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Short Abstract

Remembering and Representing Childhood: Dalit and Gender Nonconforming Childhoods in Indian Autobiography and Children's Literature

This thesis examines Dalit childhoods and the childhoods of gender nonconforming children in India through a reading of select autobiographies and contemporary Indian children's literature. In research and policy, Dalit children appear largely as a category of deprivation and dropout, and gender nonconforming children, if at all, as a legal and welfare category. Children's own accounts of these childhoods are seldom recorded or preserved. The thesis asks how autobiography and children's literature, as forms of literary representation, make Dalit and gender nonconforming childhood experiences narratable, visible and intelligible. It also asks what these representations reveal about the construction of the normative Indian childhood. It reads six autobiographies by Dalit writers, six by transgender writers in India, and nine contemporary Indian children's texts that address caste and transness. This study undertakes qualitative textual analysis within the larger framework of Cultural Studies at the intersection of Childhood Studies, Dalit Studies and Transgender Studies. It combines close reading, thematic analysis and comparative reading. The texts are read across the everyday sites of home, school, work and play, along with the stage. The autobiographies show that these children understood their place in the order of caste and gender long before they had words to describe it. The writers name these experiences only as adults, retrospectively. In children's literature, the question of representation is whether to name caste and transness directly or show them through suggestive images and objects. The conventions of the form, however, leave out the violence and desire that the autobiographies narrate. The attempt here is to show that the normative Indian childhood becomes visible as a construction only from the position of the childhoods it excludes. Dalit and gender nonconforming childhoods are, in this sense, central to the study of childhood in contemporary India.

Keywords: Dalit childhood, gender nonconforming childhood, childhood studies, Dalit autobiography, transgender autobiography, Indian children's literature