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Review of Isabel Wilkerson's *The Origins of Our Discontent* Review

Armani Stewart

In *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin writes, “I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually” (9), and Isabel Wilkerson does just that as she peels back the layers that nourish the key structure in America’s dichotomized racial system: caste. Wilkerson’s book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* aims “to understand the origins and evolutions of classifying and elevating one group of people over another and the consequences of doing so to the presumed beneficiaries and to those targeted as beneath them” (27). Wilkerson succeeds, gifting her audience with a second sight traditionally reserved for those who are bound by the pillars of caste-based structures and practices. Wilkerson addresses the long-standing issue of racism in America, that which stabilizes caste, by exploring the shift from race as a fluid perception to that of an immutable, dichotomized conception of Black and white. Wilkerson brings to the surface the complexity of caste and the superficial social constructs of “isms” that serve to masquerade the fundamental core of caste: “In America, race is the primary tool and the visible decoy, the front man, for caste” (18). Wilkerson further discusses how racialized religious, political, and social ideology was, and still is, legitimized through archaic laws, resulting in the perpetual negation of the subordinate caste’s humanity through egregious ostracism. In doing so, Wilkerson situates herself as the primary subject of the subordinate caste in America: an African-American.

In addition to exploring caste in America, Wilkerson also explores the notorious caste system of the Third Reich practiced upon Jews in Nazi Germany, and the Hindu caste system in India to display the prevailing interconnectedness of varying caste systems. Then and now: “The human impulse to create hierarchies runs across societies and cultures, predates the idea of race, and thus is farther reaching, deeper, and older than raw racism and the comparatively new

division of humans by skin color” (67). Within these caste systems, ideologies were, and still are, legitimized through the synthesis of church and state. The Nazi Third Reich studied American ideologies on racial categorization and interracial marriage that were then institutionalized into law: “With the results of their research laid out before them, the men at the June meeting began debating two main pathways to their version of a caste system: first, creating a legal definition for the categories of Jews and Aryans, and, second, prohibiting interracial marriage between the two” (84). Religion was used to justify the dehumanization of African Americans in the United States and the Untouchables, or Dalits, in India as a result of an immutable hierarchy sanctioned by the Divine Creators in Western Christianity and Hinduism: “In both countries, the subordinate castes were consigned to the bottom, seen as deserving of their debasement, owing to the sins of the past” (104). Wilkerson connects these three systems through her conception of eight immutable pillars interwoven into the erection and conservation of these caste systems. These eight pillars are centered cohesively around religious and pseudoscientific means of justification for the stratification and dehumanization of groups alienated from subjective experiences and, instead, compartmentalized into passive objects.

Wilkerson humanizes her abstract historical research with personal experiences and engagements with members of the subordinate caste, highlighting the essence of double-consciousness. Attempting to dismantle an invisible force is near impossible, but Wilkerson manages to materialize the intricate features that stabilize the caste equilibrium. In one example, she describes how she, as a national correspondent for *The New York Times*, was set to interview someone from the dominant caste in America, yet the interviewee refuses to believe that she is the interviewer from *The New York Times* because she is a member of the subordinate caste: “Each of us is in a container of some kind. The label signals to the world what is presumed to be inside and what is to be done with it” (59). Wilkerson’s endurance of this personal

experience depicts the flagrant erasure of humanity into an abstracted body schema. Wilkerson intends to galvanize the audience through a collective dispelling of caste by prioritizing the issue of caste as a cosmopolitan rather than domestic issue. This can be immediately done from a grassroots level of lessening the degrees of separation through transcontinental coalition: “They must develop powers of perception if they are to navigate from below” (282). Wilkerson’s engagement with a Dalit, a member of the caste system in India, as he maneuvers around the upper caste group of Indian society in the conference room through the subtle gestures and exchanges that signify each person’s caste placement, expands her localized experience as a member of America’s subordinate caste and deconstructs the alleged immutable pillars of caste forged upon the human subject.

Wilkerson unveils the intricacies of caste as a predestined condition fettered by the dominant caste, but one that could and should be challenged by removing the “mudsill” from the foundation of the house: this is accomplished by confrontation rather than retreat (131). Through another metaphor, Wilkerson explores the concept of a necessary scapegoat to bear the sins of the world. This displaced guilt complex retained by the dominant caste is complicit in the erasure of humanity in the subordinate caste: “For the ancients, the scapegoat served as the healing agent for the larger whole. For modern times, the concept of the scapegoat has mutated from merely the bearer of misfortune to the person or group blamed for bringing misfortune” (190).

Wilkerson also unveils the debilitating impact that caste has on identity formation, which I believe to be the root cause in humanity’s discontent. Wilkerson uses the concept of the alpha and the necessary underdog to metaphorically depict how alpha roles are forced on identities they were never fit to take on such roles, thus displaying the inadequacy of caste placement: “The great tragedy among humans is that people have often been assigned to or seen as qualified for alpha positions not necessarily on the basis of innate leadership traits but, historically, on the

basis of having been born to the dominant caste...” (206). Wilkerson not only focuses on the effects of caste on the subordinate caste, but redirects the focus to exploring the damaging effects it has on the dominant caste’s investment in upholding the caste equilibrium, displaying the twofold psychologically disparaging system of caste’s insidious intrusion on the human psyche.

Wilkerson strategically posits the issue of caste as that not of a domestic issue, but ultimately a cosmopolitan issue. In mapping the ills of caste full circle, the otherwise elusiveness of caste is grounded in a more tangible plane that could be challenged and gradually decimated, for the collective ascension of all groups compartmentalized into a subordinate complex. Wilkerson seemingly incorporates G.W.F. Hegel’s dialectical framework to illustrate the collective fate of humanity: humanity’s fate is inextricably tied, and can only be adequately realized through the acknowledgement of the Other’s humanity. The present state is transfixed in stagnation because it is virtually existing within an unrealized antithesis that survives on the basis of the hegemony’s precariously filtered reality. This unreconciled antithesis inhibits the full realization of the spiritual zeitgeist, preventing the fulfillment of a manifestation of necessity integral to humanity’s spiritual consciousness. As we are still enduring a capriciously unparalleled year, with an unforeseeable future, a grip on reality must be attained through an adequate assessment of the subtle war being waged on humanity’s collective advancement. As demonstrated in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, which I believe to be the culmination of Wilkerson’s intent, each individual affected by caste has the tools to dispel the ascribed conditions of caste by being the active cause instead of the passive effect. Isabel Wilkerson’s *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* is an essential read that serves as a guide, for all of humanity’s fate lies within a freedom realized in totality.

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