

Isabel Wilkerson (2020), *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*

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Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, the second book from Pulitzer Prize winner Isabel Wilkerson, is a seminal work on the boundaries of power that surround and segregate us. Isabel Wilkerson spares no effort to show the reader how these lines transcend class, national boundaries and even generations. Like the bars of an invisible but all-encompassing prison, we are at the mercy of caste: even those of us who benefit from it.

The author sets out to first establish a simple social order: Caste is the domination of a superior caste of people over a group of people considered inferior. Through the system, she mentions a variety of hierarchies: the order of blood purity in Latin America, the Jāti Varna system in ancient India or even the quasi-hierarchy of white immigrants in a post-civil war America. In every case, caste is this bodyless-yet-present-in-everybody force: like the needle of a compass points north, societies return to this hierarchy. The uniqueness of Wilkerson's argument lies in her rejection of societal segregation by biology, wealth, genetics or history. Caste exists as a structural goliath, a ghoulish perversion that no one is spared. One does not need to be openly prejudiced to be casteist – even the assumption that you hold most agency in a room may reflect caste.

The highlight of *Caste* is the vast research accompanied by master storytelling. A gruesome picture of structural dehumanisation is painted as one progresses through the text. The reader notices a certain ridiculousness in the enforcement of a caste system within America. While the Japanese with their whiter-than-white skin were not considered racially white, Indians, from the land that birthed Aryan people, were not considered Aryan. Caste systems have the unique power of turning the subjugated against their own caste, as caste becomes their defining identity and they struggle to define themselves outside their shackles (Kanye West with a 'White Lives Matter' T-shirt, anyone?) Wilkerson's work exposes the reader to the fallacy of a meritocracy, or the opposite: that those on the lower rungs deserve to be where they are.

Through the small stories, urban legends, personal anecdotes and news snippets, the author creates a gripping narrative to make the case for recognising caste. As you complete the book, you are reminded that just because discrimination is forbidden on paper, it does not cease to exist in real life. For example, Wilkerson cites the infamous example of Black women and their instrumental role in the progress made to improve the fields of gynaecology, pain relief and surgery. These brave women were forced to endure days of excruciating pain before they were sent back to toil under the sun or simply died through the tyranny. Black men who were made scapegoats to trial medication and punishment were denied pain relief on the grounds that they 'felt lesser pain'. Today, even after nearly 300 years, hardly any studies on how diseases show up in the African American population exist. African American women are still less likely to be treated when they complain of serious illnesses. Despite being the backbone of modern medicine, theirs is a community that is still denied proper healthcare. But it does not end there: through drug and disease epidemics, inflations and recessions, wars and crises, the dominated remain expendable, offered at the mercy of the superior caste (p. 147). It begs the question where and when do the consequences end? And how do we make reparations?

America remains the focal point of *Caste* – what was, what is and what will be is presented in extensive detail. Time and again, Wilkerson draws our attention to figures revered by us – presidents, prime ministers, members of Senate and Congress, actors – and shows us just how white-washed history is. Why is Hitler villainised, she asks, while Andrew Jackson is commemorated on the \$20 bill despite enslaving innocent Black people and killing countless Native Americans on the Trail of Tears? Even before there was nationality and democracy, there was subjugation. While Nazi Germany was cognizant of the horror inflicted on its Jewish residents and sought to hide it, America put its cruelty on display with pride. You read on in horror as Wilkerson recounts the meeting that decided the final solution in Germany – inspired by the savagery in America, the Nazis sought to recreate some of those practices. But even most Nazis agreed on one point – the Americans had gone too far (p. 153).

Wilkerson argues that modern-day Germany is a stellar example of a caste system successfully destroyed, and for good reason: it took a revolution the size of a world war to end the tyranny of caste. She reminds the reader that caste hierarchies still fester within societies – India being a prime example of affirmative action against caste that prompted a lot of conversation yet improved very little. It is unfortunate that she dips only periodically into the socio-history of Nazi Germany and India, examining and comparing their caste systems. Caste manifests its ugly head in every society in the world – even in Africa. I would have appreciated a deeper dive into the histories of some other covert (and overt) caste systems for greater understanding of the concept.

In hindsight, the most impactful part of the book remains its introductory chapter. It recounts US politics in recent years up to the publication of the book; indeed, its datedness may confuse the reader and prompt them to confirm if they have picked up the right book. However, while contexts change, structures do not. Hierarchies have a way of returning to their default setting as history often repeats itself. In the aftermath of the 6 January Capitol uprising, countless racially motivated shootings and public outcry after the Black Lives Matter movement, we are once again at a point in history where we have come face-to-face with caste again. Even if you are not American, it forces you to question your pre-existing notions of subordinate castes from not only around you, but of all such cultures where the narrative is shaped by the dominant caste. *Caste* is instrumental in helping us understand the patterns that repeat themselves in society.

Caste is by no means an easy book to read or digest. Although written by Wilkerson in simple language with precise arguments, the book succeeds in making the reader deeply uncomfortable – as they perhaps should be. She drives her point home repeatedly, to the point where the reader may often start to feel fatigued. The book does serve its purpose perfectly – it forces you to confront reality. It does so with no false pretences: just because the dominant caste committed unspeakable acts against the submissive caste does not mean they should be forgotten about. Read *Caste* if you want to challenge yourself and everything you may take for granted. You may find yourself looking at the world differently.

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