

Freeing the Labels of Caste: Marginality, Self-Definition, and Liberation in Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am*

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Abstract— *I Am What I Am* by Sunitha Krishnan is primarily an autobiographical narrative about social activity, rehabilitation, resistance, and the fight for human dignity. Krishnan acknowledges her growing caste consciousness and notes that many of the marginalised women she encountered belonged to lower castes, even though caste is not the memoir's primary autobiographical framework. The ideas of caste labels, social marginalisation, stigma, self-definition, dignity, and freedom are used in this essay to analyse the memoir. It contends that caste functions through hereditary classification, social distance, presumptions of impurity, exclusion, and the reduction of complex human identities to fixed labels in addition to overt discrimination. An ethical vocabulary for challenging caste hierarchy is provided by Krishnan's rejection of labelling, humanist stance, and insistence on acknowledging socially stigmatised people as individuals. The study defines liberation as a shift from stigma to dignity, from social distance to solidarity, and from imposed identity to self-definition, drawing on research on Dalit women, caste exclusion, life writing, and Krishnan's advocacy. It concludes that, although not being a traditional Dalit autobiography, *I Am What I Am* makes a significant contribution to caste discourse by illuminating the social forces that both create and resist marginality.

Keywords— Self-Definition, Identity, Liberation, Caste, Marginality and Stigma

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, caste has historically served as a hierarchy of social values that dictates how people and communities are acknowledged, included, excluded, treated, and represented. It is not merely a system of community classification. Despite the legal rejection of caste discrimination by constitutional modernity, the cultural legacy of caste endures through social distance, prejudices, hereditary stigma, notions of purity and contamination, and the reduction of people to identities allocated by birth. Liberation therefore entails more than just legal or physical mobility for oppressed populations. It necessitates liberation from the interpretations placed on their identity.

When studying autobiographical tales, this aspect of caste becomes more significant. Socially marginalised people and those who experience marginality can reveal how society shapes identity through life writing.

The significance of biographies and autobiographies as archives through which marginalised histories can be reconstructed is demonstrated by Gogu Shyamamma's study of caste histories through the biographies of Dalit women. By introducing individual experiences, communal identities, and previously marginalised voices into the sphere of knowledge, such writing challenges prevailing historical depictions.

I Am What I Am by Sunitha Krishnan holds a unique place in this debate. Since caste is not Krishnan's primary autobiographical identity, it is incorrect to characterise it as a traditional Dalit autobiography. However, her interactions with underprivileged groups force her to recognise caste as a systemic issue. Krishnan admits that "my own understanding of caste and class was just evolving" when considering her friendship with activist Geeta Menon (Krishnan 43). This acknowledgement is important because it portrays caste consciousness as something that can be learned via critical thought, lived experience, and observation.

A clearer realisation that "most of the women in prostitution belonged to the lower castes or were minorities" (Krishnan 43) follows her growing understanding. The phrase does not imply that caste is the only reason why some people are marginalised. Instead, it finds a recurrent social pattern. In an environment where social stigma is severe, lower-caste identities are disproportionately prevalent. The reader is prompted by this insight to shift from personal explanations of marginality to enquiries about inherited structural exclusion.

When caste-based marginalisation is normalised by social branding, it becomes very potent. When Krishnan states, "Labelling—of any kind—does not help," she expressly opposes this reduction (Krishnan 14). Although various types of stigma are covered in her immediate discussion, caste is one of the most enduring inherited labels in Indian society, hence the principle strongly applies to caste. Before an individual's character, accomplishments, intelligence, or aspirations are acknowledged, they may be given a societal significance.



When Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar note that Dalit women have traditionally been portrayed as “impure, polluting, untouchable, unapproachable, and ‘unseeable,’ “the detrimental impact of caste stigma becomes more apparent (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 74). These divisions show how caste transcends distinction and uses birth identity as an excuse for social exclusion. They further establish dignity as essential to caste emancipation by arguing that this exclusion has grave implications for “human right and human dignity” (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 74).

The autobiography of Krishnan frequently challenges the social processes by which individuals are classified. Others who stigmatise others “because of their looks or origin” are criticised by her (Krishnan 14). Because caste identity is inherited, the term “origin” is especially pertinent to caste study. The community that a person is born into is not their choice. Inherited identity turns become a social confinement mechanism when origin turns into destiny.

I Am What I Am is thus interpreted in the current study as an ethical story pertinent to caste discourse. In addition to Krishnan’s broader criticism of branding, stigma, social distancing, dehumanisation, and the denial of dignity, it looks at her clear acknowledgement of lower-caste marginality. The paper makes the case that moving from forced classification to self-definition is necessary to liberate caste identity. When a socially branded individual is acknowledged as a human subject with a voice, dignity, agency, and the freedom to identify oneself, liberation starts.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

T. Kavya, “Between Care and Control: Biopolitical Practice in Sunitha Krishnan’s *I Am What I Am*,” (2026)

Kavya T. uses Foucauldian ideas of governmentality and biopower to analyse Krishnan’s memoir. She contends that the complex interplay between humanitarian assistance and regulatory oversight gives rise to NGO-centered advocacy. Protection may be provided via rescue, rehabilitation, legal action, institutional punishment, and surveillance while also taking part in institutions that govern the lives of those who are vulnerable. Kavya’s research is significant because it challenges the idea that activism is solely joyful and examines how institutional power affects marginalised groups. Its examination of marginalised bodies and institutional classification is helpful for comprehending how social systems construct identities that can either promote or impede autonomy, even though caste is not its primary focus.

Prof. (Dr.) Visweswara Rao Chenamallu’s “Dalit Women and Their Journey toward Self-Emancipation” (2026) investigates Dalit women’s fight for self-emancipation inside socially discriminatory systems. Because caste emancipation entails moving past enforced inferiority toward self-recognition, dignity, consciousness, and agency, his emphasis on freedom is important to the current study. The study offers a conceptual framework for understanding disadvantaged women as participants in their own emancipation rather than only as victims. Krishnan’s rejection of simplistic social labels and the memoir’s focus on action, resiliency, and the ability of socially stigmatised people to reconstruct their identities are complemented by its fundamental preoccupation with self-emancipation.

According to Gogu Shyamamma’s PhD research, “Examining Caste Histories via Biographies: An Analysis of Dalit Women in Telangana” (2018), biography is a crucial tool for recreating caste history from the viewpoint of Dalit women. Personal narratives are acknowledged in her work as alternative historical archives that make experiences that are not included in mainstream history apparent. Because *I Am What I Am* similarly converts lived experiences into social knowledge, this method is especially pertinent to the current paper. Even though Krishnan’s memoir is not an overtly Dalit biography, her growing understanding of caste shows how autobiographical experience can highlight structural tendencies that traditional historical narratives can miss.

According to Sumithra Prasanna’s “*I Am What I Am: Sunitha Krishnan’s Crusade against Sex Trafficking*” (2024), Krishnan’s narrative describes a fight for long-term healing, dignity, and social reintegration that goes beyond rescue. Physical rescue, she notes, is simply the first step since socially stigmatised people then have to deal with marginalisation and the challenge of reconstructing their own identities. This issue is important for a caste-centered interpretation because hereditary caste stigma also persists outside of official inclusion. The study aids in highlighting the distinction between joining society and being recognised as an equal member of it.

I Am What I Am, according to “Sunitha Krishnan’s Life Is a Story of Grit, Determination, and Persuasion” (2025) by Sarika Chavan, is a compelling and truthful account of Krishnan’s lengthy advocacy. She highlights the memoir’s portrayal of tenacity, resolve, defiance of institutional barriers, and ongoing attempts at social inclusion. Krishnan’s call for a shift in how society views survivors and underprivileged persons is also mentioned by Chavan.

Because caste prejudice endures through how communities are viewed and classified long after institutional obstacles have been contested, this concern with altering the social gaze is particularly helpful in caste studies.

M. Menon Priya emphasises the memoir's unwavering confrontation with difficult social realities and the sincerity of Krishnan's autobiographical narrative in her article "Book Review of '*I Am What I Am*': The Value of Honesty" (2024). Instead of making her life a sentimental tale of victimisation, Krishnan places a strong focus on action, responsibility, and purpose. Because marginal subjects often come across public narratives that characterise them primarily via their suffering, such self-representation is pertinent to a study of caste labels. This reductionist approach is contested in Krishnan's memoir, which maintains that accomplishment, agency, labour, and self-definition are essential components of identity.

In "Book Review of Sunitha Krishnan's '*I Am What I Am*'" (2024), Mantripragada Lakshmi interprets Krishnan's narrative in terms of dignity, social responsibility, purpose, and the capacity to speak up for those who are not given enough public respect. According to her review, Krishnan's idea aims to create a society in which those who are socially excluded can lead respectable and dignified lives. Caste criticism can be productively connected to this ethical perspective. The basic foundation of graded human worth is challenged by dignity because caste hierarchy operates through unequal social assessment. The present paper's argument regarding transitioning from social categorisation to personhood is strengthened by Mantripragada's emphasis on seeing the human being underlying the socially assigned label.

Dignity is emphasised by Smruti S. and SnehaSadhukan as being essential to Krishnan's social goal. According to their work, "Prajwala Founder Sunitha Krishnan on Her Fight for Dignity for Survivors of Assault" (2024), Prajwala is an organization that focuses on rehabilitation, reintegration, and the restoration of human worth in addition to being a rescue organization. Since caste emancipation is fundamentally based on dignity, this method greatly advances the existing research. A caste system distributes respect unfairly by turning difference into hierarchy. The moral validity of inherited social inequality is thus called into doubt by any opposition based on unconditional dignity.

III. OBJECTIVES

To analyse how caste consciousness appears in *I Am What I Am* by Sunitha Krishnan.

To examine how Krishnan's autobiographical views depict lower-caste social marginality.

To investigate the connection between socially imposed identity, origin, stigma, and caste labels.

To investigate self-definition as a means of defying social categories that are both inherited and imposed from without.

To investigate collective action, solidarity, dignity, and belonging as means of escaping social marginalisation.

To evaluate *I Am What I Am*'s literary value and limitations for comprehending caste marginalisation and emancipation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The study uses close reading and qualitative textual analysis of *I Am What I Am* by Sunitha Krishnan. The memoir's concerns of labels, stigma, origin, dignity, social exclusion, solidarity, and self-definition are examined with explicit references to caste and lower-caste societies. The theoretical and contextual framework is provided by pertinent research on Dalit experience, caste exclusion, autobiographical representation, and marginality.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Caste Awareness: From Knowledge to Acknowledgement

Krishnan's candid presentation of her social awareness as evolving is a significant aspect of *I Am What I Am*. She does not assert that she started her activism with a thorough understanding of structural marginality. "My own understanding of caste and class was just evolving," she acknowledges (Krishnan 43).

The phrase "just evolving" merits special consideration. Here, caste consciousness is portrayed as an experience-driven intellectual journey. Prior to creating a lexicon that might link personal experiences with broader social structures, Krishnan had previously come into contact with socially stigmatised communities.

This sets caste recognition apart from theoretical knowledge that is abstract. Experience continuously poses issues to Krishnan that cannot be resolved by individual explanations alone, which leads to the emergence of her knowledge.

This intellectual shift is made possible by her friendship with Geeta Menon. She “was immediately able to connect her ideas on those topics with what I already knew,” according to Krishnan (Krishnan 43). The key word is “connect.” Interpretation and experience come together.

When recurring marginal lives stop seeming accidental, caste becomes apparent.

B. The Location of Marginality and Lower-Caste Identity

Based on her study experience, Krishnan’s most significant direct remark for caste analysis is that “most of the women in prostitution belonged to the lower castes or were minorities” (Krishnan 43).

When interpreting this sentence, the paper needs to exercise caution. Krishnan does not claim that caste is the only factor contributing to her marginalisation or that other lower-caste women have the same experiences. Her use of “most,” however, reveals a trend that necessitates structural analysis.

The distribution of marginality is social.

Caste cannot be written off as accidental when members of historically underprivileged castes frequently emerge in highly stigmatised social settings.

A more comprehensive context is provided by SaiBabu’s description of Dalit women, who note that they “grapple with the discrimination due to caste hierarchy and untouchability” (SaiBabu 492). His remark aids in placing Krishnan’s empirical recognition in the broader context of caste exclusion.

Instead than starting with a preconceived ideological interpretation, Krishnan’s value rests in identifying the pattern through engagement.

C. The Term “Social Captivity”

I Am What I Am revolves around the idea of labelling. “Labelling—of any kind—does not help,” Krishnan states categorically (Krishnan 14). One of the most persistent hereditary identifiers in Indian society is caste.

Although a person is born into a community, hierarchy gives that identification a social significance prior to the development of an individual’s personality. Expectations regarding behaviour, IQ, occupation, respectability, purity, social closeness, and worth may be influenced by the title.

For this reason, liberating caste identification entails more than just removing a community name. It necessitates releasing the name from hierarchy. Therefore, Krishnan’s assertion is crucial: the issue is not identity per se, but rather the reduction of personhood to a label.

D. Origin, Caste, and Inherited Stigma

Labels used “to stigmatise someone because of their looks or origin” are condemned by Krishnan (Krishnan 14).

In caste discourse, the term “origin” carries profound meaning. Rather of being earned, caste is inherited. Ancestry is not chosen by an individual. However, ancestry becomes a social judgement in caste society.

When Sabharwal and Sonalkar note that Dalit women have been viewed as “impure, polluting, untouchable, unapproachable, and ‘unseeable,’” who highlight the extreme form of this historical classification (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 74).

Such phrase illustrates the transformation of a birth-based designation into embodied stigma. The individual is perceived by society as polluting. Thus, distance is determined by the label. Origin must stop functioning as destiny in order to achieve caste freedom.

E. “The Label Is for Life”: Caste and Permanence

The burden of permanent classification is aptly captured by Krishnan’s comment, “The label is for life” (Krishnan 13). Although the mechanism she describes is especially relevant to caste, and her immediate setting involves another type of social stigma. Traditionally, caste has been thought of as permanent. Inherited caste identity may still be socially recoverable even if a person relocates from a hamlet to a city, enrolls in college, achieves professional success, travels abroad, or adopts a completely different worldview. The individual is not allowed to completely leave the category. Thus, caste stigma serves as a kind of social memory. Liberation must disprove the notion that identity is permanently governed by inherited classification.

F. The Identity Distillation

When Krishnan claims that her “entire identity became distilled” into a single socially imposed term, she is describing a particularly traumatic type of labelling (Krishnan 14).

The distillation metaphor has a lot to do with caste. One category is used to describe a complicated human being. Caste bias takes inherited community as the major interpretive key, even though an individual may have many identities, such as teacher, activist, writer, parent, professional, intellectual, artist, and citizen. Such reduction is both social and epistemological. The person is no longer known to society. Only the label is known to it. Therefore, complexity must be recovered in order to free caste identity.

G. Self-Identification as Opposition

One could read the title “*I Am What I Am*” as a strong declaration of self-definition.

“I am” opposes “you are.” The difference is essential to marginal identity. Marginalised people are constantly told who they are by dominant civilisations. They identify, categorise, stigmatise, stereotype, and control them. That authority is reversed by self-definition. The marginalised individual asserts their right to self-identification. A conceptual model pertinent to caste resistance is provided by Krishnan’s refusal to let imposed designations define her entire existence.

Denying one’s caste identity is not always the aim. Caste identification may also become a significant source of political assertion, collective memory, and history for disadvantaged populations. Instead, liberation is rejecting the identity’s associated inferiority.

H. From Group to Individual

Krishnan’s shift from perceiving a social category to identifying an individual is one of the most significant changes in her social cognition. She states, “Now I saw her as a person I could connect deeply with” (Krishnan 9) in reference to Laxmi. “As a person” is an important term. This process is reversed by caste hierarchy. It prioritises categories over individuals. It is possible for a caste name to appear before familiarity. Interaction may be preceded by inherited presumptions. Prior to classification, Krishnan’s metamorphosis restores personhood. Such a reversal is necessary for caste freedom. Stereotypes are undermined by human recognition because it gives concrete form to the abstract social “other.”

I. Social Distance and the Formation of the “Other”

In the past, caste has maintained itself by social distancing. A person from a lower caste is perceived as socially distinct, aloof, and, in extreme cases, polluting.

“Not fit for social and physical association with others” is how Sabharwal and Sonalkar characterise this situation (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 74). This idea of distance is consistently broken by Krishnan’s action. She moves into the periphery. She sits among folks who are shunned by the general public. She pays attention. Even after being turned down, she comes back. She builds connections.

The relationship eventually shifts to the point that she refers to herself and the marginalised women as “allies on the same team” (Krishnan 9). The language of partnership is the antithesis of caste division. Hierarchy is produced by distance. Solidarity is made possible by proximity.

J. Humanism in opposition to Hierarchical Human Value

“I most identify with being a humanist,” says Krishnan (Krishnan 43).

Because caste hierarchy imposes unequal social worth based on birth, her humanism presents an ethical challenge to caste. Humanism starts with the contrary premise: there is no hierarchical distribution of human worth. Crucially, caste is not rendered invisible by Krishnan’s humanism. Her humanist perspective is directly responsible for her open acknowledgement of caste.

This combination is important. Without structural consciousness, universal humanity could become shallow. Without human recognition, structural consciousness could become abstract. The two are brought together by Krishnan. Thus, her stance might be interpreted as a humanism that recognises social differences in order to oppose uneven social values.

K. Stigma and Reintegration’s Challenges

In the biography, Krishnan poses one of the most significant queries: “How is social reintegration feasible when your history weighs strongly over your present?” (Krishnan 16).

The question strikes a deep chord with caste. A societal legacy that has persisted into the present is caste. Even if a person joins a different institution, their community heritage may still be used to understand them. Thus, true belonging need not result from formal inclusion. Even if the caste-marked individual is present, they may still be viewed as outsiders in society. Liberation necessitates changing the circumstances under which the marginalised individual is acknowledged in social spaces, not just gaining access to them.

L. Pollution versus Dignity

The loss of equal dignity is one of the most serious harm caused by caste. Caste-based exclusion, according to Sabharwal and Sonalkar, has “enormous implications on the human right and human dignity of Dalit women” (74).

Pollution and dignity are irreconcilable concepts. A person cannot be classified as inherently polluting and still have intrinsic dignity. Therefore, the moral logic of caste hierarchy is undermined by the ethical logic of dignity. Krishnan has firsthand knowledge of institutional procedures “that stripped away the dignity of a person” (Krishnan 64).

Her later activism is influenced by her resolve to reinstate what these systems take away. The idea is immediately relevant to caste, even though this specific experience is not caste-based in and of itself: a culture that denies dignity based on hereditary identity results in structural dehumanisation.



M. The Need to Belong and Marginality

Additionally, Krishnan learns from her experience “the loneliness and the need for belonging that isolation creates” (Krishnan 64). Belonging and caste marginalisation are closely related. Caste has historically dictated where people can reside, who they can interact with, what areas they can enter, and how they are perceived by society. The excluded individual is told via exclusion that they do not truly belong.

Therefore, liberation must result in more than just tolerance. Distance is maintained by tolerance. Subordinate membership is eliminated by belonging. The right to live in society as equal participants rather than as tolerated outsiders is necessary for caste-oppressed communities to achieve equality.

N. Liberation and Collective Action

Krishnan highlights that she learned “the power of collective action” via activism (Krishnan 32). This is especially important when it comes to caste resistance. Individual bias is not the only factor sustaining caste. Social networks, institutional systems, inherited traditions, collective customs, and communal activities all contribute to its reproduction.

Such a system cannot be overthrown by individual kindness alone. Collective structures of resistance are necessary for collective structures of exclusion. The significance of organization, awareness, representation, education, literature, political engagement, and collective assertion is demonstrated by the history of Dalit movements.

In a similar vein, Krishnan’s transition from individual involvement to organised activism shows that mechanisms that allow oppressed people to act collectively are necessary for long-term freedom.

O. From Being a Victim to Being an Agent

Agency is necessary for marginalised people to be freed. A marginalised subject cannot be perpetually produced as a rescue object. Such reduction is fiercely opposed in Krishnan’s memoir. Throughout her entire autobiographical effort, the socially stigmatised individual is changed from an object to a subject.

This change has implications for caste politics. It is not enough to portray the caste-oppressed person as a mere object of sympathy. Hierarchy may remain intact while compassion is present. Hierarchy is challenged by agency. Thus, the main movement needs to be:

Reform object → Speaking topic → Social agent → Liberation participant.

Dalit autobiographies have gained significance in caste discourse for this reason. People who have previously been discussed can become speakers through life writing.

P. The Foundation of Liberation: Action

In the end, Krishnan disapproves of solely rhetorical transformation. “What brings change is action,” she responds when asked if dreaming or dedicating oneself to a cause is sufficient (Krishnan 22).

This assertion offers a suitable basis for caste emancipation. Caste cannot be eliminated by awareness alone. Discrimination cannot be eradicated by moral criticism alone. Dignity cannot be restored by sympathy alone. Relationships, social customs, institutions, representation, education, and public awareness must all be changed by action. Opportunities for self-representation are necessary to foster self-definition. Institutional protection of dignity is necessary. It is necessary to practise social belonging. Solidarity needs to transform into group action. Therefore, the memoir’s intended progression can be stated as follows:

Label, stigma, marginality, consciousness, self-definition, human recognition, solidarity, collective action, dignity, and liberation.

Q. The Significance and Boundaries of a Caste Reading

Finally, a reasonable reading needs to recognise the evidence’s limitations. The main focus of *I Am What I Am* is not Krishnan’s own caste oppression. Only a few times does the word “caste” occur overtly, most notably when she talks about how her perception of lower-caste women has changed over time. Therefore, it would be incorrect to interpret all of the memoir’s experiences as caste persecution. However, the material is still useful to caste studies despite this shortcoming.

It is valuable because it sheds light on mechanisms that are common to various systems of social marginalisation, such as labelling, imposed or inherited identity, social distance, stigma, diminished personhood, exclusion, and difficulty obtaining recognition following formal inclusion.

These concepts create a relevant caste-centered interpretation without warping the main text when carefully linked to Krishnan’s explicit acknowledgement of lower-caste marginality. In the end, the book makes the argument that liberation starts when socially constructed identities are no longer able to define a person’s value.

VI. CONCLUSION

I Am What I Am by Sunitha Krishnan provides a unique paradigm for analysing caste, marginalisation, self-definition, and emancipation.



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Krishnan's admission of her changing caste consciousness and her recognition of the presence of lower castes in marginalised communities provide a crucial foundation for analysis, even though caste is not the autobiography's main focus. While her dedication to humanism, personhood, solidarity, belonging, dignity, and collective action challenges hierarchical social valuing, her critique of labels shows how social categories can become enduring forms of stigma. According to the memoir, liberation necessitates eschewing identities imposed by prevailing culture in favour of the freedom to define oneself. Therefore, eliminating caste designations entails releasing people from hereditary inferiority while upholding their rights to equality, history, community, dignity, and agency.

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