

Unveiling Caste Trauma: Thenmozhi Soundararajan's Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition

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Abstract: The book titled *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition*, authored by Thenmozhi Soundararajan, is a groundbreaking work that delves into the enduring trauma created by caste-based segregation. Soundararajan, a prominent Dalit American activist and a leading advocate in the struggle against caste discrimination combines a rigorous examination of the caste with reflections on recovery and resilience. While the historical context of Dalit oppression is well-known, this paper will critically analyse caste trauma from the perspectives of feminism, abolitionism, and the teachings of Dalit Buddhism, aiming for a more profound understanding of the interplay between historical trauma, generational trauma and liberation.

Keywords: Caste Apartheid, Trauma, Survivorship, Abolition, Diaspora, Resistance, Liberation

In her groundbreaking book *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Reflection on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition*, Thenmozhi Soundararajan introduces the concept of "Dalit" as synonymous with "brokenness." She eloquently states, "This brokenness stems from the profound loss of human potential to this violent system—a life not fully lived, and souls silenced, unable to sing their complete song" (Soundararajan 2). This depiction, she argues, is not merely figurative but a tangible consequence of enduring the relentless suffering imposed by the oppressive caste system—the world's oldest and most enduring dominator system, sanctioned by ancient scriptures and perpetuated

through egregious acts of violence. Throughout the centuries, Dalits have borne the weight of suffering, oppression, and trauma inflicted by this deeply entrenched social hierarchy.

As a leading figure in the Indian American Dalit rights movement, Thenmozhi Soundararajan brings a deeply personal and authentic perspective to her activism. Through her role as the founder of Equality Labs, the most prominent Dalit civil rights organisation in the United States, she not only offers scholarly insights but also draws from her own experiences as a Dalit woman. Soundararajan's book is structured into four distinct sections, which she terms meditations, providing readers with a framework for navigating the complexities of caste oppression and resilience.

In the first meditation of her book, Soundararajan narrates memories from her childhood and reflects on how she came to understand her Dalit identity. Although she did not directly encounter the discrimination that her ancestors faced, she vividly portrays the inheritance of the collective trauma associated with the term "Dalit." She defines this experience as being "broken" by the enduring weight of suffering and the oppressive caste system. She eloquently expresses the daily confrontation with caste in her house, family, and even within herself, emphasising the inescapable nature of this form of oppression, "I faced caste every day in my house, in my family, and in my own body. There is no escaping it" (Soundararajan 3). She delves into the intricate nature of trauma, defining it as an intergenerational affliction transmitted from one generation to the next.

Soundararajan emphasises the role of silence and secrecy in perpetuating this traumatic legacy, making a poignant plea for both the oppressor and the oppressed to take responsibility and address how trauma manifests. Drawing from Peter Levine's insights, she articulates that "trauma occurs when blocked energies from hurtful experiences cannot be released, underscoring the importance of empathetic witnesses in the healing process" (19).

The second meditation, titled *The Source of Caste* (41), explores the historical roots and mythological constructs that form the basis of the caste system. Soundararajan delves into the Vedic notions of Karma and Dharma, explaining how these concepts have historically shaped social hierarchies in India. The caste pyramid, she explains, is a complex framework based on the Vedic

notion of the perceived sacredness of different parts of the human body, with an individual's caste determined by their actions in past lives. She critically examines the caste hierarchy, highlighting the Brahminical patriarchy embedded in Hindu scriptures that perpetuates social, economic, and cultural marginalisation. She advocates for the transformation of institutions of faith that have historically been weaponised to harm marginalised communities. The narrative unveils the systemic injustices inherent in the caste system and emphasises the urgent need for change.

In the third section, *From Wounds to Liberation* (80), Soundararajan delves into the intersection of caste and gender. She introduces the concept of Brahminical patriarchy, defining it as "the ideology that the dominant caste adheres to in marginalising the caste-oppressed across various dimensions" (97). As a Dalit feminist, Soundararajan argues that caste cannot be eradicated without addressing patriarchy. She sheds light on how Hindu scriptures control interactions across caste, religion, sexuality, and love. The section also addresses the gendered nature of caste trauma, with a focus on caste and sexual violence, stress, and suicide resulting from "caste apartheid," and states, "Caste is trauma" (18). She contends that caste trauma is a fundamental barrier to Dalit liberation and insists on the necessity of addressing this trauma to achieve equality and liberation. Notably, she briefly mentions Dalit Buddhism, highlighting its significance for identity and resistance.

The book's final section marks a crucial shift in focus from exposing the wounds of caste to a plea for addressing and healing these "soul wounds." Soundararajan states that the historical trauma of caste creates soul wounds, and until these wounds are healed, the cycle of violence and trauma will persist. She argues that caste can only end when the soul is healed, offering a profound perspective on the cyclical nature of trauma within the Dalit community. She concurs with trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem's assertion that marginalised and oppressed individuals must perceive systems of exclusion through a trauma-informed lens. This approach entails acknowledging the racial soul wound that underpins persistent racial violence and marginalisation. Soul wounds, she explains, denote the profound, enduring anguish stemming from historical trauma, a term frequently associated with the intergenerational suffering experienced by Native Americans. The book's central argument

becomes clear as Soundararajan calls for attention to the emotional wounds of caste. She contends that the veiled nature and hushed conversations surrounding caste-based trauma create formidable barriers for Dalits seeking healing and recovery. Her narrative constructs a moving exploration of the systemic violence and trauma embedded in the caste structure, tracing its profound and enduring impacts on the lives of Dalits. Reflecting on the enduring struggles of the Dalit heritage, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, an eloquent advocate, shares on her Twitter page, Dalit Diva:

As the daughter of people oppressed for thousands of years, I am also the artefact of centuries of their love and resilience. In that, there is hope for everything. May a myriad of blossoms unfurl in your heart and mine for our liberation. (Dalit Diva)

This poignant expression encapsulates the indomitable spirit and collective optimism ingrained in the history of a community that has faced oppression and trauma on the mind and body across the ages.

Soundararajan's work posits the caste system as a form of intergenerational trauma, where the suffering of one generation is passed on to the next. This trauma, deeply rooted in discrimination, violence, and poverty, affects the collective consciousness and identity of the Dalit community. This sentiment is echoed perfectly in a review of *Trauma of Caste* by Mallikabooks, which aptly states:

The book not only sheds light on the continued violence and trauma faced by the caste-oppressed, spanning regions from South Asia to the global stage but also underscores how these wounds etch themselves into the very soul, persisting across generations." (Mallikabooks)

The trauma, Soundararajan argues, manifests as deep soul scars carried forward through generations, impacting even those Dalits who may not have directly encountered caste-based discrimination. The censorship surrounding caste-based trauma, according to her, forms an additional layer of trauma itself. This becomes a significant barrier to seeking assistance and support, hindering the ability to process trauma and move forward in life. Leigh Gilmore, who holds a position as a professor in English and Gender Studies at Williams College, offers a definition of trauma as an experience that fundamentally alters one's sense of self due to violence, injury, or harm. She articulates; "Trauma is

not confined to a single, identifiable violent event in an individual's history but rather resides in the manner in which its unprocessed and initially incomprehensible nature resurfaces to unsettle the survivor at a later point" (Gilmore 1).

Dalit narratives, like Soundararajan's, challenge the dominant caste narrative, providing a compelling critique of the system and offering valuable insights into the real-life struggles faced by Dalits. These narratives serve as a means to comprehend the profound impact of caste on trauma and the journey toward healing. The book emphasises how the pervasive nature of the caste system makes it exceedingly challenging for Dalits to break free from the cycle of trauma, as they are persistently confronted with reminders of their marginalised status.

Jeffery Alexander's assertion that "whole communities can suffer atrocities, with traumatic effects reverberating through the fabric of the community and society for generations" (Alexander 30) aligns with Soundararajan's depiction of the long history of trauma endured by Dalits. The intergenerational transmission of trauma becomes a central theme, making it difficult for Dalits to heal, as they may feel constantly reliving the experiences of their ancestors.

The concepts of trauma and post-memory are intertwined in the analysis of caste-related trauma, which is defined as an intensely distressing experience with enduring effects on physical and mental well-being and finds resonance in the experiences of Dalits. Post-memory, as articulated by Marianne Hirsch, also the originator of the post-memory theory, characterises it as a distinct form of remembrance that is set apart from personal memory by the passage of generations. It further distinguishes itself from historical memory through its emotional and affective connections to the past. Hirsch succinctly defines the theory as "marked by generational distance and distinguished from history by the emotional resonance of its link to the past" (Hirsch 28–103). In the context of caste-related trauma, post-memory serves as a mechanism through which the experiences of Dalits are transmitted across successive generations. Soundararajan's personal reflections and the narratives of other Dalits documented in the text illustrate the impact of post-memory. Her parents' experience with caste trauma is shared by her within the text:

My mother never expected to engage in such a conversation while in America. The preceding generation, including my parents, carried a certain innocence. They held the belief that they had left behind the spectre of caste discrimination upon their arrival in the United States. They were enveloped in an ardent sense of hope, as they constituted the initial cohort to reap the benefits of affirmative action programmes. These programmes facilitated Dalits in obtaining advanced education and pursuing careers overseas, coinciding with a surge of South Asian immigration to the U.S. during the 1970s. (Soundararajan 22)

Dalit feminists, like Soundararajan, actively engage in resistance and recovery efforts related to caste-based trauma through various avenues. Soundararajan, in particular, is dedicated to increasing awareness about the issue, providing support services, and leveraging art and literature as tools to challenge the caste system. The adoption of Buddhism by Dalits, as discussed by her, represents a decisive rejection of the oppressive caste system and serves as a theoretical framework for Dalit resistance and empowerment. She also unfolds avenues through which Dalits can resist and recover from the clutches of caste-based trauma. Acknowledgement and active engagement with trauma have become crucial components of the Dalit liberation movement. Soundararajan's journey, from growing up with Hindu and Christian influences to adopting Buddhism as an adult, reflects the complexity of navigating caste identity. Her adoption of Buddhism becomes a symbolic act of breaking free from the challenges of her background, aligning with the Buddha's insights into suffering. Her call for Buddhists to recognise the impact of caste alongside racial disparities emphasises the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression. The teachings of Dalit Buddhism serve as a theoretical framework, offering insights into the resilience and empowerment sought by the Dalit community. As presented by her, the vision of a caste-free world underscores the Dalit feminist perspective on resistance and reclamation. Buddhism and its teaching as a path to liberation align with the rejection of the caste system and offer a way to heal from the soul wounds inflicted by centuries of discrimination. Her work serves as a testament to the multifaceted nature of Dalit resistance, encompassing cultural, spiritual, and socio-political dimensions.

Presently, Soundararajan is a compelling advocate for Dalit rights, utilising her influential voice for the cause. Her impact resonates on esteemed global platforms, where she has delivered compelling addresses on human rights and humanity. In an interview with The Hindu newspaper, Soundararajan stresses the importance of humanity today, “The responsibility to life is pervasive. It cannot simply be borne by the oppressed. We gain immensely when we return to the family of humanity” (Datta). Acknowledgement from reputable publications like The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, and The Guardian validates the importance of her contributions. Awards, including the Just Films Fellowship from the Ford Foundation and the Visionary Award from the Asian American Legal Défense and Education Fund, emphasise her commitment and influence in combating caste discrimination. Soundararajan’s unwavering commitment to raising awareness and amplifying the voices of Dalits positions her as a critical figure in the ongoing struggle for a more just and equitable society. Her efforts contribute to the dismantling of the culture of silence surrounding caste-based trauma, encouraging open discussions and active engagement with the issues faced by the Dalit community.

In conclusion, Thenmozhi Soundararajan’s *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition* profoundly explores the lasting impacts of caste trauma on Dalit individuals. Through her personal experiences, scholarly analysis, and Dalit feminist perspective, Soundararajan offers valuable insights into the intergenerational nature of caste trauma. Her work is a call to action, urging readers to confront historical and systemic injustices, break the culture of silence, and actively work towards abolishing the caste system.

The book is an indispensable contribution to the discourse on caste and trauma, offering a pathway toward healing and liberation for the Dalit community. Soundararajan’s narrative goes beyond mere documentation of suffering; it becomes a meditation on survivorship, healing, and abolition. By combining personal reflections with a broader analysis of the caste system’s historical roots, she creates a comprehensive narrative that resonates with readers on both an emotional and intellectual level. The intersection of caste and trauma, as presented by Soundararajan, reveals the

profound challenges faced by Dalits and the urgency of addressing both the visible and invisible wounds inflicted by the caste system. The cyclical nature of trauma, the intergenerational transmission of pain, and the culture of silence are masterfully woven into a narrative that calls for empathy, understanding, and collective action.

Soundararajan's work serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of the Dalit community and their unwavering commitment to liberation. Through Dalit feminist resistance, engagement with Buddhism, and a nuanced exploration of trauma and post-memory, Soundararajan invites readers to participate in the collective journey toward healing. *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition* stands as a beacon of hope, challenging not only the caste system itself but also the structures that sustain and perpetuate the trauma experienced by Dalits.

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