Power Relations in the Force Field of Academia: A Close Reading of Srividya Natarajan’s No Onions Nor Garlic

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Abstract

University campuses serve as second homes for students, teachers, administrators, and parents coming from diverse regions, religions, classes, castes, and different genders. Interaction and camaraderie between the major characters in the academe develop. The bonhomie that exists between the stakeholders of the academe has its own rules, rules that are marked by the interference of power. The one wielding more power by virtue of one’s position, class, caste, or gender tries to dictate the terms of a particular relationship. Relations evolve as power relations, whereby a specific code of conduct regarding speech, behavior, thought, writing, love, and life is laid down for all—from administrators and professors to students and parents. This article studies how in a location as specific as Chennai University as described in Srividya Natarajan’s No Onions Nor Garlic, the ideological prejudices and hierarchical divisions highlighted by the play of power affect the daily life of the academe and chart out the course of action for everyone, from professors, students, high caste, low caste to men and women, involved in power relations. On the basis of that, this article suggests power in general serves not only to suppress the powerless but is productive also, as countering power with power creates a proper kind of resistance that blurs the difference between the agent and the target of power in power relations.

Keywords
academe, Chennai university, power, power relations, resistance, Srividya Natarajan

In post-independent India, that is, after 1947, the new government’s primary objective was to educate the population in the regular school-college-university model as well as in the vocational courses taught by technical and polytechnical institutes. The foundation stone of the present day education system in India was laid down during the colonial era and the famous Thomas Babington Macaulay’s (1835) Minute on Indian Education is a case in point. Sarangapani (2014) reiterates that the modern academic system in India “has its origins in the colonial system of education that was shaped between the 1830s and 1870s” (para. 2), whereby, a considerable number of schools, colleges, and universities were established across the country. In addition to the building of educational institutes “the twin interests of social reform through enlightenment, knowledge, and education, as well as the lure of employment through Western education,” also “drove the expansion of the system” of education both at its primary stage in schools and at the higher level in colleges and universities (Sarangapani, 2014, para. 2). This gave rise to the insiders’ as well as the outsiders’ rendering in novels, of the conflicts, the desires, the ambitions, and the hypocrisies fundamental to the academic sphere along with the highlights on close relations that develop between a wide range of key characters there—faculty and students, administrators and parents, professors and lecturers, high caste and low caste, and men and women. Indian college and university campuses are one of the world’s most socially heterogeneous societies where people from different class, caste, creed, religion, and gender assemble to forge multidimensional relations. These relations become the sites for the operation of power, the after math of which is a transfiguration of faculty–student relationship, caste, religion, and gender into power structures, and the relations due to the play of these power structures culminate into power relations.

Notable Indian writers like R. K. Narayan wrote novels like The Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher as early as 1937 and 1945, respectively. Both talk about the lived experiences of educators in the Albert Mission College situated in the fictitious town of Malgudi. In the later years, renowned academics conversant with the Indian university...
education like Saros Cowasjee and Prema Nandkumar and eminent university professors like Makarand Paranjape and M. K. Naik continued writing novels set against the backdrop of college or university and delineating real affairs and perceptions within the academia. Srividya Natarajan (2006), following the footsteps of the likes of Cowasjee, Nandkumar, Paranjape, and Naik, sets her maiden novel No Onions Nor Garlic in Chennai University and documents the functioning of power structures inherent in the relationship between professor and student, high caste and low caste, and man and woman. Of these three prominent power edifices in Chennai University, caste and gender make for an interesting study because both are not separate, rather are complementary, with caste and gender reinforcing each other. Natarajan, born in Chennai and at present residing in Canada with her son and husband, teaches English at King’s University College, University of Western Ontario. It was her years at the University of Hyderabad in India, while pursuing PhD in English that influenced her first venture into writing, that is, No Onions Nor Garlic (About the Author section, para. 1).

No Onions Nor Garlic is wildly funny almost evoking the romantic confusions in P. G. Wodehouse’s Blandings Castle stories. The novel, telling the story of an onion-and-garlic-free Tamilian Brahmin professor at Chennai University who rewrites William Shakespeare’s A Midssummer Night’s Dream to uphold the Hindu order, smug Non-Resident Indians who call the shots in matrimonial, visiting Canadians who are aghast at the plight of dalits (the oppressed) and, at the apex of the whole tumbling structure, a bibulous builder who invokes the gods even as he defrauds his clients, is an example of humor at its best. The humor in the novel arouses laughter in the readers till the very end but humor works best only when it has an underlying theme: when it offers social commentary, holds power to account, questions caste politics and its correlation with faculty–student relationship/interdependence between genders, assesses the concomitant dissatisfaction or simply relies on good natured storytelling to make a point. The novel’s haunting and serious issues of the unscrupulous builder–bureaucracy nexus, corruption in the academic circle, caste system, and women subordination convey that behind the hilarity, all is not well on and off the university campus. In the novel, tailing the ludicrous incidents is the exposure of a structurally unsound ivory tower of the academia resulting from the constant exploitation of students by professors, continuous agitation against the Reservation Policy, and the politicking by the upper caste Hindus to maintain a stronghold inside the premises of the university vis-à-vis the society at large. The article seeks to investigate the challenges to the university’s power structures from groups such as the students, the lower castes, especially the dalits, and the women in general, as well as the scope for the subversion of the long established power structures. The article, in other words, aims to discuss the interplay of power and the ways the power edifices apparent in the faculty–student relationship, caste, and gender are negotiated by individuals in a distinct locale as the academe, and in the context of an Indian novel—No Onions Nor Garlic.

“Power” has always been a highly debatable topic and its definition and operative mechanisms have baffled scholars over the ages. A working definition of “power” is provided by Naim (2013): “Power is the ability to direct or prevent the current or future actions of other groups and individuals” (Chapter 1). For Aristotle in the 3rd century BC, power in addition to wealth and friendships were the three major components which accounted for a person’s happiness. The proposition that common man seeks power in the personal space, whereas rulers seek power to consolidate and expand their kingdom, is a matter of near consensus in philosophy. Niccolo Machiavelli (1532) had written in his Italian political treatise The Prince that acquiring territory and political control “is in truth very natural and common, and men always do so when they can” (as cited in Naim, 2013, Chapter 1). This idea is taken a step ahead by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651) in his magnum opus on human nature and society, Leviathan. Hobbes (1651) states, “I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death” (Of the Difference of Manners, para. 2). Over 200 years later, Friedrich Nietzsche (1899) wrote in Thus Spake Zarathustra, “Wherever I found a living thing, there found I Will to Power; and even in the will of the servant found I the will to be master” (p. 112). Apart from these seminal texts that have shaped the concept of “power,” mention should be made to other works, for instances, Sun Tzu’s [ca. 500 BC] Chinese military treatise The Art of War, Vidura’s [ca. 800 BC] Vidura-Niti (Vidura’s statecraft, the prime minister in the court of king Dhritarashtra in the Hindu epic Mahabharat), Chanakya’s [ca. 200 BC] Chanakya Niti Shashtra, Samurai Miyamoto Musashi’s (1645) Japanese martial art treatise The Book of Five Rings, Carl Von Clausewitz’s (1831) On War, Emil Ludwig’s (1930) Bismark: The Story of a Fighter, Ralph Gun Hoy Siu’s (1979) The Craft of Power, John J. Pitney’s (2000) The Art of Political Warfare, Thomas Jefferson’s (1823) The Art of Power, Richard M. Locke’s (2013) The Promise and Limits of Private Power, and Moisés Naim’s (2013) The End of Power, which explicitly exhibit the numerous attempts taken by philosophers, thinkers, and statesmen to describe, explain, and elaborate “power” as an idea since the dawn of society. Brown (2006) while tracing the etymology of the English word “power” finds that it is derived from the Latin “potere,” meaning “to be able” (p. 65). From this etymological origin, Brown (2006) infers that “power” is suggestive: “. . . quality (an ability) which, however, important, diverts appreciation of power as a relation and one that induces effects, especially in the making of human subjects and social orders” (p. 65). The notion that power operates within everyday relations between institutions and people is retold by Greene (2003): “Power involves a relationship between people; you will always need others
as allies, pawns, or even as weak masters who serve as your front. The completely independent man who would live in a cabin in the woods—he would have the freedom to come and go as he pleased, but he would have no power” (p. 85). That is to say, it is in the relationship between an institution and an individual or between individuals that we find power working most vividly.

This is well defined in *No Onions Nor Garlic* where Professor Pattabhiram, popularly known as Professor Ram owing to the acknowledged power differences between faculty and student is always keen to cash in the sacredness of the teacher–student relationship. This is very closely related to what Professor Nagarajan asserts, though in Sanskrit, “Guru saakshaath parabrahma . . . The teacher is equal to the ah-Over-Soul” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 91). The effect of this power is that Professor Ram “was indeed a dead ringer for the Over-Soul” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 91) who holds back research scholars like Shastri for his own selfish motives. Professor Ram wants to be elected as the president of the Association of Commonwealth Studies (ACS) and to influence the members of the association as well as the delegates he even organizes a conference called “CONFLUENCE 2002” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 96) at the University. He forgets in the mean time that he has a scholar Shastri who has been working toward the completion of his thesis for the last 14 years but could not submit it due the lackadaisical attitude of the professor:

“The other diskette, sir,” Shastri wheezed. “It is having the eighth draft of my thesis.”

“Well, print it out, print it out!” Professor Ram said abruptly. “. . . Get it to me by the end of the week. But now, my young friends, to more pressing matters . . .” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 97)

It is true that over the years Shastri’s reliability has naturally helped him attain the status of the professor’s “full-time chamcha and right-hand man” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 18) as well as the post of the student editor of *The Brahmassathra* magazine. However, it is simultaneously equally true that in reality, he is no better than an office-bearer exploited by the professor. Dixon (1996) makes a very interesting observation regarding the “so called ‘quid-pro-quo’ offers, in which faculty members offer students . . . benefit” that are “de facto coercive . . . in view of the professors’ immense power to harm them should they decide to retaliate if the students refuse the offer” (p. 520).

Shastri’s future rests within the control of his thesis supervisor and this gives the professor license to exercise power over Shastri. Even after writing eight drafts, that is, a total of 1,662 pages, of his thesis entitled “Hedgerows, Hardly Hedgerows: Dwarf Plants and Crotons in Wordsworth’s Poetry,” each draft has got rejected without being properly checked. Frustration mounts on Shastri but all he is capable of doing is to anonymously stick malicious notes on Professor Ram across the walls of the department alleging him of inviting the dead theorist Michel Foucault to the ACS conference as well as siphoning off money collected in the name of the said conference. Shastri chooses the morning session of one of the days of the conference to expose the professor’s deceit and academic duplicity. Shastri paves the way to critique the power wielded by the professors and teachers, even though it means back stabbing but it also underlines the general perception that in educational institutes, students retorting to teachers or resisting the authority of teachers are seen as aberrant, or potentially disruptive of the status quo in which power is held by the professors, that is, the ones dominant in the relationship with students in any campus. A whole seemingly self-evident system of silencing and compelling to speak, of commenting on and assessing a work in relation to fixed parameters exists, which in turn leads to the mapping out of power relations between professors and students. After all, as Bourdieu and Passerson (1990) assert, the educational system is equipped with “the recognition of the authority of its actions” to “fulfil its social function of legitimating the dominant” group’s possession of power within the strictly defined faculty–student relationship (p. 124).

The existing power differential between faculty and student is usually responsible for violation of the students’ autonomy in accurate decision making when teachers come up with any proposal or any kind of advances. It is with ease that Professor Ram coaxes Jiva, another of his research scholar, to abstain from the interview for the post of Lecturer in Drama and Folklore at the university in an attempt to steer the members of the association as well as the delegates he even organizes a conference called “CONFLUENCE 2002” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 96) at the University. He forgets in the mean time that he has a scholar Shastri who has been working toward the completion of his thesis for the last 14 years but could not submit it due the lackadaisical attitude of the professor:

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they were listened to” (p. 41, p. 39). Jiva has the courage to face Professor Ram’s challenge but generally students behave quite differently when they are out of their teacher’s presence. They jeer at their teachers, tell stories of ways in which the powerful persons will be mortified, and invent demeaning nicknames as happens in the case of the new literary criticism lecturer in the English department. The lady, who is an alumnus of the University of California at Berkeley, has the habit of saying that things were “always already.” The students cannot fathom why things are “always already.” So, they forget her real name which is Kalpana Kamath and called her Always Already instead. At this juncture, Scott (1990) makes an interesting finding regarding the attitude of the underlings that resonates the activities of the students at Chennai University underlining the induced imbalance in the pivot of power relations:

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of both hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination. (p. xii)

It is clearly noticeable that the behaviors of both the powerful and the powerless are regulated within the power relation. This explains why unlike Jiva or other students, Sundar, another Professor Ram’s student, fails to escape the panoptic surveillance. Professor Ram is the pervasive image of panoptic surveillance whose force Sundar feels when he has to write a paper on the “The Tay Poems of William McGonagall and Abhinavagupta’s Abhinavabharati: An Intertextual Exploration” for his presentation at the annual conference of the ACS. Sundar has no interest in the topic, he has been working on it for 3 days at a stretch “but he had not found a thing worth mentioning . . . he had read somewhere that whereof you don’t have anything intelligent to say, thereof you should draw a veil over your half-baked ideas” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 97). Yet he chooses to write it because he has to satisfy the ego of his professor who wants to make the conference a success at any cost. In other words, Sundar’s choice is not voluntary just as his decision to marry the professor’s daughter, Jayanthi is not. He is under the “gaze” and when the professor discovers Sundar’s real feelings he threatens to cut off Sundar’s scholarship, destroy any chance of getting a university job, ruin his sister Uma’s life if Sundar refuses to marry Jayanthi or hinders Chunky’s marriage with Uma. Dixon (1996) is correct when he states that “exploitation of students by professors violates many professional obligations” and continues to further criticize the behavior of the professors: “one consideration suffices to condemn their behaviour: it is wrong because it is a classic case of using someone solely as a means, without concern for his or her wishes” (p. 520).

The positioning of the professors/lecturers in the hierarchy of the academy guarantees their role as the vital “agents” of the education system, making significant contribution to the shaping of the individual child, its family, and the society. Ahmad (2012) enunciates:

Perhaps, teachers as a group face no greater complexities of social expectations than any other group which has a similar level of education and a similar level of awareness. Nevertheless, teachers are in a particularly sensitive relation to community because they are dealing with the community’s most precious possession, its children. Teachers are, therefore, under more public scrutiny than any other groups. (p. 45)

It should be noted here that it is the teachers who have the prerogative to authoritatively decide the range of practices to mold the students’ minds to promote the institutionalization of discourse of dominant culture, class, or caste. This is required to keep power concentrated in the hands of the selected few and power in all probability is something more like a strategy rather than mere possession. Power becomes strategy due to the functioning of discourse. Discourse, as defined by Foucault (1972) is, “the general domain of all statements” (p. 80) and is viewed as a system which structures the way we perceive reality. Discourse, as further referred by Foucault (1981), is the “violence which we do to things” (p. 67). This is largely because a complex set of practices manage the existence of discourses. Discourse is not just a simple set of statements which have some coherence; rather, people in positions of authority sanction certain practices which try to keep some chosen group of statements in circulation. Similarly, there are other practices also which try to ward off conflicting statements out of circulation. A notion of exclusion is, therefore, inherent in the processing of discourse which assists in the transformation of the social constructs of femininity, alternate sexuality, racism, class, and the one relevant in No Onions Nor Garlic—caste into power structures.

“Caste” has its etymological origin in the Portuguese language. In Sanskrit language, the equivalent word for caste is jati/varna which loosely translated into English means “race” (Pruthi, 2004, p. 5). The caste system is very intricate and complicated and it is very difficult to find an exact match of “caste” from the Western world. The closest parallel can be seen with the European system of guilds that divided artisans into separate social and economic entities on the basis of their specializations and sub-specializations. The caste system in India arose out of necessity because the inhabitants of the country had taken on an identity which was associated largely with the economic activity of their gotra or clan (Gaur, 2006, p. 32) and in a stratified and hierarchical socio-economic order there was a need to absorb different people within a homogeneous social structure. In other words,
feminism, alternate sexuality, race, and class are universal power structures, whereas caste as a power structure is specific to India. Bayly (1999) has very rightly observed that “nothing quite like the caste evolved in other parts of the world” (p. 28) and Paswan and Jaideva (2004) list caste system as “the main cause of disharmony and disunity in the community” (p. 22). Division of the Hindu community into the four castes or varna, traditionally known as the chatuvarna, namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, is a general form of organization. The discrimination on the basis of varna or castes is an old practice in India and finds its earliest mention in the Purusha Sukta, the 19th hymn of the 10th mandala of the Rig Veda. According to such old texts, the Brahmins are considered the highest of the castes. The Brahmins are supposed to have originated from the head of Brahma, the creator (Pruthi, 2004, p. 6) and specialize as priests, teachers, and protectors of sacred learning across generations. Brahmins are also traditionally responsible for religious rituals in temples, as well as rituals such as solemnizing a wedding with hymns and prayers. Following the Brahmins are the Kshatriyas who are “believed to have sprung from Brahma’s arms, and on them rests the burden of protecting the community from external aggression and internal trouble. The Kshatriyas are by right of birth, kings and soldiers” (Pruthi, 2004, p. 18). The Vaishyas “emanated from Brahma’s thighs and as such are inferior to the Brahmin and the Kshatriya” (Pruthi, 2004, p. 22). The Vaishyas are assigned the traditional roles of agriculture, cattle rearing, and trade, in short, increasing the prosperity of the country. “Next to the Brahmins, the Shudras are the most interesting community in India at present . . . Their status, according to the Hindu law books, is very low in the social scale” (Pruthi, 2004, p. 23) and their primary duty includes serving the three higher castes, especially the Brahmins. In addition to these four castes, there is a fifth caste constituted by the avarna/priest/panchama/atishudra/anyaja/namashudra or the untouchables (Shah, 2004, p. 118). They were kept outside the ambit of the four fold caste system and occupied the lowest rank in the Hindu caste system. The untouchables came to be known as harijans, that is, children of God—a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi in 1933 but as Shah (2004) says, “the harijan nomenclature is considered pejorative by some leaders of the castes.” So, they prefer to be called dalit, i.e., the oppressed” (Shah, 2004, p. 118). Dalit is not a caste and is known variously as exterior caste, outcaste, depressed class, or scheduled caste (as cited in Paswan & Jaideva, 2004, p. 11) whose touch, sometimes its shadow and even its voice, is believed to pollute caste-Hindus (Shah, 2004, p. 118).

Initiatives were taken by reformers, especially during the preindependence era by Mahatma Gandhi and by prominent dalit leaders like Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, R. D. Bhandare, R.R. Bhole, Iyodidat, Bhola Paswan Shastri, Puran Chand, and most importantly Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to annihilate caste system and prevent it from assuming the stature of a power structure. In the postindependence period, as Guha (2007) notes, “the Janata Party . . . had constituted the Mandal Commission in 1978” (p. 610) to identify the socially and educationally backward sections in the country. The basic recommendation of the Commission (later known popularly as the Reservation Policy) to reserve 27% of the vacancies in the government of India sector for candidates from the socially and educationally deprived segment of society was implemented by the new avatar of Janata Party, Janata Dal in 1990 (Guha, 2007, pp. 608, 610) and in the years particularly after the 1990s, there has been a continuous and meticulous execution of reservation quota in education and jobs to uplift the downtrodden by the successive governments.

However, there are some parts of the country where caste fanatics like Professor Ram exist. Professor Ram is a staunch Tamilian Brahmin who wears the poonal, that is, the sacred thread worn traditionally by Brahmins after being initiated into the sacramental Brahmin fold at the age of 7, and claims dvija status or the “twice-born” referring to a second or spiritual birth. His no nonsense upper casteist fervor becomes explicable when he declares that his is a “no onions and garlic,” strict vegetarian Brahmin family (the book draws its title from here):

We never cook onions in our home . . . We feel onions should not be a part of the Brahmin diet. “Garlic, leeks, onions, mushrooms, and all plants springing from impure substances,” Manu the Lawgiver wrote, “are unfit to be eaten by twice-born men.”

(Natarajan, 2006, p. 124)

His obsession with caste hierarchy reaches the next level when he authors a rule book for the Hindus titled Daddy What Is the Significance of the Poonal and One Hundred Other Questions About Hinduism. As a self-styled authority on Hinduism, Professor Ram in this book gives a thorough rendering of poonal, untouchability, and four-caste system and illustrates every other field relevant for the knowledge of the caste-Hindus. Nevertheless, the professor’s understanding of the caste is highly detrimental to the society because he abuses his position as the head of the English department at Chennai University to sustain the principle of caste hierarchy both inside and outside the university campus. He strives tirelessly to align caste hierarchy with power and for that assumes a delusive role of an emissary. In the professor’s hands, caste becomes a site of power. In fact, caste politics is anticipated at the very beginning of the book with the staging of Shakespeare’s play, A Midsummer Night’s Dream. This play happens to be rewritten by the vindictive professor, for the University festival. He is oblivious of the theatrical needs and modifies the Shakespearean play solely to express his sympathy toward the Brahmanical sentiments and support the sanctimonious Hindu hierarchy. He believes that the attitude of the people toward the caste system can be shaped by “knowledge” of Brahmin-centered caste values being venerated as the core of human order and propriety, that is, dharma.

Professor Ram propelled by this belief, highly disparages the
anguish that must have been triggered in those who feel oppressed by the upper caste brandishing of power. The professor’s activities to delimit the knowledge about caste hierarchy in favor of the caste-Hindus is analogous to “knowledge,” as explored by Foucault (1980a), according to whom, for something to be established as a fact/true, other equally valid statements have to be discredited or denied (as cited in Mills, 2003, p. 69). Only such statements are in circulation which underpin what is to be taken as ‘commonsense knowledge’ in society, and here in this novel, the statements on caste order approved by Professor Ram who is authority personified go a long way in initiating caste as a power structure.

This is recognizable when the saffron light comes on stage with the inception of the play to signify the hidden Hindu message of the show. Professor Ram deliberately chooses symbols and colors like saffron because as Doniger (2009) observes, saffron and saffronization have “strong echoes of . . . Hinduism” (Vedic Animals in the News Sacred Cows section, para. 2). The version of A Midsummer Night's Dream enacted on the stage is quite contrary to the comedy Shakespeare had originally written sometime between 1590 and 1596. The present performance at the Pantheon Theater is replete with Professor Ram’s interpolations, mainly pertaining to the question of the top-downward model of the caste system in India. He rues the introduction of the Reservation Policy in government sectors. The treatment meted out to Dr. Laurentia Arul by Professor Ram and his Brahmin colleagues is symptomatic. Dr. Arul is a faculty of the same department as Professor Ram but she is a non-Brahmin and belongs to the scheduled caste. This is reason enough for the professor with that opinionated mind-set regarding the supremacy of the Brahmins to humiliate her, and to constantly make Dr. Arul aware of her low social status, he brands her as the “backward-caste” and “dirt-eating Ambedkarite seditionist” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 190). The constant bullying by her Brahmin colleagues corners Dr. Arul: “Sometimes they forgot to stop laughing when Dr. Arul walked past, and after 3 months of this, Dr. Arul ate her lunch all by herself and never went down to the canteen with anyone for a cup of coffee” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 87). Professor Ram’s anger against Dr. Arul actually reflects his stand against the Reservation Policy, which advocates for more reservations in certain jobs for the backward castes and this provision, according to caste-Hindus, in turn interferes with the recruitment procedures in government institutions including universities. “In Professor Ram’s opinion, Dr. Arul was not the most pernicious of the beasts that slouched towards Chennai University to be born. No, it was the Reservation Policy itself” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 88). For him “the Reservation Policy was just snatching the curd-rice and mango pickle from the mouths of twice-born boys, especially Brahmins” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 83). Efforts are taken not to produce the other side of “knowledge” which are categorized as false statements because they showcase the woes of the suppressed as well as are capable of abetting resistance. The dispute can shake the base on which the superstructure of caste ranking is built by a fundamentalist like Professor Ram. Such fundamentalism finds its earliest depiction in the Hindu epic, Mahabharata, where the Brahmin teacher Guru Dronacharya trains his upper caste students in the art of archery but refuses to train a lower caste, a tribal dalit, Eklavya. Natarajan (2006) writes in this connection:

A tribal archer worked out with a Brahmin coach, though the coach was only a likeness he had fashioned out of clay, and how the original of this statue turned up after the archer had graduated with a top rank and asked for his fee. And the fee was nothing but the archer’s right thumb. This seemed . . . a singularly nasty and underhand demand. (p. 36)

Interestingly, when there is a play, Eklavya in the novel, the upper caste Hindu Chunky dismisses the very pertinent aspect that “the archery teacher is a Brahmin . . . so that makes this play, like, a comment on how the Brahmins oppressed all these other guys, the tribals and the daylights [dalits]” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 37). On the contrary, Chunky says, “the Ekalavya myth is about emasculation, and the thumb is a kind of penis substitute” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 37). Chunky’s words manifest that caste system is an important power edifice which can never be abolished and it is the ostensible truth on which the plot of No Onions Nor Garlic hinges. Each regime in fact has its own regime of truth which involves the exercise of power by the state not only through its agents like army, police, judiciary, and bureaucracy but also through doctors, philanthropists, friends, family, parents, and teachers. The common knowledge to exert power is dispersed everywhere from the State or government to family, religious institutions, and even the educational system. In No Onions Nor Garlic, caste and the power it connotes metamorphose into power structure only when “the system of education,” as Foucault (1981) argues, represents itself as “a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry” (p. 64).

Professor Ram is largely instrumental in recognizing the “authority of the masters” (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990, p. 124) and inculcating the dominant culture in the students. He puts his body and soul to fight for the “Future of Education,” and with the trustworthy Brahmin scholar Shastri as his auxiliary, he works toward purging the “mean corridors of academe” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 84) of the evils brought by the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes faculty members and students. According to him, it is a “noble cause” to support the Brahmin students. Professor Ram joins his Brahmin students in sweeping the streets, to show how the educated and the upper castes cannot get any decent job after the Mandal Commission recommendations. He supervises only Brahmin students for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and after three decades of teaching he has...
taken a dalit community student, Jiva at the insistence of the university Vice Chancellor. Bourdieu and Passerson (1990) comment that in the French educational system the process of “elimination” rather than “selection” has given rise to “educational mortality rate of the different social classes” (p. 154). Similarly, considering the process of “elimination” employed by Professor Ram in No Onions Nor Garlic, there is a duplication of the French scenario in the Indian society with the prevalence of “educational mortality rates” of different castes. This is perceptible from Professor Ram’s caste biased remarks on the intellectual inferiority of the harijans and the dalits at Jiva’s application for the post of lecturer:

Well, Jiva, as head of this department, I would like to make sure that there is good balance of talents in the pool, and—no offence meant—it would not do for backward and scheduled-caste candidates to start competing with the talents that open category candidates bring. (Natarajan, 2006, p. 94)

Such caste prejudice is perpetrated further by “special teaching methods” adopted by Professor Ram for scheduled caste students. Some of these methods were:

Throwing their papers out of the classroom window, calling them names like dolt and nincompoop, which were not there in the attendance register, failing them in every examination, giving them his sincere blessing when they dropped out of the course, and treating them at all times as if they stood no higher than vermin in the evolutionary order . . . Professor Ram treated these students in this manner because they came from backward towns like Dindigul or Palayankottai, and had Christian names and non-Brahmin surnames, and were the same colour as soya sauce. (Natarajan, 2006, p. 82)

Professor Ram being a shrewd man realizes that power is present in human actions and not solely in the actions of institutions. He understands that merely attacking representative structures of the oppressed will not serve his purpose of retaining caste hierarchy as the ascendant power edifice. Organizations or their buildings or statues of Dr. Ambedkar were all structures, which could be easily rebuilt after they were crushed. Hence, Professor Ram targets the individuals, more specifically Dr. Arul. Dr. Arul has spearheaded the drive for the installation of the statue of Dr. Ambedkar in an educational institute, which as Professor Ram apprehends will become a cult figure for the student body of the reserved category students like the Students for Democracy who will combine together to oppose him and protest against inequality and injustice. So, Professor Ram levels the false allegation against Dr. Arul of besmirching his name by sticking notes containing offensive remarks on him, across the department. He takes every possible measure to mobilize his Brahmin colleagues and organizes a march from the English department to the Vice Chancellor’s bungalow, demanding the demolition of the Ambedkar statue. This undoubtedly contradicts Professor Ram’s own desire to get a statue of Goddess Saraswati installed within the university campus for which he “would personally take responsibility . . . and pay half of its cost!” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 197). His actions are in keeping with Foucault’s (1978a) observation on educational institutions. Accordingly, schools and universities in the West were set up primarily to teach the students to be submissive and simultaneously to control their family. The 17th century Christian schools aimed not only to train docile children but also “to supervise the parents, to gain information as to their way of life, their resources, their piety, their morals. The school tends to constitute minute social observatories that penetrate even to the adults and exercise regular supervision over them” (p. 211).

Professor Ram and his marauding Brahmin workmates misapply the power which comes with their positions to focus less on the circulation of knowledge and more on the way certain types of knowledge are to be excluded, the rigorous process whereby the outcasts, be it the students, their parents or faculty, are to be brought into line with the type of knowledge considered to be “academic” and “true” as well in consonance with the dominant caste. Thus, someone as educated as Professor Nagarajan of the same English department pens an article like “Atrocities on Brahmins” where he talks about “the sufferings of upper caste Indians who have to trust a Harijan doctor with their God-given bodies” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 159). He criticizes Dr. V. P. Singh, under whose Prime Ministership the “affirmative action” mentioned in the Mandal Commission Report was publicized, for not going to the Public Health Centre but to the United Kingdom for his own treatment. All the high browed historian friends of Professor Ram like Dr. Iyer and Dr. Chaturvedi “have observed, the ‘so-called scheduled castes stomp with an upward motion and grind the upper castes into the stratosphere with an unprecedented gravity-defying aggression, a phenomenon to which we may apply the term “uptrododeness”’” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 83). The nefarious stance endorsed by the Brahmins to ignore the dolor of the lower castes and stifle their voice of dissent has drawn flak in many of the writings like Why I Am Not a Hindu (1996), Post-Hindu India: A Discourse in Dalit-Bahujan (2009), Untouchable God: A Novel on Caste and Race (2013) by Kancha Ilaiah, the dalit activist and director of the Centre for Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy at Maulana Azad National Urdu University in Hyderabad. Ilaiah’s (2006) assertion that ‘the upper caste have never agitated against private medical, engineering and management colleges selling seats to the rich for money. An anti-caste policy like reservation is being projected as an anti-national policy’ (p. 2447) is worth noting in the context of No Onions Nor Garlic.

This explains Professor Ram’s interference in the interview for the Open Category post of Lecturer in Drama and Folklore at the university. An “open category” post signifies that candidate from any caste, creed, or religion can apply. His student, Jiva who belongs to the scheduled caste
community has also applied for the post. Professor Ram cannot sit in the interview committee because his son, Chunky, is one of the applicants. He tries to utilize his academic contacts and deploy the power of his chair to manipulate the result of the panel even before the interview takes place. He initially cajoles Jiva to prevent her from attending the interview. Professor Ram even holds her the bait of a confirmed job when the Reserved Category post came in: “... the Reserved Category seat will be falling vacant six months from now ... It will be easier for me to guarantee you that job if you don’t antagonize the department by competing for an Open Category post” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 93). Jiva defies Professor Ram’s command and he is left with no option but to lament the absence of other high caste panelists. “It is a tragedy,” according to Professor Ram” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 90), especially when the panel comprises only women and shudras, whom the professor despises. The poignant irony in this line serves to intensify the professor’s despair as the chance for his son to get selected for the post seems a distant possibility and the triumph of a dalit appears as the tenable outcome. Chunky is supposed to succeed Professor Ram as the flag-bearer of the Brahmanical ethos both within and outside the university campus. Chunky, “according to reproduction theorists,” as Alpert (1991) postulates, is expected to “reproduce the ideology of dominant groups in society, their forms of knowledge” (p. 351), carry forward the legacy of the upper caste dominance over the lower castes, and maintain the division of castes in the Indian society, thereby ensuring the progression of caste into a supreme power structure.

It cannot be ignored that wherever there are imbalances of power relations between groups of people or between institutions/states, there is bound to be a production of knowledge. This idea is validated by Foucault (1980b) as well. Foucault (1980b) states that “it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (p. 52). He emphasizes the way that knowledge is not dispassionate but an essential part of struggles over power. Foucault draws attention to the fact that, in producing knowledge, one also simultaneously stakes a claim to power. As a result, Professor Ram constantly maneuvers to get his son selected for the post of lecturer in the university and himself elected as the president of the ACS. His desire is to seal his son’s as well as his place in that much coveted space of stalwarts who can speak authoritatively on castes.

Professor Ram’s action is in the line of Nietzschean thought of “Will to Power,” according to which people first decide what they want and then they fit the facts to their aim. This at the same time also means that there are no absolute truths or objective knowledge. This premise gets clarified when one delves deep in the fact that discourse which produces knowledge is “a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978b, pp. 100-101). Discourse, unlike the Marxist connotation of ideology, is both the means of persecution and the means of opposition. Moreover, discourse, truth, and knowledge are intricately connected to power, and power, as Foucault (1980a) has written, is “something which only functions in the form of a chain ... Power is employed and exercised through a net like organisation ... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (p. 98). The marginalized, therefore, in the academic sphere or in any institution have the potential to produce such information which can alter the status quo in the society. In No Onions Nor Garlic, Professor Ram is then correct in observing the lower caste faculty members and students as nonconformists to the long established system. Indeed, the Students for Democracy, a body comprising the lower caste students in Chennai University, express its resentment by constantly toiling toward erasing the facile Hindu way of life. The fact that “dalit studies are getting a lot of recognition these days” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 277) distinctly highlights that due to institutionalized imbalances in power relations between the upper castes and the oppressed, information is produced about the “dalits” and few on the Hindu upper castes; thus, many researches and plenty of books on the “dalit” subject are to be found in universities and libraries. Nevertheless, “all that caste-oppression stuff is history. The tables are pretty much turned now” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 37). The entire Brahmin faculty and the students of the university rally against the consecration of the statue of Dr. Ambedkar within the campus, whereas the reserved category students and the faculty have come up with a series of rhetorical questions on “hero-worship,” “independence,” and “the news about Gujarat” to justify the installation of the same (Natarajan, 2006, pp. 165-166). Resistance is an act of disapproval and subsequent liberation when power is misused to control and push further the already marginalized. Foucault (1980a) explains this kind of antagonism and resistance against the dominant class/caste power structure in the following words:

... Resistances ... will have to be analysed in tactical and strategic terms, positing that each offensive from the one side serves as leverage for a counter-offensive from the other. The analysis of power-mechanisms has no built-in tendency to show power as being at once anonymous and always victorious. It is a matter rather of establishing the positions occupied and modes of actions used by each of the forces at work, the possibilities of resistance and counter-attack on either side. (p. 163-164)

Power structures and their innate power relations, however, “… are multiple; they have different forms,” as Foucault states (as cited in Mills, 2003, p. 35). They can be at work within an institution or an administration or in family relations specifically in the relation between man and woman which surfaces as the power structure of gender. In No Onions Nor Garlic, the most striking model of such a relation between the two sexes and power is perceived in the marriage of the Rams’. Professor Ram by virtue of being a conservative Tamil Brahmin has devoted an entire chapter
under the heading “Daddy, What Is the Role of Women in Hindu Tradition?” in the only book which he has written in his lifetime, to discuss the issues pertaining to the conduct of women both within the family and outside it. He even remodels the Shakespearean drama A Midsummer Night’s Dream to fit in his ideas on women, “especially when Oberon began to say acid things about the role of woman in Hindu society” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 32). Interestingly, it is not the “Hindu society” or India at large alone which charts out the role of women, but as Greene’s (2001) study observes, women are treated as subordinates in every field across the globe. Greene (2001) writes:

Thousands of years ago, power was mostly gained through physical violence and maintained with brute strength. There was little need for subtlety—a king or emperor had to be merciless. Only a select few had power, but no one suffered under this scheme of things more than women. (p. xix)

This is conspicuous in the caustic remarks of Professor Ram in the guise of Oberon which were primarily directed against the lower caste women of the University, like Dr. Arul, for whom he has absolutely no respect. “You know Laurentia’s face? I have met fire-extinguishers with more sex appeal” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 87). Speaking about the fair sex in reality a way of simultaneously producing and controlling it and this is far more marked in familial relationships. The professor’s remark raises an important question on the power–gender–caste nexus which is even echoed by Chakravarti (1993):

Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the principles of the brahmanical social order and despite their close interconnections neither scholars of the caste system nor feminist have attempted to analyse the relationship between the two . . . For, when women are corrupted all is lost . . . To prevent such a contingency women’s sexual subordination was institutionalised in the brahmanical law codes and enforced by the power of the state. (p. 579-580)

It is, therefore, intrinsic for Professor Ram to dictate the terms of marriage to his wife. His notion of marriage is founded on the old Hindu order, according to which his own marriage to Mrs. Ram has entered that unusual stage whereby “they just moulded their special clothes without looking at each other and fell into their separate beds” and when Professor Ram sold the double bed and velvet mattress that had served them since their nuptial night, and bought single cots with two bedside tables between them, Mrs. Ram too “realized that the entry into sannyasaan would be marked by the complete cessation of the old rumpy-pumpy. She truly understood, then, that the Hindu wife’s duty was to curb lustful propensities and promote universal harmony” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 138). Mrs. Ram’s behavior can be explained in terms of what Chakravarti (1993) suggests the ideology of pativrata (faithfulness to the husband) or stridharma (duties of a woman) which is accepted whole heartedly by women in general. Women, as exemplified by Mrs. Ram, motivated by the ideology of stridharma strive toward fulfilling the expectations of their husbands. When Professor Ram has nightmares, it is supposed that the first duty of the Hindu wife is to roll out of her single bed and bring him a tumbler full of warm milk to soothe him, and the second duty is to massage her husband’s legs, not lustfully but impersonally, until he fell asleep again. The ideology of pativrata or stridharma is a device of patriarchy to exercise power over women. Tarabai Shinde in a hard-hitting attack on the whole pattern of life laid out for women by Hindu patriarchy catechizes in Stri-Purush Tulna (Comparison of Women and Men):

What is *stri dharma? Endless devotion to a single husband, behaving according to his whims. Even if he beats her, curses her, keeps a prostitute, drinks, robs the treasury, takes bribes, when he returns home she should worship him as a god . . . There are a million reasons for breaking *pativrata. (As cited in Omvedt, 2011, p. 33)

Nonetheless, even before a woman can break away from the shackles of *pativrata or *stridharma that strengthens the power complex of gender, it subjects the woman to disciplinary “gaze” thereupon changing her behavior, here, Mrs. Ram, who internalizing such ideology in due course of time makes it appear as a normal occurrence compromising on any kind of objection. Chakravarti (1993) explains:

Pativrata, the ideological “purdah” of the Hindu women was . . . the mask by which the hierarchical and inegalitarian structure of the social order was reproduced . . . The actual mechanisms and institutions of control over women’s sexuality, and the subordination of women, was . . . completely invisibilised and with it patriarchy was firmly established as an ideology since it was “naturalised.” (p. 583)

The construction of gender as a power structure is absolute for according to Foucault (1978b), where “a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex—specific discourses . . . in the field of exercise of power itself” (p. 18) determine the category “women,” it can hardly be imagined that somebody, especially a girl, can have a different sexual orientation other than being heterosexual. Choosing to be gay or lesbian, that is, assuming alternate sexuality, is frequently viewed as a way of dissension against the stipulated norms of sexual relationship between human beings. In the Indian civil society, too, homosexuality is considered a taboo. It is condemned and Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code makes same sexual relationship punishable by law. This law was framed by the British in 1860 during their colonial rule over India. Section 377 was repealed in a landmark judgment by the High Court of Delhi in July 2009 but the Supreme Court of India overturned the previous decision on December 12, 2013, declaring that amending or annulling Section 377 should be decided by Parliament and not the
The performance style (of homophobia) says more about the ongoing construction of the self, than the sexual identities of others... In the constant struggle for coherence subject engage in various forms of splitting, projection and displacement which are “articulated” in the homophobic performance. These processes of self-production appear to go largely unacknowledged by the individuals concerned as they struggle to achieve the illusion of internal consistency... (p. 225)

It is, therefore, expected that in a society propelled by the “assumption by which heterosexuality is taken for granted as the natural order of things” (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985, p. 586), the Rams in No Onions Nor Garlic have no other option but to disown their only daughter, Jayanthi when it is disclosed that she is a lesbian and in a relationship with a Canadian blonde, Caroline, and even planning to marry her. Not only the choice of orientation, in a society which allows only men to jealously guard the gender stronghold, defend its constitution as a power structure and police the behavior of women, the simple wish to marry a man of one’s own liking is also a matter of great consternation. Probably this is the reason why Uma’s desire to wait for someone who will love her for what she is and whom she can equally love is labeled as being too romantic and film like. On the contrary, a “tub-bier” divorcee who is “beginning to be Muruga!—bald” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 115) is considered a much more socially viable match for the dark complexioned, 27-year-old Uma. Women are circumscribed within the power structure of gender but individuals, be it man or woman, should not be simply seen as the recipients of power. If they are the place where power is enacted then they are also the place where power is overtly and covertly flouted. The same idea is restated in the works of Judith Butler, who, having been influenced by Foucault’s concern with the materiality of power relations at a local level, too tries to assume that power is not simply located in institutions. She emphasizes that sex and gender are the results of discourse and law but at the same time insists on the possibilities for growth and subversion from within existing discursive structures, more so since no position can be taken up outside the checks imposed by power structures (as cited in Salih, 2002, p. 50).

Infringement of power provides some kind of respite to the rampant discontent as it converts into “power” by neutralizing the impact of the disciplinary “gaze” of different power structures like poverty, shame, death, caste, class, religion, family, or gender. The selection of Dr. Arul to the post of the president of the ACS for a term of 3 years in Professor Ram’s place is a direction toward this change heralded by much friction and conflicts. Moreover, Jayanthi continues her affair with a girl and sticks to her decision of marrying the same sex despite being forsaken by her parents. Uma too secretly marries the man she loves. However, the real inversion of the order takes place after it is disclosed that Professor Ram is actually the son of a low caste dancing girl, the brother of Dr. Arul, in short, not a true born Brahmin. A behavioral change ensues in Mrs. Ram. Chakravarti (1993) is accurate when she says, “the upper caste women is the object of moral panic. Through the recalcitrance of women the established property and status order can be subverted” (pp. 579-580). Mrs. Ram continues to perform the duties of a Hindu wife but knowing that her husband is “fifty per cent low-caste” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 316), her visits to the god man, Sri Sri Sri Sastrigal “to get herself purified up” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 325) becomes more frequent. Professor Ram’s personal life is all shot to pieces, with Mrs. Ram frequently reminding him that she has “married beneath her” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 325). Professor Ram is relegated to an absolute nothing. He has to “cook, and wash the silver tumblers he drinks out of, and make the beds, and iron his shirts, all by himself” (Natarajan, 2006, p. 325). Moving away from the family life to the professional space, Professor Ram receives a setback there too. He is robbed of his position as the head of the department. A new head, a Brahmin though, is appointed. However, Professor Ram is isolated by his Brahmin compatriots. A scheduled caste student is chosen to fill the Open Category post for lecturer. The once strife torn university campus gives way to a university culture that begins showing the signs of being genuinely egalitarian, something which was unthinkable during Professor Ram’s tenure as the head of the department.

The ending of No Onions Nor Garlic with its confusions, squabbles and the denigration of Professor Ram is almost burlesque. In sum, it is rib tickling but at the same time it has overtones of bitterness. Destiny has not been kind to the ridiculously bigoted Professor Ram who epitomized all the
prevailing power edifices taken together in Chennai University and the bitterness explored in this novel is a consequence of play of power relations entrenched primarily in the power structures immanent in faculty–student academic hierarchy, caste, and gender. It may appear exaggerated; nevertheless, it is healthier and wiser not to cherish idyllic fantasies about the academic world and the academicians inhabiting that world. Their occupants possess the capability to demur when dissatisfied with the abuse of power. Dissent and friction rule the roost in the university campus when power is produced in such ways and maintained in circulation in societies through the operation of various institutions and practices that it becomes the tool in the hands of interest groups, thereby revealing the interconnectedness of power and resistance. Power is ubiquitous, power is palpable in every interaction, and as is clear in this article from the analysis of the relationships between teacher and student, high caste and low caste, and man and woman in *No Onions Nor Garlic*, the line dividing the ones exercising power and the real exerciser becomes blurred. The succinct appraisal of the power relations in *No Onions Nor Garlic* explain the vital question about the auto-

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