formulation of *stri-jati* identifies the system's central operation: historically produced differences are presented as natural distinctions between male and female kinds, then transferred from one generation to the next as common sense (36–37).

The word "caste" in the title consequently does more than intensify the claim that women are treated unequally. It directs attention to ascription, hierarchy, social closure and reproduction. A caste location is not ordinarily chosen by an individual; it precedes the individual and structures the field of permissible conduct. Nabar argues that gendered identity works similarly. The daughter is imagined before birth as liability, trained for departure from her natal home, transferred through marriage and evaluated through service, chastity and maternity. Even when a woman enters education or employment, the normative identity of daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mother continues to regulate her legitimacy. Her "modernity" remains acceptable only when it does not disturb the older allocation of care, obedience and sexual respectability (Nabar 43–45, 168–76).

This paper argues that Nabar's central metaphor has two related strengths. First, it converts apparently private suffering into a structural problem. The woman's experience is personal, but the terms in which she understands it have been publicly manufactured by tradition, institutions and collective memory. Second, the metaphor reveals that caste and gender are not merely parallel hierarchies. Caste continuity depends upon marriage regulation, descent and the policing of women's sexuality; gender hierarchy is in turn shaped by caste location. Ambedkar's analysis of caste as enclosed through endogamy and Chakravarti's account of Brahmanical patriarchy clarify the historical logic that Nabar approaches through cultural criticism (Ambedkar 5–16; Chakravarti 579–85). The "female-jati" is therefore best understood as a structure produced within caste society, not as a replacement for the differences among castes.

Such a distinction is necessary because Nabar frequently speaks of "the Indian woman" and identifies gender as a common denominator across caste and class. Her claim contains a strategic truth: patriarchal control does cross social boundaries. Yet a common structure does not create an identical experience. A Dalit agricultural labourer, an upper-caste urban professional, a Muslim widow and a middle-class Hindu daughter-in-law may all face male dominance, but the mechanisms, resources, risks and meanings of that dominance differ. Crenshaw's critique of single-axis analysis and Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint help reveal what becomes



invisible when gender is treated as a self-contained identity (Crenshaw 139–67; Rege WS39–WS46). An adequate reading must therefore preserve Nabar's structural insight while resisting homogenisation.

The paper proceeds through a critical close reading of the book's life-cycle structure. It first defines gender-as-caste and examines tradition as a technology of rule. It then follows the female subject from girlhood through marriage, widowhood, dowry, wifehood and motherhood. Finally, it assesses Nabar's account of female agency, her attempt to indigenise feminism and the conceptual limits of her middle-class frame. The aim is not to judge a 1995 text by terminology consolidated later, but to show how its arguments anticipate intersectional questions while also requiring their corrective.

Method and Conceptual Framework

This study uses interpretive textual analysis. It treats *Caste as Woman* as a work of feminist cultural criticism rather than as a statistical survey or a comprehensive social history. Nabar herself makes the status of the work clear: personal experience and observation form its nucleus, while historical texts, literary works, newspapers, magazines and public controversies provide contexts through which those experiences acquire social meaning (ix–xii). Her method is deliberately hybrid. Autobiographical memory stands beside readings of the *Dharmashastras*; poems and novels stand beside reports of violence; advertisements and advice columns become evidence of the popular consciousness. This mixture is not an accidental absence of disciplinary purity. It supports the book's major claim that patriarchy occupies several sites simultaneously and cannot be understood through legal or textual history alone.

Three concepts guide the present analysis. The first is structural analogy. Gender is “like” caste insofar as both are ascriptive, hierarchical and institutionally reproduced. The analogy does not imply that every woman occupies the same social position or that gender oppression is interchangeable with untouchability and caste violence. Its value lies in identifying comparable mechanisms: birth-based membership, prescribed occupation or duty, controlled marriage, rules of purity, unequal access to authority and sanctions against transgression. Nabar's own conclusion that sex-, caste- and class-based discrimination together create a triple-layered existence prevents a completely reductive equation (49–50).

The second concept is Brahmanical patriarchy. Chakravarti explains that caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy operate together because caste continuity requires control over marriage, descent and female sexuality (579–85). This framework helps interpret Nabar's extensive engagement with normative Sanskrit texts. Scriptural authority is not significant merely because old verses continue to be repeated. It provides a language in which patrilineal inheritance, female chastity, wifely devotion and caste purity appear mutually supportive. In this system, the regulation of the upper-caste woman's sexuality protects caste boundaries, while the differential availability and exploitation of subordinated-caste women sustain the privileges of dominant groups. Patriarchy is thus internally differentiated even when it claims universal authority.

The third concept is intersectionality. Crenshaw shows that treating systems of power as mutually exclusive leaves subjects located at their intersection theoretically and institutionally unrecognised (139–67). Rege makes an allied intervention in the Indian context by arguing that Dalit women's voices cannot be accommodated as one more “difference” inside an unchanged feminist framework; they require a transformation of how caste and gender are conceptualised (WS39–WS46). These perspectives make it possible to read Nabar both sympathetically and critically. Her female-jati names the breadth of gender discipline, but its operation must be examined through caste, class, religion and region rather than above them.

Gender as Caste: From Difference to Destiny

Nabar's most direct explanation of the title occurs when she discusses the expressions *purush-jati* and *stri-jati*. These terms, in her reading, convert manufactured differences into the supposed nature of two human kinds. Doctrine and dogma then transmit the distinction from mother to daughter and from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law (36). The analogy with caste is especially revealing at this point. Gender classification is not limited to an external label. It is a social location accompanied by an ethical code—*stri-dharma*—that determines what counts as virtue, shame, fulfilment and rebellion. The female subject is not simply forbidden certain actions; she is taught to desire compliance and to interpret suffering as moral achievement.

The resulting hierarchy is durable because it operates before explicit choice. A caste order makes birth socially consequential; Nabar shows that patriarchy does the same to sex. The girl is assigned a future in which her natal membership is temporary, her sexuality is a family concern, marriage is compulsory and her adult identity is relational. This is why the book's life-cycle structure matters. “Girl,” “wife,” “widow” and “mother” are not neutral descriptions of age or kinship. They are successive statuses, each carrying rules that become intelligible through the status preceding it. The daughter's training in sacrifice prepares the wife for service; the wife's identity through her husband makes widowhood a symbolic social death; the exaltation of maternity compensates for the erasure of independent selfhood (Nabar 41–44, 142–49, 177–87).

Nabar later sharpens the argument by observing that practices initially attached to particular caste locations spread until sex appeared to form a new jati. Gender then became a paradoxical equaliser across social levels even as caste continued to govern social relations. She summarizes the condition as a triple discrimination of sex, caste and class and writes, “To be caste as woman in India is to live out this triple-layered existence” (50). The sentence is crucial because it refuses a simple substitution. Womanhood does not cancel caste; it becomes another axis through which caste society ranks, disciplines and exploits subjects.

Ambedkar's analysis of caste formation deepens this insight. If caste is sustained by endogamy, it cannot reproduce itself without managing the marriageable population, particularly women's sexuality and reproductive capacity (5–16). Practices



concerning widowhood, child marriage and the disposal of “surplus” men and women are therefore not peripheral customs but mechanisms of social closure. Nabar's chapters on marriage and widowhood reveal the cultural interior of this mechanism: what a structural account describes as regulation is lived as duty, honour, modesty, auspiciousness and fear. Her contribution is to show how a system secures obedience by translating demographic and property interests into intimate moral identities.

At the same time, the gender-as-caste formulation must remain analogical. Caste is not merely a prejudice attached to identity; it includes graded inequality, occupational history, endogamy, spatial segregation and practices of purity and pollution. Women are distributed across this hierarchy and may participate in maintaining it. An upper-caste woman's subordination to male kin can coexist with caste power over Dalit women and men. Nabar gestures toward this complexity when she describes gender-, caste- and class-based discrimination as simultaneous, but her recurring collective subject sometimes compresses these unequal relations. The metaphor is strongest when it exposes the ascriptive and reproductive logic of patriarchy; it is weakest when “female-jati” seems to imply a homogeneous female community.

Tradition as a Technology of Patriarchal Rule

Tradition in Nabar's argument is neither a fixed inheritance nor a complete record of the past. It is a selective practice in the present. Communities preserve, reinterpret and popularise those elements that authorise existing arrangements while ignoring others that might enable equality. Nabar notes evidence of women enjoying greater status in earlier materials and identifies resistant voices such as Janabai, Mirabai and Bahinabai, yet she argues that the later patriarchal legacy of the *Dharmashastras* has exercised far greater power over popular consciousness (17–18, 196). The point is not that one text mechanically causes contemporary behaviour. Rather, scriptural fragments, mythic exemplars and family custom form an archive of legitimacy from which patriarchy repeatedly draws.

This selective archive converts history into inevitability. When a restriction is described as ancient, sacred or culturally authentic, its human authorship disappears. Nabar therefore insists that the first feminist recognition is that the situation is made by people and can consequently be changed (36). Her formulation targets the epistemic core of patriarchy. A rule survives not only because somebody enforces it but because those governed by it cannot easily imagine it as contingent. *Stri-dharma* becomes faith; disobedience becomes not disagreement with a social norm but betrayal of family, religion and civilisation.

Mythic femininity is central to this process. Sita and Savitri supply images of fidelity, endurance and self-sacrifice, while the more argumentative Draupadi creates discomfort because she does not fit as easily into the ideal of silent virtue (Nabar 22–23). Nabar does not simply reject myth. She studies the politics of selection: why certain characteristics are detached from complex narratives and elevated as timeless standards. A living literary or religious figure is reduced to a disciplinary emblem. The modern woman is then measured against a purified prototype whose impossibility is precisely what makes it useful. Since no actual woman can fully embody it, every woman remains available for correction.

Ritual materialises this authority in the body. Marriage symbols, dress codes, food practices, spatial restrictions and widowhood observances mark female status publicly. Nabar reads *purdah* both literally and metaphorically: it includes physical seclusion but also the demand that a woman conceal desire, bodily confidence and dissent (41–44). The body thus becomes a visible register of male-centred kinship. A married woman's ornaments announce the living husband; their removal announces his death and her diminished social being. The corresponding male body carries no equivalent, compulsory display. The asymmetry shows how tradition distributes identity: the woman bears the signs of relationship, while the man appears as the unmarked individual.

Family honour intensifies this regulation. *Izzat* transfers collective reputation onto the conduct of daughters and wives, especially their sexual conduct. A girl's mobility, friendships, clothing and marital decisions are monitored because the family imagines itself as publicly embodied in her. Honour therefore appears protective while functioning as ownership. The language of care permits surveillance to be experienced as affection, and fear of social shame persuades parents to return abused daughters to violent marriages or to accept economically ruinous demands (Nabar 57–58, 160–65). Patriarchal power is most stable when coercion can speak in the voice of concern.

Nabar's use of popular magazines, advertising and cinema extends the analysis beyond scripture. Modern media do not simply replace older norms; they refashion them. The professional woman is celebrated provided she remains an exemplary homemaker, while the mother appears as an endlessly resourceful manager of family consumption. In advertisements she feeds, cleans, heals and economises, but rarely exists outside service. Popular representation modernises the surface of femininity without redistributing labour or authority (Nabar 12–13, 182–84, 188–91). Tradition is therefore not the opposite of modernity. It can travel through modern institutions, commodities and images.

The Girl Child: Manufacturing the Female Subject

The chapter “Gauri-Kanyaka-Kumari” demonstrates that female identity is produced before a girl can consent to it. Nabar begins with the preference for sons, expressed through blessings, sympathy offered after the birth of a daughter and pressure to continue childbearing until a son arrives (51–52). These small utterances disclose a social economy. A son represents continuity, ritual capacity, inheritance and future security; a daughter represents expense, sexual risk and eventual departure. Female foeticide and infanticide are the extreme end of a continuum whose ordinary forms include unequal nutrition, education, leisure and affection (Nabar 52–58).



The daughter is treated as temporary in her natal home. This apparent contradiction—she belongs to a family whose honour she carries, yet is imagined as another family's future member—defines her vulnerability. Because her destination is marriage, investment in her becomes conditional and her upbringing anticipatory. Domestic work, sibling care, modest speech and self-denial function as training for daughter-in-lawhood. Nabar's examples show that gender socialisation is not a discrete lesson but an organisation of everyday time: who eats first, who serves, who receives freedom and whose reputation requires constant protection (57–61).

Education does not automatically undo this caste-like training. A girl may acquire qualifications while remaining ignorant of her body and fearful of sexual knowledge. Nabar describes a culture in which bodily development is surrounded by secrecy and shame, producing vulnerability rather than safety (37–40). The distinction between respectable and disreputable femininity is learned through concealment. A “good” girl is not merely one who avoids sexual activity; she must appear not to possess sexual curiosity or desire. Her body is made socially consequential while her knowledge of it is restricted.

The book also shows that harassment in public space completes this instruction. Girls learn to use books and bags as shields, to anticipate touching and verbal aggression, and to regard mobility as exposure to danger (Nabar 90–91). Such experiences teach a spatial dimension of female caste. Public space may be formally open, yet access is unequal because women bear the labour of vigilance and the risk of blame. The threat does not merely prevent movement; it generates a self that occupies space apologetically.

The girl child thus becomes the clearest evidence that female identity is institutional rather than natural. By the time marriage is proposed, she has already learned its conceptual premises: her freedom is temporary, sacrifice is feminine, family judgement is decisive and her future worth depends on respectability. Marriage does not suddenly impose a new order. It formalises a disposition cultivated from birth.

Marriage, Endogamy and the Transfer of Female Identity

Nabar presents marriage as the central social destination of girlhood. Her satirical poem opening “Vivaha” depicts the bride-viewing process as a sale in which education, appearance, docility and parental resources become features of a commodity (97–98). The irony is important. Modern credentials do not necessarily expand the woman's autonomy; they can increase her value within a market whose terms remain patriarchal. The desirable graduate is one whose education does not produce a disruptive will.

Marriage transforms the girl's identity through transfer. She leaves a natal home in which she was already considered temporary and enters a marital home in which acceptance depends upon adaptation. Nabar's discussion of the bride's testing, arranged marriage and familial authority shows that consent is diluted through collective decision-making (79–83, 97–106). The family may understand its involvement as responsibility, yet responsibility becomes domination when the woman's refusal is unintelligible or punished. The individual is asked to recognise the family's preference as her own.

The caste dimension of marriage is especially significant. Endogamy preserves group boundaries by determining legitimate intimacy and descent. Ambedkar identifies the prohibition of intermarriage as the mechanism that encloses caste (5–8). Nabar's material demonstrates how this enclosure becomes gendered experience. The woman is burdened with the task of preserving lineage purity, while male sexual transgression is treated more leniently. Female chastity is therefore not simply a moral preference; it is an instrument through which caste reproduces itself.

Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy explains the unequal distribution of this control. Dominant-caste women are secluded and disciplined to secure legitimate heirs, whereas subordinated-caste women can be exposed to labour and sexual exploitation without receiving the “protection” attached to upper-caste respectability (579–85). The language of honour therefore cannot be evaluated apart from caste. It may restrict a privileged woman's mobility while simultaneously marking other women as sexually available or insufficiently respectable. Nabar recognises class- and caste-based differences, but the broader category of Indian woman occasionally leaves this relation underdeveloped.

Within marriage, the ideal of *pativrata* converts subordination into ethical greatness. Nabar traces prescriptions according to which the devoted wife aligns her emotions, appearance and bodily well-being with those of her husband (43–44, 149–50). Her virtue is relational: she is good insofar as she serves, adjusts and endures. The husband's ethical identity is not defined by a reciprocal surrender of self. Marriage is thus represented as complementarity while organised as asymmetry.

This asymmetry also structures sexuality. Nabar contrasts the requirement of female virginity and fidelity with cultural permissions historically extended to men (168–71). A wife is expected to experience sexuality only within marriage and largely through service to the husband's desire, while male experience is normalised, joked about or concealed. The double standard creates two different kinds of sexual subject: the man whose desire confirms masculinity and the woman whose desire threatens respectability. Female sexuality is not absent from the social order; it is intensely present as something to be contained.

The household then expands wifely duty beyond the conjugal pair. The bride does not simply marry a man; she is incorporated into a hierarchy of elders and kin. Nabar's examples of food, service, deference and the fear of appearing a deficient *bahu* show how ordinary practices test belonging (173–76). The daughter-in-law may possess formal rights but lack conversational authority even in mundane matters. Silence is not evidence of harmony. It can be a survival strategy in a setting where articulation itself is read as disrespect.

Nabar is careful not to romanticise individualism as an uncomplicated solution. Indian family structures can provide care, continuity and responsibility across generations (178–80). The critical question is not whether community should disappear, but whether it requires female self-erasure. Her analysis calls for reciprocal community rather than an escape into isolated individualism.



A just family would distribute care, permit disagreement and recognise the daughter-in-law as a person rather than as labour acquired through marriage.

Widowhood and Dowry: The Violence of Status

Widowhood exposes the extent to which married female identity is organised around the husband's life. Nabar contrasts normative demands of lifelong abstinence upon widows with the permission, and sometimes obligation, for widowers to remarry (142–43). The asymmetry follows from the structure of household authority. The man remains a social and ritual subject who requires a wife to perform his role; the woman is understood principally as his partner and loses the basis of recognised status when he dies.

The body again becomes the site of public classification. Restrictions on adornment, food, clothing and participation strip the widow of signs associated with auspicious married life (Nabar 143–49). These practices are often defended as mourning, but mourning does not explain why deprivation is permanent, gender-specific and connected to notions of pollution or danger. The widow is made to carry death socially. Her changed appearance warns others that her identity has crossed from auspicious wife to deficient woman.

Nabar's autobiographical account of her father's death brings the critique into the intimate sphere. During ritual observance, she sees her widowed mother excluded from a ceremony supposedly honouring a husband who had treated marriage as partnership (143–44). The contradiction reveals ritual's capacity to override lived ethical relationships. A loving marriage cannot protect the widow when an impersonal code reclassifies her. Tradition here does not preserve memory; it defeats the values embodied in the actual relationship.

The discussion of widowhood also reveals how caste continuity and gender control converge. Restrictions on widow remarriage preserve property, lineage and sexual closure. Ambedkar's work makes clear that the management of widows is connected to the maintenance of endogamy (9–16). Nabar's cultural examples show the cost of that management: deprivation is moralised as chastity, and the absence of alternatives is renamed virtue. The widow becomes admirable to the extent that she does not seek a renewed life.

Dowry represents a different but connected form of status violence. Nabar defines it not as voluntary gifting but as the transfer demanded from the bride's family as a condition of marriage. Even legal prohibition does not dislodge the expectation because the transaction is sustained by the marriage market, family prestige and fear that a daughter will remain unmarried (159–61). The bridegroom's education and employment can raise his “price,” revealing how modern economic achievement is absorbed into a feudal gender relation.

Dowry also clarifies why formal consent can coexist with coercion. Parents may appear to give voluntarily, but their choice occurs under the threat of social failure, public humiliation or harm to the daughter. After marriage, continuing demands transform the natal family into an indefinitely available source of goods, and the daughter can become the means through which those demands are enforced (Nabar 160–62). Economic extraction and emotional blackmail operate together. The woman is blamed both for the inability of her parents to provide and for the consequences of resisting her marital family.

Nabar's distinction between dowry and *stridhana* is analytically important. Property intended for the woman can be appropriated by the husband's family even when authoritative traditions recognise her claim to it (166–67). Patriarchy is therefore not a consistent loyalty to scripture. It selects whichever interpretation preserves male or familial control and neglects rules that could strengthen women's property rights. The appeal to tradition is opportunistic rather than coherent.

Widowhood and dowry together demonstrate that marriage assigns value to women while withholding secure personhood. The wife may be economically costly to her natal family, materially useful to her marital family and symbolically valuable as a sign of honour, yet none of these values guarantees control over property, body or future. Status replaces autonomy. Like caste rank, it determines how others may treat the person and how the person is expected to interpret that treatment.

Wifehood, Motherhood and the Disappearing Self

In “Wife and Mother,” Nabar turns from overt ritual and transaction to the daily reproduction of hierarchy. The wife's work is continuous yet conceptually minimised because it is described as love, nature or duty rather than labour. Cooking, cleaning, serving, childcare, care of elders and emotional management are treated as spontaneous expressions of femininity (172–76). When work is naturalised, it cannot easily become the subject of negotiation, measurement or redistribution.

The Indian joint-family context intensifies this burden. The wife is accountable not only to a husband but also to a network of elders whose authority is protected by the language of respect. Nabar's reading of Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* shows how even a sympathetic husband may refuse to challenge paternal authority, leaving the woman to absorb the cost of family continuity (180–81). Patriarchy need not appear as an individually cruel man; it can operate through a “good” man who regards institutional obedience as unavoidable.

Motherhood then promises honour while deepening self-loss. Nabar contrasts the divine or cinematic mother with the exhausted woman whose body and time are consumed by domestic demands. Popular culture celebrates maternal capacity to feed everyone, stretch resources, heal illness and endure hardship, thereby turning deprivation into evidence of love (182–84). The ideal is powerful because it offers symbolic elevation in exchange for material sacrifice. A woman denied authority as an individual may acquire moral authority as mother, but the bargain depends upon her continuing self-denial.



Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and as institution helps clarify this dynamic. The capacity to nurture and the intimate meanings of mothering are not identical to the social system that makes maternity compulsory, privatises care and demands female sacrifice. Nabar similarly refuses to dismiss affection while questioning the conversion of affection into destiny (183–85). Her mother is not a goddess but a human being entitled to hunger, fatigue, solitude and ambivalence.

The mother-in-law relationship reveals the cyclical reproduction of gender caste. A woman whose identity and power were restricted may later gain authority through her son. Instead of dismantling the system that subordinated her, she can enforce its standards upon a younger woman. Nabar traces how preference for sons, emotional investment in male children and fear of losing influence generate conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (185–87). Female participation does not disprove patriarchy; it shows that systems recruit intermediaries by distributing limited rewards.

This cycle is central to the book's theory of identity. The woman is not merely acted upon from outside. She may internalise the role, police others and derive meaning from the very standards that restrict her. Agency consequently cannot be reduced to visible defiance. A woman's compliance may express calculation, affection, fear, lack of alternatives or genuine attachment to community values. Conversely, her exercise of authority over another woman is not full liberation. It is delegated power within a male-centred structure.

Female Identity, Resistance and the Problem of Voice

Nabar's female subject is produced through relationships, but she is not wholly passive. The book retrieves resistant women from devotional poetry and contemporary collective action, including women whose voices challenge caste and gender authority (17–18, 49, 195–96). Such examples prevent tradition from appearing monolithic. The past contains conflict, reinterpretation and alternative ethical possibilities; therefore, feminist critique need not accept the conservative claim that equality is alien to Indian culture.

Yet resistance is constrained by the language available to it. Janabai, Mirabai and Bahinabai speak through devotion, sometimes securing spiritual freedom by addressing a divine authority beyond household and caste. Their agency is real but negotiated. The very need to translate rebellion into devotion shows how few secular spaces were available for female self-definition. Nabar's interest in these figures lies less in celebrating exceptional heroines than in exposing the system against which exception becomes visible.

The book also challenges the romanticisation of endurance. A woman who survives violence, poverty or domestic exploitation may display immense strength, but survival does not transform the conditions that made such strength necessary (Nabar 190–92). The cultural praise of resilience can therefore become a refusal of justice. By honouring the “strong woman,” society avoids redistributing work, confronting abusers or creating institutions of support.

Collective action offers a different possibility because it relocates pain from private shame to public claim. Nabar refers to grassroots women's organising and the pressure exerted upon the state to recognise dowry harassment, violence and unequal law (15–18, 49). Consciousness-raising matters because an individual woman may interpret her suffering as personal failure, whereas shared testimony reveals a pattern. The move from experience to structure is itself an act of resistance.

However, the category of voice must be treated carefully. Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint warns against a politics in which dominant-caste feminists merely “include” Dalit women's experiences without changing the concepts and institutions of feminism (WS39–WS46). If female identity is internally stratified, speaking for “Indian women” can reproduce hierarchy even while opposing patriarchy. Nabar's candid acknowledgement of her middle-class readership and selective method is therefore important (48, 198). It creates space to use her work as one situated intervention rather than a total representation.

Indigenising Feminism: Between Universalism and Cultural Relativism

One of Nabar's major concerns is the perception of feminism as a Western import. She argues that Indian scepticism was shaped partly by media caricatures of Western women's liberation and by the distance between individualist rhetoric and community-centred social life (27–34). A politics framed exclusively as release from family obligations may fail where family and community are important sources of identity, care and survival. For Nabar, feminist strategy must speak from within the cultural field it seeks to transform.

This position does not amount to cultural relativism. Nabar repeatedly rejects the defence of violence or discrimination as tradition. Context explains the form of oppression and the conditions of change; it does not make injustice acceptable. Her proposal is better understood as translation. Feminist commitments to equality, bodily autonomy and freedom from domination must be articulated in relation to Indian histories, languages and institutions rather than copied as ready-made slogans (20–23, 33–36, 197–98).

The distinction between individual and collective freedom is particularly productive. Liberal feminism often imagines the autonomous individual as the basic unit of emancipation. Nabar observes that Indian women are located within dense networks of dependence that cannot simply be wished away (31–34, 178–80). Yet community is not intrinsically emancipatory. When obligation is unequal, collective identity becomes the route through which women perform unpaid labour and surrender choice. The relevant question is therefore not individualism versus community, but what form of community permits reciprocity and dissent.

Nabar's approach also resists tokenism. The success of a few professional or political women cannot demonstrate the liberation of women as a class, especially when successful women continue to carry conventional domestic expectations (9–12, 193–95). Representation matters, but it may leave the underlying division of labour intact. A woman can enter a male-designed



institution without the institution recognising care work, safety or unequal family obligations. Equality requires structural redesign, not only admission.

Her proposed feminism is therefore both cultural and material. It seeks changes in consciousness, but consciousness must connect to law, public policy, support services and economic value. Domestic labour needs recognition; childcare and flexible work require institutional provision; legal rights require implementation; and personal laws must be examined where they preserve patriarchal authority (Nabar 15–16, 192–94). The book's limitation is that these proposals remain suggestive rather than systematically developed. Its achievement is to show why reform in one domain fails when the surrounding culture continues to reward compliance.

Critical Evaluation: Power and Limits of Nabar's Framework

The principal strength of *Caste as Woman* is its theory of continuity. Nabar refuses the comforting narrative that law, education, employment or a few celebrated women have displaced patriarchy. She shows how old hierarchies enter new forms: educational qualifications become marriage-market assets, consumer goods become dowry, magazines modernise domestic ideals and professional women perform a double burden. Modernity changes the vocabulary of patriarchy without necessarily changing its distribution of power.

A second strength is methodological accessibility. Nabar's movement among autobiography, textual tradition, literature and media allows readers to recognise theory in ordinary experience. The approach makes visible the connection between a remark at a traffic signal and the large structure of son preference, or between a family joke and the economic violence of dowry. Her analysis thereby demonstrates that ideology is not confined to formal doctrine; it lives in humour, habit, aspiration and embarrassment.

A third strength is the identification of women's role in social reproduction. Patriarchy is not described as a conspiracy of men acting upon a unified group of women. Mothers train daughters, mothers-in-law discipline daughters-in-law and women may defend ideals of sacrifice that give meaning to their own lives (Nabar 36–37, 185–87). This insight avoids a simplistic opposition between male oppressors and female victims. It also explains why legal change alone cannot dissolve a hierarchy embedded in identity and affection.

The framework nevertheless has limitations. Its frequent use of “Indian woman” can obscure the graded character of caste society. Gender may be a widespread basis of subordination, but it does not equalise women politically or materially. Dominant-caste respectability can be maintained through the stigmatisation and labour of subordinated-caste women. A model that treats caste, class and gender as three separate layers risks missing how each changes the operation of the others. Crenshaw's intersectional method and Rege's standpoint critique therefore supply necessary revisions (Crenshaw 139–67; Rege WS39–WS46).

The archive is also weighted toward Hindu normative traditions and urban middle-class cultural materials. Nabar explains that Hindu references have pan-Indian relevance because communities influence one another and because majority traditions shape public culture (xi). That argument has force, but it cannot substitute for sustained attention to distinct religious laws, regional histories, Adivasi social formations or the labouring lives of rural and informal-sector women. The claim of cultural circulation should be paired with analysis of difference and unequal power.

Further, the caste metaphor can unintentionally naturalise caste even as it denaturalises gender. If caste is used merely as a familiar synonym for rigid hierarchy, its specific history of untouchability, graded status, violence and material exclusion may fade. The stronger formulation is relational: gender resembles caste in certain mechanisms, and caste itself is reproduced through gendered control. This approach retains Nabar's insight while refusing equivalence.

Finally, the book's reliance on personal observation and media examples means that it should not be read as empirical proof of prevalence. Nabar does not claim comprehensiveness (198). Her examples perform a different function: they reveal patterns of meaning and expose contradictions between formal equality and lived hierarchy. Subsequent research can test distribution and change, but the conceptual question remains hers: why do discriminatory arrangements continue to feel natural to those who inhabit them?

CONCLUSION

Caste as Woman offers a powerful vocabulary for understanding patriarchy as social classification rather than isolated prejudice. Through the idea of *stri-jati*, Nabar shows how gender difference is assigned, ranked, moralised and reproduced. The girl child is prepared for transfer; marriage connects sexuality to family and caste continuity; widowhood reveals the dependence of female status on the husband; dowry converts marriage into extraction; wifehood hides labour inside duty; and motherhood rewards self-erasure with symbolic divinity. These stages form a coherent regime of identity.

The metaphor of gender as caste is most persuasive when it names shared mechanisms of ascription, closure and inherited obligation. It must not, however, dissolve the historical specificity of caste or the unequal locations of women. Ambedkar and Chakravarti show that gender is essential to caste reproduction, while Crenshaw and Rege demonstrate why no single category can represent subjects formed at multiple relations of power. Nabar's female-jati should therefore be read as an invitation to relational analysis rather than as a universal female caste.

The book's lasting contribution is ethical as well as analytical. It asks readers to scrutinise what appears loving, sacred, humorous or respectable and to identify the power concealed inside ordinary practice. Nabar describes her project as showing how



“the personal has a rationale in the politics of tradition” (198). That phrase captures the work's continuing importance. Patriarchy endures not only through prohibitions but through identities people cherish and duties they fear to question. Transformation begins when tradition is returned to history, hierarchy is removed from the language of nature and female identity becomes a field of self-determination rather than an inherited rank.

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