

**Subltern Hermeneutics: Dalit Hermeneutics.**

**A Research Paper for the course on Hermeneutics for the Degree of M.A. in  
Philosophy**

By

**Savio E. Saldanha SJ**



**03<sup>RD</sup> APRIL 2022**

**THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY,  
LOYOLA COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS)  
CHENNAI- 600 034**

## DECLARATION

SAVIO SALDANHA SJ  
21-PPL-009  
Chennai-600 034  
Department of Philosophy  
Loyola College (Autonomous)

I declare that the Paper entitled, **Subaltern Hermeneutics: Dalit Hermeneutics**, has been submitted by me for the Master's degree in philosophy is a work carried out by me during the period January 2022 to April 2022 as a personal project to better understand the applications and implications of Subaltern Hermeneutics with respect to Dalit Hermeneutics. It is declared that no part of the thesis has been formed for the award of any degree, diploma, associate-ship, fellowship or any other similar titles prior to this date. The presentation of this paper was held in Loyola College, Philosophy department on 03<sup>rd</sup> April 2022, and has been subsequently published online under DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.17224.39684.

Chennai  
April 2022

Savio Saldanha  
21-PPL-009

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am filled with a deep sense of gratitude to the Department of Philosophy, Loyola College, Chennai; for having given me the opportunity to present this research paper. I am grateful to the almighty God for having given me the opportunity go through this stage of intellectual and philosophical formation.

I am thankful to two persons whose research on this topic was immensely helpful for me in my own research, S. Lourdunathan (Dalit Social Hermeneutics) and my brother Jesuit; A. Maria Arul Raja, SJ (Hermeneutical Sensibilities of the Dalits). Their research is much appreciated.

This paper is a result of personal practical application of the principles of Hermeneutics on the Dalit struggle for dignity. I believe that the saddest part of our Indian education system is that it does not encourage independent thinking, imagination, doubting, questioning methodology but rather a crystallised form of indoctrination of theories and principles as recommended by the Board of Education. I took on this work as a private enterprise in addition to my studies of philosophy to deepen my knowledge of the given subject. I am publishing this paper with a sole aim that students of philosophy and other fields will find my research helpful in their pursuit of knowledge.

Overall, the caste system in India is a very sensitive topic and its eradication should be the final aim of all Indians who wish to see their country as a developed nation. This paper provides a philosophical perspective from the Hermeneutical studies and not from political or any other perspective.

Savio Saldanha

April 3, 2022.

Satya Nilayam, Chennai

## Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	7
1. Introduction.....	9
2. Etymology.....	12
2.1. Facets of Hermeneutics: Biblical or Textual Hermeneutics.....	12
2.2. Derivations: Shifts in Hermeneutics. ....	12
3. Dalit Social Struggle.....	14
3.1. The Origin. ....	14
3.2. Composite location of the Dalit World. ....	15
3.2.1. Individuals who are tragically victimized by caste-based oppression.....	16
3.2.2. Determined agents shaping their own destinies. ....	17
3.2.3. Community building community.....	17
4. Coping with Suffering.....	21
4.1. Swift Justice. ....	21
4.2. Multiple conflicts. ....	22
5. Dalit Interpretative Perspective.....	23
6. Interpretation of Sacred text.....	26
7. Dalits and the Biblical text.....	27
7.1. Oral traditions and literacy.....	27
7.2. Dalit Perspective and Biblical Narratives ....	28
7.3. The Divine Image.....	29
8. The Hermeneutic Circle.....	32
8.1. The Dalit Hermeneutic Cycle.....	33
8.2. Dalit interpretation through a lens of skepticism. ....	34
8.3. Variations in Dalit Hermeneutics: Secular and Non-Secular.....	36
8.4. Variations in Dalit Hermeneutics: Issues with Secular and Non-Secular Approaches.....	37
9. Critique of Hermeneutics.....	39
10. Conclusion. ....	40
10.1. The Liberating Potential of Dalit Hermeneutics ....	40
10.2. How Hermeneutics can help Dalit liberation struggle. ....	41
11. Bibliography. ....	44





## **Abstract**

Hermeneutics, as a philosophical approach, can be applied to the Dalit liberation philosophy in order to deepen our understanding of the Dalit struggle for equality and dignity. Hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of texts, ideas, and experiences, emphasizing the importance of understanding the context, historical background, and lived experiences of individuals or communities. Applying hermeneutics to Dalit liberation philosophy involves analyzing and interpreting Dalit texts, narratives, and socio-political experiences to uncover the underlying meanings and implications for the Dalit struggle.

**Key Words:** *Hermeneutics, Dalits, Subaltern Hermeneutics.*





## 1. Introduction

Applying hermeneutics to Dalit liberation philosophy involves interpreting Dalit texts, narratives, and experiences in their historical and social context, while valuing the lived experiences of Dalit individuals and communities. It encourages dialogue, critical reflection, and a self-aware approach to understanding the Dalit struggle for equality and dignity. By employing hermeneutics, we can gain deeper insights into the complexities of the Dalit liberation movement and contribute to the pursuit of social justice. Here are some ways in which hermeneutics can be applied to Dalit liberation philosophy:

1. **Contextual Interpretation:** Hermeneutics stresses the significance of understanding the historical, social, and cultural context in which texts or ideas emerge. Similarly, in the case of Dalit liberation philosophy, hermeneutics can help in interpreting Dalit texts, speeches, and narratives within the context of caste-based discrimination, oppression, and exclusion. By considering the historical and social background, hermeneutics allows us to grasp the nuanced meanings and implications of Dalit struggles for equality and dignity.

2. **Lived Experience:** Hermeneutics recognizes the importance of lived experiences in interpreting texts and ideas. In the context of Dalit liberation philosophy, hermeneutics encourages us to engage with the lived experiences of Dalit individuals and communities. By centering the voices and experiences of Dalits, hermeneutics enables a deeper understanding of their struggles, aspirations, and resistance against caste-based oppression. This approach acknowledges that the Dalit struggle for equality and dignity is not merely an intellectual or theoretical pursuit but rooted in real experiences.

3. **Dialogical Interpretation:** Hermeneutics emphasizes the dialogical nature of interpretation. It recognizes that interpretation is a dynamic process that involves a dialogue between the interpreter and the text or idea being interpreted. Similarly, applying hermeneutics to Dalit liberation philosophy entails engaging in a dialogue with Dalit texts, philosophies, and activists. It involves a reciprocal and interactive process that acknowledges the agency of Dalit voices in shaping their own liberation narratives. This approach allows for a more inclusive and participatory understanding of the Dalit struggle.

4. Critical Reflection: Hermeneutics encourages critical reflection and self-awareness in the interpretive process. When applied to Dalit liberation philosophy, hermeneutics invites critical engagement with dominant narratives and power structures that perpetuate caste-based discrimination. It prompts us to critically examine our own biases, assumptions, and prejudices that might hinder a true understanding of the Dalit struggle for equality and dignity. By adopting a self-reflective stance, hermeneutics helps uncover hidden dimensions and challenges the status quo.

In this paper I shall explore the aspect of Dalit struggle for dignity and how hermeneutics can better help us to understand this aspect and aid in this struggle.



## 2. Etymology

The word "hermeneutics" has its roots in ancient Greek. It is derived from the Greek word "*hermeneuo*," which means "to interpret" or "to explain." The term "hermeneutics" itself was coined by the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early 19th century to describe the theory and methodology of interpretation.

The origin of the word can be traced back to the figure of Hermes in Greek mythology. Hermes was the messenger of the gods and the patron of communication, language, and interpretation. In ancient Greece, the art of interpretation was closely associated with the skill of conveying messages accurately and faithfully. The Greek term "*hermeneutike technē*" referred to the art of interpretation and was used to describe the process of explaining or translating the words of the gods to mortals.

### 2.1. Facets of Hermeneutics: Biblical or Textual Hermeneutics.

Biblical or Scriptural Hermeneutics refers to the branch of hermeneutics which focuses on the interpretation of religious texts, particularly the Bible or other sacred scriptures. Biblical hermeneutics involves principles and methods for understanding the historical, cultural, and linguistic context of biblical passages in order to derive their intended meaning. Textual Hermeneutics on the other hand deals with the interpretation of any written text which is not limited to religious texts. It encompasses various disciplines, such as literary criticism, literary theory, and linguistic analysis. Textual hermeneutics aims to understand the meaning and significance of texts by considering their structure, language, authorship, historical context, and intended audience.

### 2.2. Derivations: Shifts in Hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics has evolved over time and different shifts or developments have occurred within the field. Some significant derivations or shifts in hermeneutics include:

a. ***Historical-Critical Hermeneutics***: This approach emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and emphasized the historical context and critical analysis of texts. Scholars sought to uncover the original meaning of texts by examining their historical background, authorship, and

linguistic aspects. This approach aimed to distinguish between the historical meaning of a text and later interpretations.

b. ***Phenomenological Hermeneutics***: Developed by philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, phenomenological hermeneutics focuses on the understanding of human experiences and the role of preconceptions and prejudices in interpretation. It highlights the fusion of the interpreter's horizon (pre-understanding) with that of the text to arrive at a meaningful understanding.

c. ***Deconstructive Hermeneutics***: Associated with the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstructive hermeneutics challenges the notion of a fixed or stable meaning in texts. It emphasizes the inherent contradictions, ambiguities, and multiple interpretations within texts. Deconstructive hermeneutics seeks to unveil and question the underlying assumptions and hierarchies present in language and interpretation.

e. ***Postmodern Hermeneutics***: Postmodern hermeneutics builds upon the insights of various philosophical movements, including deconstruction and poststructuralism. It critiques the idea of a single objective meaning and instead emphasizes the plurality of interpretations. Postmodern hermeneutics recognizes the influence of social, cultural, and political factors on interpretation and encourages dialogue and diversity in understanding.

These derivations or shifts in hermeneutics reflect the evolving nature of interpretation and highlight different perspectives on the meaning and significance of texts. Each approach brings its own insights and methods to the practice of hermeneutics. Contemporary hermeneutics also includes interdisciplinary approaches, such as feminist hermeneutics which focuses on the interpretation of texts from a feminist perspective, and cultural hermeneutics, which examines how cultural and social contexts influence the interpretation of texts. Overall, hermeneutics is a dynamic field that continues to evolve and adapt to new intellectual and cultural challenges, reflecting shifts in philosophical, literary, and sociopolitical thought. In this paper I shall focus on the term Hermeneutics with respect to the philosophy of Deconstruction by Jacques Derrida.

### **3. Dalit Social Struggle.**

Dalit social struggle is rooted in the historical and oppressive caste system in India. The term "Dalit" refers to individuals who were historically considered "untouchable" and subjected to severe social, economic, and political discrimination. The roots of this evil practice can be traced to the Varna system which has been advocated by scriptural texts like the Manusmriti. The reference to dalits can be found in the Vedic system where they have been mentioned by various names like the Asuras, Dasyas, Antyajias, Avarnas, Nisadas, Mletchasas, Chandalas, Panchamas. We have to remember that historically these names were given by the oppressors to the oppressed. These terms are inherently derogatory in nature meaning untouchables, enemies, and outcasts. We must remember that 'Dalit' is not a term that they refer themselves. According to the 2011 census about 16.6% of the Indian population was composed of Dalits (Eguardian, 2023). When we study about them we have to take into account the historical, social, cultural and religious perspective of the issue.

#### **3.1. The Origin.**

Dalit hermeneutics refers to an interpretive comprehension of the Dalit social world, considering its discontent with the caste-based cultural society. It constitutes a theoretical and practical approach to hermeneutics that aims to promote liberation for:

- a. Individuals facing discrimination as a result of casteism.
- b. Individuals who are subjected to the hierarchical structure of casteism within the social and cultural order.

Recognizing that the caste-based social system undermines equality and justice in social relationships, Dalit hermeneutics seeks to uncover and address the cultural and political challenges of casteism through interpretive exploration of textual, metaphorical, narrative, ideological, and structural aspects. Its objective is to facilitate emancipatory hermeneutics, detached from the cultural burdens imposed by casteism, by adhering to principles of freedom, justice, and solidarity. Dalit hermeneutics represents a critical application of social theories, driven by its pursuit of liberation. Consequently, it engages in an ongoing critical dialogue with various social developmental theories and practices such as traditionalism, modernism, post-colonialism, or postmodernism. However, these engagements are shaped by the liberative

interests that guide Dalit hermeneutics (Lourdunathan, 2018). Central to our approach is the belief that:

- (i) Dalit experience holds significance in the realm of hermeneutic inquiry.
- (ii) Hermeneutics, as the discipline of interpretation, can be employed to comprehend the realities of Dalit existence.

### **3.2. Composite location of the Dalit World.**

Dalit hermeneutics encompasses various perspectives that provide a multidimensional understanding. The philosophical perspective of Dalit hermeneutics aims to uncover the hidden presence of caste-based dominant ideologies within philosophical texts and ideological contexts. It exposes the metaphysical, epistemological, and moral dimensions of exclusion as a philosophical construct, which in turn perpetuates and legitimizes the marginalization of outcasts in society. From a religious standpoint, Dalit hermeneutics seeks to reveal the problematic spirituality embedded within caste-based hierarchies, with the intention of fostering an emancipatory religious experience.

When exploring development perspectives, Dalit hermeneutics aims to bring attention to the unequal and imbalanced forms of development that adversely affect marginalized and vulnerable communities. Its objective is to promote a more inclusive and equitable approach to development. Within the realm of law, Dalit hermeneutics examines the limitations of legal systems in delivering justice to Dalits and other subaltern groups, highlighting the need for active intervention and reform. Ecological perspectives within Dalit hermeneutics emphasize the inseparable connection between subaltern communities, including Dalits, and the natural environment. It advocates for sustainable social ecology and acknowledges the importance of preserving this relationship. In terms of political perspectives, Dalit hermeneutics sheds light on the unfavorable conditions and forces present in democratic representative politics, while simultaneously striving to create a just and authentic democratic system. From a sociological standpoint, Dalit hermeneutics engages in scientific and empirical analysis to understand casteism as a social structure, encompassing social relations, interactions, and cultural aspects. Its goal is to advance critical social theory and practices that promote social justice. Through an artistic lens, Dalit hermeneutics explores aesthetics as a medium to depict the inhumanity of

casteism and envision emancipation with a sense of hope. From the perspectives of literature and communication, Dalit hermeneutics critically reevaluates existing literary works that perpetuate casteism, exposing their immorality and advocating for liberative forms of literature. Performative arts and social media within Dalit hermeneutics creatively challenge and dismantle the practice of casteism within the social fabric of Indian society, inviting participants to develop a critical and liberative consciousness (Arul Raja, 2010).

In order to gain insights into the layers of Dalit preunderstanding, it is necessary to delve into the internal dynamics of the enduring hardships faced by Dalits throughout their extensive history of struggles. During this exploration, we encounter three distinct roles and functions: (1) individuals who are tragically victimized by caste-based oppression, (2) determined agents shaping their own destinies, and (3) builders of a cohesive community. It is important to note that these roles and functions do not unfold in a linear manner. Instead, they manifest as intricate and multifaceted complexities, operating at both the individual and collective levels, within the context of Dalit oppression and the pursuit of Dalit emancipation in diverse situations.

### **3.2.1. Individuals who are tragically victimized by caste-based oppression.**

As victims of the disgraceful practice of untouchability the Dalits endure significant hardships. The origins of their suffering can be explained as follows: Firstly, their sense of identity is severely damaged due to the rigid caste system, which unfairly designates them as untouchables, permanently branded with impurity. Secondly, they face a contradictory situation where they are sought after as low-ranking workers but rejected as equals in society. This creates inner conflicts as they yearn for equal treatment while being forced into a lesser position on the social and political ladder. Moreover, there is a clash between their immediate survival needs and their deep-rooted desire for a collective human identity. The achievements they attain are often mocked and obscured by the inferior status imposed upon them. Additionally, the various forms of daily violence they experience, whether psychological, social, or political, are downplayed or even justified by the media, bureaucracy, and judiciary. This leads to a harmful cycle where depression and self-hatred result in fear of isolation and punishment. Dalits also bear the burden of initiating the painful process of reconciliation, particularly when forming short-term political alliances with anti-Dalit groups, who occupy a similar position in the caste hierarchy. Furthermore, the ethical sensitivities of Dalits are often dismissed as eccentric claims,



disregarded in regional, national, or international discussions. By examining these sources of suffering, we come to understand that Dalits are not responsible for inflicting these hardships upon themselves. Therefore, the traditional approach to addressing the problem of evil is inadequate when it comes to comprehending the suffering experienced by Dalits.

### **3.2.2. Determined agents shaping their own destinies.**

Dalit individuals assert themselves in various ways, aiming to carve out a space where they can shape their own destinies. A prominent example is their self-identification as Dalits, rejecting all other imposed identities. In oral and written Dalit literature, one may encounter exaggerated accounts of their struggles, showcasing a wide range of responses that span from mild disagreements to intense confrontations.

Despite being denied political representation, the Dalit experience of suffering can trigger conscious or unconscious acts of vengeance fueled by their enduring memory. Expressions of anger and frustration can take the form of slogan-shouting or even lead to violent clashes. Faced with frequent deprivation and accumulated humiliation, they may seek temporary relief when a permanent solution seems out of reach. This can manifest in alcohol addiction, promiscuity, excessive reliance on entertainment such as movies, or engagement in religious practices rooted in magical beliefs, all of which are often rationalized by Dalits. In their resistance against caste hierarchy and untouchability, Dalits may adopt the following behavioral patterns:

1. Simulating the practices of the so-called higher castes, particularly within the religious and cultural domain.
2. Transferring the conflict to other aspects of life, thereby temporarily mitigating the intensity of the existing confrontation and ensuring personal safety and livelihood.
3. Engaging in direct confrontation with those perceived as representatives of caste-based oppression, which can even escalate to violent altercations resulting in bloodshed.

### **3.2.3. Community building community.**

The current discourses, ideologies, philosophies, theologies, strategies, and programs within the Dalit community largely address the aspects of their deprivation as victims, as well as

their assertion as subjects. While their labor contributes to the welfare of society, a significant and passionate objective of Dalits is to create a society free from caste distinctions. Therefore, through their struggles, Dalits are actively engaged in the process of community-building. To achieve comprehensive Dalit emancipation, it is crucial for Dalits to strengthen their commitment and expand the scope of their strategies.

In essence, Dalits need to transcend their exclusive focus on Dalit-centric issues and extend their reach to others while deepening their dedication to their own liberation. It is important to consider the role of Dalit solidarity with other marginalized communities locally and globally. What practical implications arise from Dalits' role as a community of builders, actively engaged in fostering solidarity and collaboration with other victimized communities? The process of community building has profound implications in various dimensions, including the relationships between Dalit women and men, the dynamics between Dalit Christians and other Dalits, the interactions between Dalits and Adivasis, and the connections between Dalits and other backward classes.

In the realm of gender dynamics, the efforts towards community building foster a transformative environment for Dalit women and men. It provides an opportunity to challenge and dismantle gender-based discrimination and inequality, empowering Dalit women and promoting gender equity within the community.

When examining the relationships between Dalit Christians and other Dalits, community building initiatives encourage understanding, cooperation, and solidarity. It seeks to bridge potential divides and promote unity among different segments of the Dalit population, recognizing the shared experiences of discrimination and oppression.

Community building also plays a crucial role in fostering positive interactions between Dalits and Adivasis. By promoting dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation, it strives to strengthen the bond between these marginalized communities and work towards common goals of social justice and empowerment. Additionally, community building efforts aim to foster harmonious relations between Dalits and other backward classes. By fostering understanding, empathy, and collective action, these initiatives strive to transcend barriers and build inclusive alliances to challenge social hierarchies and discrimination.

Overall, community building initiatives have far-reaching implications for improving the relationships and interactions among various segments of society, including Dalit women and

men, Dalit Christians and other Dalits, Dalits and Adivasis, and Dalits and other backward classes.



## **4. Coping with Suffering.**

It is impossible to accurately predict how victims of untouchability will handle their suffering. Expressing deep anguish through lamentations is one spontaneous way to communicate and may garner support or provide some therapeutic relief. If these expressions fail to yield results, individuals may attempt withdrawal, employing passive assertion or opting for total silence. The wounded psyche may adopt a self-pitying attitude, causing Dalits to become inwardly focused. Consequently the Dalit anguish may manifest as self-hatred, feelings of helplessness, reliance on sedatives, or resignation to impersonal karma or the will of God.

During the height of intense anguish, philosophical contemplation may not occur. However, as the intensity subsides over time, individuals and communities engage in reflective processes. They delve into the underlying reasons and mechanisms behind the inflicted suffering. Depending on variables such as the cumulative historical impact of ongoing deprivation and the emotional readiness of their wounded psyche to respond, the process of philosophical contemplation may lead them in the following directions:

- (1) Helpless acceptance, embracing the suffering.
- (2) Calculated resignation, maintaining composure through reticence and deliberate silence in public, awaiting the right opportunity.
- (3) Immediate offensive or calculated revolt against the perpetrators who have caused them harm.

### **4.1. Swift Justice.**

In every situation of conflict, it is the oppressed who strive to challenge the existing power structure. The more oppressed the victims, the more they yearn for swift justice. This stands in stark contrast to the oppressors who are determined to maintain the status quo at all costs, using the guise of upholding revered traditions, religious principles, ancient customs, and ethical standards. Consequently, when Dalits seek to provoke a dramatic confrontation and demand immediate resolution, the ruling elite employs tactics to delay the process. These tactics include prolonged legal proceedings, sluggish investigations, endless negotiations, and empty slogans of law and order, harmony, and peace. For the victims, the key aspect of their expectations is the ethical urgency of obtaining justice promptly. The performances and artistic

expressions of Dalits are often imbued with the pursuit of immediate justice. Furthermore, one can observe the enthusiastic celebration among victimized Dalits when a righteous hero or heroine is depicted punishing the wicked acts of villains on the silver screen or through any other form of visual representation.

#### **4.2. Multiple conflicts.**

When the Dalit community combines their self-assertion with a grounded worldview, the material aspects of their spiritual beliefs, the tangible realm of knowledge, and the complexities of various conflicts, their consciousness becomes multi-layered, encompassing multiple identities. This gives rise to the emergence of self-assertive sub-groups within the Dalit community, each seeking their own distinct identities. In the current political landscape of India, it is not possible to simply unite all Dalits under a single banner. In other words, while demanding their rights and opposing caste-based oppression the Dalits do so with a specific historical and geographical context and cultural uniqueness. Dalit subjecthood manifests a particularistic perspective rather than a shared vision that could foster a coordinated effort among all Dalits for their liberation. Responsible agents of social transformation must carefully examine the interconnectedness of caste, patriarchy, and globalization. Feminist movements that overlook the analysis of caste hierarchy inadvertently fall into the hands of caste-based forces. Similarly, leftist movements that neglect the implications of caste hierarchy end up serving the same caste-based forces. Any credible and comprehensive endeavor for Dalit emancipation must expose the nexus between all these oppressive systems that hinder genuine Dalit empowerment. Such a profound analysis can prompt Dalits themselves to be more attuned to gender issues and the socio-economic ramifications of the market economy. Periyar, like Gandhi, advocates for provoking Dalits to openly confront the contradictions and conflicts, abandoning calculated reticence and dependence on prayers and penance for the conversion of oppressors. As Felix Wilfred observes, "Dalit women's struggle becomes a clear dissent from the concerns of middle and upper caste women, which overlook the issue of Brahminical patriarchy." (Wilfred, 2007)

## 5. Dalit Interpretative Perspective.

The aim of Dalit hermeneutics is not limited to understanding but extends to transformation. Its objective is to liberate Dalits from the shackles of the caste hierarchy and position them within a new world order based on human equality. This hermeneutical approach is contextualized, driven by social and political agendas, and seeks to empower Dalits to break free from the grip of untouchability. Its orientations are not elitist, authoritarian, or individualistic; rather, they are subaltern, participatory, and community-oriented (Richard, 1998).

At the heart of Dalit hermeneutics lies a dual interpretative key: the rejection of exclusion (the imposed identity) and the affirmation of inclusion (the identity of being co-human with others). This principle is foundational to Dalit hermeneutics, stemming from the Dalit experience of victimhood and the aspiration to construct a casteless human community. Any criticism labeling Dalit interpretation as purely subjective holds no sway, as Dalit hermeneutics does not claim scientific objectivity or detachment. It is forward-looking, with a primary agenda of fostering coexistence with fellow humans.

Dalit consciousness recognizes the need to integrate "hermeneutics, social theory, and the search for a transcendental dimension" to enable a psycho-social critique of societies and traditions, transcending contextual limitations (Thiselton, 1997). It embraces self-esteem and acknowledges legitimate anger. Thus, Dalit hermeneutics tends to be more socio-critical, focusing on actual conflicts, rather than sociopragmatic, which may mask apparent harmony. However, this does not imply a desire to create enemies; rather, it emphasizes that any dehumanization of others ultimately dehumanizes oneself (Ruether, 1993). As such, Dalit hermeneutics offers a valuable contribution to the entire human community and should be embraced by all.

In contrast to traditional Indian readings of biblical texts, which sought to explain Semitic and Hellenistic experiences using classical Indian categories and often centered on Christocentrism, Dalit interpretations exhibit marked differences. Reflecting Black sensibilities, Dalits do not cling rigidly to the literal words of the texts as sacrosanct but rather utilize biblical stories in ways that ensure their relevance and emotional impact. In this ongoing dialogue between the Dalit world and biblical texts, the focus is not primarily on philological intricacies but on the narrative threads and discourses. Consequently, Dalit hermeneutics avoids excessive textualism, disdain for major and popular religions, and the homogenization of the poor.

It is important to clarify that speaking of "Dalit hermeneutics" as a single unified category of interpretative exercise inadvertently negates the identity-specific modes of interpretation employed by various Dalit communities for empowering themselves. The multiplicity of Dalit preunderstandings gives rise to a diverse range of Dalit interpretations, each with its own contextual particularities. Therefore, when exploring the Dalit interpretation of the Bible, it is crucial to examine how Dalits, as subjects of interpretation, engage with the biblical texts on their own terms.





## 6. Interpretation of Sacred text.

In the age of globalization, no single religious group can claim exclusive ownership over a particular scripture, both in terms of its content and interpretations. As caste fundamentalists assert their dominance and advocates for social harmony strive for inclusivity, scriptures have been embraced by individuals with diverse perspectives. These sacred texts and narratives are studied and analyzed for various purposes. For example, the Bible, Quran, or Bhagavad Gita have provided marginalized individuals with a means to reclaim divine intervention that appears to support their cause. However, the same stories have also been manipulated by a wide range of fundamentalists, who twist them into weapons to justify everything from mild animosity to extreme acts of vengeance against so-called enemies. Representatives of major faith traditions often position themselves as the sole interpreters of these scriptures, exerting control through co-option or coercion. These different approaches to handling sacred texts alert us to the dangers of manipulation and underline the need for Dalit hermeneuticians to approach interpretations with ideological suspicion, considering the perspectives and experiences of the marginalized. Both the historical production and interpretation of these texts raise implicit and explicit questions about ideological presuppositions and functions. It is crucial to unveil the absolute or assertive claims made in the texts and interpretations, which often invoke faith, truth, revelation, inspiration, canonization, universalism, or particularism. Additionally, it is necessary to examine how these claims are consciously or unconsciously employed to construct ethnic or caste identities while deconstructing the claims of "others." Such manipulations by fundamentalists exploit the intertextuality within biblical narratives, which can be referred to as "horizontal inter-textuality." Simultaneously, this aims to engage with the intertextuality between the biblical world and the internal textual world of the readers, which can be termed "vertical intertextuality" in the act of interpretation. Exploring both "horizontal" and "vertical" intertextual readings of the Bible should help readers broaden their understanding and empower victims. Sacred texts are intended to serve the entire human family, fostering connections that transcend creed, caste, color, or culture, and facilitating the establishment of a cosmo-centric bond that unifies and resonates in every heart.

## **7. Dalits and the Biblical text.**

In this particular section, our aim is to foster a dialogue between the Dalit world and the biblical world, delving into the complexities inherent in any hermeneutical exploration undertaken by the Dalit community with regards to any text. These discussions have the potential to open up avenues for deeper investigation into the methodological intricacies surrounding Dalit hermeneutics.

### **7.1. Oral traditions and literacy.**

Over centuries, the illiterate Dalit community has been marginalized by the dominant worldviews propagated by the literate elite. Their initial encounter with Christianity, a religion deeply rooted in written texts, presented a challenge of merging orality with literacy. Even for subsequent generations of Dalit Christians, the oral tradition continues to dominate their textual world. Consequently, the written texts of the Bible have not become an active ideological or rhetorical force in the collective consciousness of Dalits in India. Prior to their conversion to Christianity, Dalits had their own rich traditions, mythology, legends, proverbs, moral teachings, customs, festivals, and folk religions. Despite being relegated to the status of untouchables by the Brahminic worldview, they maintained autonomy in religious practices and the creation of their own texts. This autonomy has persisted even after their conversion to Christianity and exposure to the biblical world.

Unlike liberation hermeneutics, Dalit sensibilities, including Dalit Christian sensibilities, do not view the Bible as the ultimate authority on matters of morality and theological disputes (Sugirtharajah, 2002). No single text can claim a monopolistic or normative hold over the Dalit preunderstanding. The Dalit perspective does not uphold any text as uniquely sacred or an ultimate authority. It embraces religious pluralism as the norm and draws from a diverse theological pool, not confined to a particular religious source. The Bible is employed as a tool for the emancipation of Dalits. When interpreting biblical texts, it is essential to integrate the common heritage of Dalits, such as popular tales, legends, folk drama, riddles, lullabies, lamentations, and songs sung during collective labor, alongside the written texts. This allows for a meaningful interaction between the common heritage and biblical texts, resulting in mutual influence. In this process, biblical texts do not hold special privilege or authority to establish

norms for the non-textual traditions of Dalits. The primary criterion for genuine Dalit hermeneutics is the ethical imperative of dismantling discriminatory hierarchies.

Individualistic and apolitical readings that focus solely on miraculous events do not align with Dalit hermeneutics. Instead, Dalit hermeneutics favor communitarian readings that prioritize the concerns of individuals while simultaneously addressing the political agenda of collective self-empowerment and the pursuit of human dignity. However, as a community that has been systematically deprived of power and privileges, Dalits understandably harbor anger towards caste hierarchies. As a result, their expressions and interactions with others are often imbued with intense emotions, especially feelings of depression or disappointment. These emotions drive Dalits to seek solace in spiritual avenues, utilizing biblical texts as a means of finding comfort in a transcendent realm.

## **7.2. Dalit Perspective and Biblical Narratives**

Due to their grounded spirituality, Dalits resonate with the anthropomorphic portrayal of God in the Yahwistic (J) tradition. This tradition closely aligns with the divine-human connection experienced by Dalits. The monotheistic aspects of the Elohist tradition (E) in the biblical world do not hold significant importance in the spiritual realm of Dalits. While Dalits acknowledge the existence of a righteous God who promptly administers justice to the marginalized, they feel a sense of aversion towards the regulations of purity and pollution found in the Deuteronomic tradition (D). Additionally, Dalits show reluctance towards the elaborate liturgical practices outlined in the priestly tradition (P). Lengthy narratives with intricate details and stories with dramatic twists captivate Dalit readers/listeners more effectively than prolonged discourses featuring repetitive codes or sayings. The theme of promise and fulfillment in the Bible resonates with the perpetual hope for a better future cherished by Dalits. When biblical stories depict the achievement of seemingly impossible feats through direct or indirect divine intervention, the Dalit psyche is infused with newfound enthusiasm and hope. Nostalgic recollections of past victories or painful memories of defeat create a sense of solidarity with the victims in the biblical world.

As a marginalized community without land ownership, Dalits strongly connect with narratives centered on land acquisition and nation-building. However, the early instances of purchasing and trading slaves by the Israelites after their liberation from Egypt are deeply

troubling to Dalit sensibilities. The concept of retribution, where the innocent are rewarded and the sinful are punished, strikes a chord with Dalits. Similar to Job, Dalits also question why the innocent suffer. However, in contrast to Job's exploration of suffering, which challenges the theory of retribution, Dalits largely maintain the belief in the punishment of the unjust and the reward of the just, often expecting immediate consequences. The symbolic language used by prophetic poets and the communication styles of Jesus through parables and anecdotes strongly capture Dalits' attention. When Dalits interpret biblical stories, they often uncover new perspectives that diverge from traditional interpretations. For example, when viewing the story of the widow's offering from a Dalit perspective, the emphasis shifts from her generosity to the exploitation of her religious devotion by the temple treasury authorities in the guise of religious commitment. In general, Dalits prefer texts that align with their socio-political aspirations. The Pentateuch, historical books, prophetic books, and the Gospels, due to their focus on socio-political issues, serve as fertile ground for Dalit hermeneutics. The wisdom books, apocalyptic literature, and texts from the exilic or post-exilic period are particularly suited for grappling with the experience of suffering.

### **7.3. The Divine Image.**

In general, Dalits can be seen as the marginalized ones in agrarian culture, similar to how widows, orphans, and strangers were marginalized in the nomadic culture of the Israelites. The Dalit understanding of divinity can be described as polytheistic, with strong connections to agrarian practices. Dalit deities emerge from human experiences and exist in close proximity along a continuous spectrum. In contrast, the biblical understanding of God can be seen as nomadic monotheism, positioning God in the celestial realm. While Dalit deities are immanent and present in the here-and-now, the biblical God is characterized by transcendent otherness. This distinction is also reflected in the symbolism used in worship, where agricultural symbolism dominates Dalit worship, while desert symbolism characterizes biblical worship.

Within the wounded consciousness of Dalits, mother goddesses play a vital and irreplaceable role. In contrast, the feminine aspect of God is largely absent in biblical literature, where God is primarily depicted in masculine terms. The feminine element is indirectly expressed in the Bible through the exploration of hesed (compassionate affirmation) and the motherly tenderness of the fatherly Yahweh. As a result, Dalits encounter a regrettable absence when engaging with the

dominant image of a male God in the Bible. The silence surrounding the sexuality of the biblical God does not resonate positively with Dalit religious sensitivities. Furthermore, the biblical condemnation of fertility symbols among the Canaanites further dampens their attraction towards the predominantly male God of the Bible.

The image of Yahweh as the deity of a large family or as the deity of an ethnic group elicits a positive response from Dalits. They connect with the biblical image of God as a protector and a powerful, wrathful deity (the Lord of Hosts). The God of mobility (Ark of the Covenant) is dearer to them than the God of stability (God residing in the temple in Jerusalem). The former signifies the ongoing solidarity of God as Emmanuel (God-with-us), while the latter represents a God who feels distant and domesticated by the ruling class.

The unconditional love of God extended to all, both the just and the unjust, is not a part of the Dalit experience or expectation. Similarly, the Pauline concept of salvation through faith is not readily accepted by Dalits, as it clashes with their rightful anger against the caste forces that perpetuate their suffering under the guise of divinely ordained permanent pollution.



## 8. The Hermeneutic Circle.

The concept of the Hermeneutic Circle suggests that a holistic understanding cannot be achieved without considering its individual components, and the individual components cannot be comprehended without reference to the whole. The parts rely on the existence of the whole, and the whole encompasses the parts for any form of understanding to emerge. This circularity is inescapable, and presuppositions are an inherent part of understanding. All understanding is rooted in preexisting notions and beliefs. Our understanding is always influenced by prior experiences and knowledge, shaping our anticipatory structure of interpretation. Heidegger refers to this structure as "Vorstruktur," while Gadamer views it as the productive or misleading prejudices that guide our understanding and knowledge-seeking interests. It is crucial to clarify this hermeneutical foreground in our understanding of the self's understanding. The past colors the present, and the present is influenced by past experiences.

It is challenging to determine how to approach the foreground of understanding. However, evading or replacing it with traditional metaphysics that uphold metaphysical foregrounds does not resolve the circularity. Some may consider tradition as an a priori guide to understanding and uncritically immerse themselves in its prevailing discourse, structuring their understanding as a foregrounded interpretation. This obstructs fresh understanding because it is always rooted in the past (tradition), hindering authentic comprehension. Hermeneutical thinkers like Heidegger, Bultmann, Ricoeur, and Gadamer view the hermeneutical circle more favorably, as they see it as an inherent and positive element of understanding. As finite and historical beings, our understanding is guided by anticipations, expectations, and questions. The key, according to them, is not to escape the hermeneutical circle but to enter it in the right manner, as Heidegger exemplifies through his lifelong deconstruction of Western thought in search of a more original understanding of Being.

More recently, Gadamer and Derrida have been inspired by Heidegger's perspective, emphasizing the importance of engaging directly with the hermeneutical circle to expose its logical incoherence. Prejudiced understanding, such as a caste mindset, serves as a pre-understanding that must be eradicated to achieve an objective elimination of casteism in social practices. Gadamer argues that the prejudiced nature of our understanding should be recognized as the foundation that enables understanding in the first place. This is what he refers to as the ontological and positive aspect of the hermeneutical circle. Recognizing the presuppositions



(apriori understanding) is a logical prerequisite to objectively combat them. The ontological structure or foreground of understanding, which presupposes understanding, must first be comprehended in order to expose its truth or falsity. No science or inquiry is free from presuppositions. By becoming aware of these presuppositions, an inquirer can liberate themselves from any biases in their fields of knowledge and interests. Firstly, we must become conscious of our pre-understanding as a pathway to understanding. This is the ontological aspect of the Hermeneutical circle. Secondly, we can sort out these presuppositions through self-understanding of understanding. Gadamer refers to this process as elucidation or interpretation (*Auslegung*). Thirdly, we should dismiss the preconceived false anticipations imposed upon us and replace them with more authentic propositions. This hermeneutical foreground is shaped and influenced by culture, history, language, and education. However, a hermeneutics of liberation, such as Dalit hermeneutics, views the foreground with suspicion and a critical outlook, striving to subjectively and objectively eliminate any misleading false understandings that may arise from it (Grondin, 2016).

### **8.1. The Dalit Hermeneutic Cycle.**

The problem of casteism, like a hermeneutic cycle, perpetuates a vicious circularity. The entire caste structure generates a caste-cultural mindset, which in turn reinforces casteism in a self-perpetuating manner. Within casteism, the individual is not truly an individual but rather a part of a collective caste consciousness. The whole system becomes a reflection of its individual components, and these individual components, in turn, embody the entire casteist structure. Casteness is both a cultural and mental characteristic of individuals within the caste system. The concept of an individual, as understood in Western modernistic enlightenment ethics, does not (and cannot) apply to individuals within a caste-based society. They exist simultaneously as individuals and as part of the collective caste consciousness. The individual loses their individuality within the collective caste consciousness, while the collective caste consciousness is strongly reflected in individual consciousness. It is both the whole and the particular simultaneously. Dalit hermeneutics does not escape the circularity of casteism; instead, it confronts and exposes its illegitimacy. In this sense, Dalit hermeneutics is a task for both so-called non-Dalits and Dalits, provided that both are committed to the common goal of

eradicating casteism in general and improving the social condition of Dalit untouchables in particular.

As the primary focus is the promotion and advocacy of a socially and ethically constructed society against casteism, both Dalits and non-Dalits must rid themselves of any caste-related biases or preconceptions that may influence their understanding. However, this is not as simple as it may sound, as it involves a vicious circularity arising from pre-existing caste mindsets within both Dalits and non-Dalits. The issue with the Dalit hermeneutic cycle lies here. While Dalit hermeneutics addresses the problem of casteism as a whole, aiming to eradicate casteism in its entirety and originating from Dalit perspectives against casteism, the understanding of the whole and the particular is predetermined by caste-based prejudices. Non-Dalit attempts at engaging with Dalit hermeneutics are also preconditioned by caste prejudices, and even Dalits who resist casteism are conditioned by the same prejudices. The deep-rooted presence of casteism, both as a mindset and cultural construct, acts as an underlying preconception that hinders an authentic sense of hermeneutics for Dalit liberation.

The ontology of casteism must continuously be acknowledged throughout the process of engaging in a hermeneutic of liberation or Dalit hermeneutics. In this regard, the term "Dalit" should be redefined and reframed as anti-casteism, while the term "non-Dalit" should be redefined as anti-discrimination against Dalits within the context of casteism. Such a hermeneutic process, as Gadamer suggests, involves the elucidation of dismissing predispositions in favor of authenticity. Both Dalits and non-Dalits should approach Dalit hermeneutics with a hermeneutic of suspicion towards their own allegiance to casteism. Failing to do so may lead to the perception of Dalit hermeneutics as casteistic by the caste "other," and non-Dalit involvement in Dalit hermeneutics as being driven by self-interest. By critically examining the deeply ingrained caste configurations present in everyday social life, both Dalits and non-Dalits can move away from their caste constructs on subjective and objective levels.

## **8.2. Dalit interpretation through a lens of skepticism.**

The approach involves employing a method of interpretation rooted in skepticism, remembrance, reflection, resistance, and reinvention. A Dalit interpretation based on skepticism primarily aims to raise awareness, taking into consideration the influence of culturally determined caste-based roles and attitudes on the subject under examination. Its focus lies in

bringing to light the impact of caste bias and ideology on the understanding of broader meanings. A Dalit interpretation based on skepticism is concerned not only with critically engaging with narratives that may undermine the complete human dignity of Dalits but also with the omissions that perpetuate discrimination by neglecting their humanity.

When it comes to the Dalit hermeneutical philosophy, the primary application of skeptical interpretation has been centered on philosophical and cultural texts, recognizing that they are largely shaped and produced from caste-based perspectives. For instance, when interpreting a philosophical text like the Bhagavad Gita, the underlying assumption is that the text has been affected by caste-based interpretations by the community for whom it was intended, written, and structured. Exploratory questions may include: who was the text intended for and who benefits from it? In what ways is it beneficial? Does it favor the dominant caste?

By paying attention to the impact of caste structures on philosophical texts, it becomes evident that these texts are not inherently revelatory but are explicitly crafted in human fashion, reflecting the prevailing human situation. Consequently, it is possible to argue that if a text is structured to reflect a caste worldview, it is bound to perpetuate the same worldview and influence the mindset of those interpreting it. This would lead to the marginalization and negation of Dalit people as an assumed ontological condition within the text.

Dalit 'interpretation through skepticism' does not merely dwell on suspicion. It proceeds to question dubious ideologies, engaging in a process of methodological suspension of these ideologies. The hermeneutics of suspicion then transforms into a critique of these ideologies, both in theoretical and practical terms, exposing the pervasive presence of casteism (metaphysical and physical).

Thus, Dalit interpretation is inherently a critique, seeking to unveil the illusions of consciousness perpetuated by ideologies. However, this critique is not enough. Dalit interpretation aims to critically examine what led to suspicion in the first place. This critique demands intellectual rigor, an unwavering opposition to the existing status quo. It retains the oppositional force of a skeptical hermeneutics while purifying it from emotional associations, treating negativity as primarily a philosophical or political matter. Engaging in critique entails grappling with oversights, contradictions, evasions, insufficiencies, or omissions within the object of analysis. Dalit hermeneutics is a critique characterized by its inherent 'against-ness' its desire to counteract the annihilations enforced by caste configurations. It is a theoretical and

practical approach that vehemently opposes the negativity influenced by casteism. Similar to radical feminist hermeneutics, (Felski, 2011) Dalit interpretation represents a vigilant skepticism towards the fetishism embedded in caste-based cultural traditions. It is a deconstructive inquiry that aims to expose and demystify the linguistic and cultural practices of domination, disentangling the ideological functions of authoritative texts and commentaries.

The fetishization of caste must be stripped away by unraveling its deeply ingrained layers of dominant presence as a cultural mode or way of life. The Dalit interpretation based on skepticism paves the way for a Dalit interpretation rooted in remembrance. This remembrance reconstructs historical texts from the perspectives of Dalits, restoring the collective voice of caste-individuals and freeing Dalits from the shackles of caste-based enslavement and subordination.

### **8.3. Variations in Dalit Hermeneutics: Secular and Non-Secular.**

In a general sense, Dalit hermeneutics can be classified into two categories: secular and non-secular. Consequently, there exist proponents of both secular and non-secular hermeneutics, but there is also the possibility of an intersection between the two. Many non-secular hermeneuticians base their interpretations of the Dalit experience on their respective scriptural traditions, such as the Bible. They delve into the analysis of narratives, metaphors, and texts from these scriptures, aiming to highlight the alienation Dalits face due to caste-based discrimination.

On the other hand, secular hermeneuticians predominantly emerge from the realm of social sciences. They approach the topic without any religious or scriptural orientation. Their work is inspired by various modern and late-modern social thinkers, including Ambedkar, Gandhi, Karl Marx, Periyar, Nietzsche, Habermas, Althusser, Saussure, Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and many others. The choice of thinkers depends on the specific social science background of the scholar. While they all share a common goal of eradicating casteism and fighting against the discriminatory practices faced by Dalits, they differ significantly in their methods and approaches to combatting casteism and addressing caste-based discrimination. These differences themselves present a separate field of study, offering opportunities for further exploration in Dalit hermeneutics.

#### **8.4. Variations in Dalit Hermeneutics: Issues with Secular and Non-Secular Approaches**

A significant concern surrounding non-secular Dalit hermeneutics is that it limits the understanding of the caste problem to selected versions of scriptural traditions, such as narratives, metaphors, and morals. By doing so, it inadvertently confines the issue of caste discrimination within the boundaries of scriptural and textual traditions, neglecting the broader social conditions that perpetuate casteism. Another challenge with scriptural interpretations in Dalit hermeneutics is that the same scripture can be used to both mystify and demystify the very problem it aims to address within the realm of religious discourse. The interpretation of scripture can be manipulated in any desired direction, presenting a paradoxical danger in scriptural hermeneutics.

For instance, in recent decades, biblical hermeneutics and exegesis have been employed to tackle issues related to women, Black individuals, Dalits, and environmental concerns. Narratives like the exodus episodes, creation metaphors, and the sermon on the mount have been extensively used to address discrimination. However, when it comes to caste or the Dalit question, these interpretations, although rooted in classical biblical tradition, often prioritize a sophistication of liberation rather than comprehensive social liberation for the entire Catholic Church, which mirrors the caste-based social hierarchy. It is crucial to recognize that the experiences of Dalits and the discrimination they face due to casteism should not be solely subordinated to scriptural interpretations. Instead, scriptural interpretations should be subjected to the judgment of Dalits who directly experience caste-based discrimination, taking into account the effectiveness of these interpretations in achieving liberation. Moreover, the biblical exodus experience of the Israelites does not necessarily align with the cultural experience of caste-based discrimination faced by Dalits. There is an inherent cultural and experiential difference between scripture and the social reality shaped by different cultures. Therefore, interpreting Dalit experiences solely through scriptural interpretations, without critically examining the presuppositions and pre-existing understandings of biblical texts, may not be fruitful.

The traditional interpretations of scriptures themselves can impede liberative hermeneutics and obscure the true message conveyed by the scriptures. Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of the Indian Church, influenced by its own politics and caste ethos, often

maintains a dualistic approach to scriptural requirements, mystifying the theory and practice of liberation from caste-based enslavement.

Merely allowing scripture to speak the language of liberation while the Church and its scriptural ethos remain colonial or pre-colonial does not align with the modernist anti-colonial claim of equality and justice. The principle of equality, as a rejection of casteism, is distinct from the spirit of freedom depicted and sermonized through biblical narratives. The complex cultural, contextual, and political variations of caste-based slavery and liberation differ from biblical narratives of slavery and redemption. Given the pre-existing scriptural interpretations that have prevailed for ages, the scriptures themselves need to undergo liberation before attempting to enforce social liberation from casteism. Determining what aspects should be suspended or critically examined when employing scriptural interpretations to address discrimination based on casteism remains a subject of considerable debate. Dalit hermeneutics endeavors to grapple with the "human" element that scriptures embody as they pass through traditions and cultures. Hence, the credibility of scriptural interpretations poses a challenge that Dalit hermeneutics, or anti-caste hermeneutics, must carefully navigate.

The challenge with secular Dalit hermeneutics is that it is influenced by diverse ideological foundations, which may lead to an exclusive focus on addressing discrimination based solely on casteism. For instance, a Marxist perspective on casteism may fall into the fallacy of class categorization, overlooking the historical and social dimensions of caste discrimination against Dalits. Ambedkar, for instance, would question such a perspective and argue that caste stratification includes class stratification. However, regardless of the hermeneutical tool employed, the ultimate goal should be the emancipation of the entire caste discrimination and the specific realities faced by Dalits. It is essential to expose the politics of casteism and its illegitimacy, while striving for an ethics of liberation for those who suffer from caste-based discrimination.

## 9. Critique of Hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics, although valuable for psychological interpretation, falls short in encompassing the full spectrum of behavior that social science seeks to explore. It does not provide a criterion for verification but rather serves as a way to achieve clarity, making it insufficiently scientific.

In his debate with Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas contends that while hermeneutics is significant for social inquiry, its emphasis on tradition, prejudices, and internal standards of rationality limits its critical power in exposing prevailing ideologies that conceal social reality and the exercise of power. Critical theorists argue that this inherent limitation reflects a politically conservative bias.

Michel Foucault, on the other hand, argues that hermeneutic and interpretive theories still align themselves with conventional notions of truth and the self, which are shaped by dominant discursive practices in society and politics. These practices deploy categories and practices of identity and difference that favor certain forms of human beings and understanding while marginalizing or disqualifying others. Hermeneutics fails to fully acknowledge its entanglement in prevailing concepts of the self and politics.

In response to these criticisms, interpretive theorists highlight that the emphasis on language and its relationship to social practices requires an explanation that goes beyond empathic or psychological understanding. It necessitates delving into what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls "depth-interpretation." Scholars like Gadamer and Taylor recognize the limitations of hermeneutics and argue that no historical preconceptions should go unchallenged. They emphasize the need to be aware of how prevailing political and self-practices influence the possibilities of social explanation.

However, it is crucial to engage in hermeneutical dialogue with emerging social theories (pluralism) and social actors while keeping the emancipation of casteism in mind. This dialogue should be centered on the emancipation of the most vulnerable individuals, namely Dalits.

## **10. Conclusion.**

Looking at the importance of Hermeneutical studies from Dalit liberation perspective, we can derive the following conclusion. Dalit hermeneutics should not originate from individuals who hold positions within the caste power structure and dictate how Dalits should feel or behave. The truth must be spoken by the people, for the people, and especially by the Dalits themselves, as truth is inherently intertwined with their struggle. This truth is inseparable from their aspirations and dreams that arise from the sufferings and setbacks they face in their fight for liberation. It is through this struggle that a transcendent reality is revealed, enabling them to understand that their pursuit of freedom is not in vain. Speaking the truth from the Dalit perspective involves reconnecting with the roots of Dalit experiences as expressed and witnessed in the history and culture of an oppressed yet resilient people. This serves as an antidote to the pervasive casteism that exists.

### **10.1. The Liberating Potential of Dalit Hermeneutics**

As a critical theory of modern society, postcolonialism directs its focus towards the experiences of colonized societies from their own perspective. Although the term 'postcolonialism' suggests a concern with the national culture following the departure of imperial powers, in practice, it encompasses a much broader scope. It encompasses colonialism, mythology, history, language, landscape, and the intricate dynamics between the self and the other. All these elements are crucial components of postcolonial studies.

When engaging in a postcolonial reading within the framework of Dalit hermeneutics, one explores the continuous colonial continuity of marginalization that disproportionately affects Dalits as a vulnerable group, either through their co-optation or exclusion. The lived experiences of untouchable communities within the caste-ridden Indian society reflect a historical continuity of domination and subordination. They represent a cultural reality characterized by perpetual denials and deprivations. This reality is shaped by numerous ideological and cultural narratives that cunningly enforce casteism's supremacy and the subordination of untouchable individuals.

Postcolonial Dalit hermeneutics also encompasses the resistance efforts, no matter how seemingly insignificant they may be. The discourse of postcolonial Dalit perspectives seeks to redefine, reformulate, and reconstruct the colonized self. It examines how the colonized self



perpetuates power politics that further marginalize and exclude Dalit individuals from mainstream political participation and power-sharing.

In essence, the liberation potential of Dalit hermeneutics within the framework of postcolonialism emerges through a comprehensive examination of the historical, social, and cultural dynamics that perpetuate marginalization and through the critical exploration of resistance and self-redefinition within these oppressive systems.

## **10.2. How Hermeneutics can help Dalit liberation struggle.**

The caste conflict can be illuminated by employing Jacques Derrida's approach to deconstruction. Our society is entrenched in a logocentric paradigm, steadfastly believing in the grounding of everything. The metaphysics of presence upholds a centered universe or structure, establishing hierarchies through binary oppositions where the first term is privileged. Examples of such binary oppositions include spirit-matter, nature-culture, presence-absence, and male-female. These binary terms not only oppose each other but also contain implicit or explicit value judgments that favor one term over the other. Through the deconstruction of these binary oppositions, we can uncover their underlying foundation. Deconstruction serves as a strategy to transcend the metaphysics of presence. It involves two opposing concepts: a dominant element and an oppressed or non-dominant element. Deconstruction's central objective is to reveal the workings of "logocentrism" in any "text" (where "text" encompasses not only written treatises but also all our contexts). Derrida's deconstruction dismantles all hierarchies and subverts all binary oppositions, ultimately advocating for the second or inferior term in these oppositions without engendering a new polarization. Derrida posits that all knowledge is context-dependent and influenced by culture, tradition, language, prejudices, and other phenomena. Therefore, knowledge is relative to these factors. Consequently, the task of deconstruction is to interrogate all claims of objective knowledge by illustrating alternative meanings and "truths" within any specific worldview. Deconstruction serves as a method to displace the privileged systems of meaning, allowing marginalized ideas to reclaim their rightful place. It is important to note that these marginalized ideas regain their position not because they are inherently true or objective, but because they possess an equal claim to legitimacy as any other viewpoint. They too are susceptible to deconstruction.

By deconstructing the hierarchical caste based system, we can allow for the suppressed cultural expressions of the Dalits to achieve their rightful place in the society. The expression of Dalit arts, stories, legends, dance etc. will help them to proclaim their side of the story to a world which has tried to suppress it for ages. Also by understanding the Dalit perspective of interpretation of the Biblical texts as well as Scriptures of other religions will allow us to understand their understanding of the concept of God and their relation to it. This will help us in turn to deepen our Spiritual experience and help us in reconciling an entire population which is reeling under oppressive caste based structure. The Dalits in turn will benefit from the Hermeneutical studies by understanding their rightful place as equal human beings in the creation and this will help them to orient their liberation struggle in a right direction, not against any oppressor but rather for their own liberation.



## 11. Bibliography.

Arul Raja, M. A. (2010). *Hermeneutical Sensibilities of the Dalits*.

Eguardian. (2023). *Dalit population in India – Dalit caste & community in Indian Politics*.  
<https://www.eguardian.co.in/dalit-population-india/#:~:text=There is no part of,16.6%25 of the total population.>

Felski, R. (2011). Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion. *M/C Journal*, 15(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.431>

Grondin, J. (2016). What is the hermeneutical circle? In N. Keane & C. Lawn (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics* (pp. 299–305). Blackwell.

Lourdunathan, S. (2018). *Dalit Social Hermeneutics*.

Richard, P. (1998). *Dalit Interpretative Perspective The aim of Dalit hermeneutics is not limited to understanding but extends to transformation. Its objective is to liberate Dalits from the shackles of the caste hierarchy and position them within a new world order based on* (F. F. Segovia & M. A. Tolbert (eds.)). Orbis Books.

Ruether, R. R. (1993). *Sexism and God-talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*. (10th ed.). Beacon Press.

Sugirtharajah, R. S. (2002). *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*. OUP.

Thiselton, A. C. (1997). *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*. Zondervan Academic.

Wilfred, F. (2007). *Dalit Empowerment* (First). N.B.C.L.C.

Arul Raja, M. A. (2010). *Hermeneutical Sensibilities of the Dalits*.

Eguardian. (2023). *Dalit population in India – Dalit caste & community in Indian Politics*.  
<https://www.eguardian.co.in/dalit-population-india/#:~:text=There is no part of,16.6%25 of the total population.>

Felski, R. (2011). Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion. *M/C Journal*, 15(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.431>

Grondin, J. (2016). What is the hermeneutical circle? In N. Keane & C. Lawn (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics* (pp. 299–305). Blackwell.

Lourdunathan, S. (2018). *Dalit Social Hermeneutics*.

Richard, P. (1998). *Dalit Interpretative Perspective The aim of Dalit hermeneutics is not limited to understanding but extends to transformation. Its objective is to liberate Dalits from the shackles of the caste hierarchy and position them within a new world order based on* (F. F. Segovia & M. A. Tolbert (eds.)). Orbis Books.

Ruether, R. R. (1993). *Sexism and God-talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*. (10th ed.). Beacon Press.

Sugirtharajah, R. S. (2002). *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*. OUP.

Thiselton, A. C. (1997). *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*. Zondervan Academic.

Wilfred, F. (2007). *Dalit Empowerment (First)*. N.B.C.L.C.

