

**Caste, Stigma, and Social Marginality in Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am*:
A Study**

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Abstract:

Sunitha Krishnan's autobiography, *I Am What I Am*, details her life of advocacy in communities that face extreme kinds of institutional negligence, societal rejection, stigma, and exclusion. Krishnan's memoir contains a significant moment of caste consciousness when she notes that her understanding of caste was gradually evolving and recognises that many of the women she encountered in prostitution came from lower-caste backgrounds, even though caste is not the dominant autobiographical identity through which she narrates herself. By placing this explicit caste awareness within Krishnan's broader critique of branding, inherited social judgement, social distance, exclusion, and the denial of dignity, this study investigates caste, stigma, and social marginality in the memoir. The analysis separates direct caste evidence from structurally similar processes of stigma rather than falsely characterising every marginalising experience in the memoir as caste-based. It makes the case that Krishnan's path progresses from humanitarian involvement to a more sophisticated understanding of social processes. Through her connections with marginalised people, she creates an ethics of solidarity, dignity, belonging, and collective action while transforming abstract concepts into human relationships. The study indicates that by rejecting reductive labels and arguing that an individual's human worth should never be determined by their inherited or enforced identity, *I Am What I Am* adds to caste discourse.

Keywords: Identity, Dignity, Social Exclusion, Social Marginality, Caste, and Stigma

Introduction

In Indian civilisation, caste is still one of the most persistent social discrimination systems. Inherited caste identities continue to impact social recognition, communal interactions, notions of respectability, and patterns of exclusion notwithstanding constitutional pledges of equality. Caste discrimination can exist in cultural preconceptions, social distance, inherited stigma, exclusionary labels, and presumptions about the value of specific communities. It is not limited to overt untouchability. Because autobiography

connects abstract structures with real experience, life writing is a particularly useful vehicle for researching such processes.

I Am What I Am by Sunitha Krishnan is not essentially a traditional caste autobiography. Krishnan does not need a detailed description of caste discrimination to create her autobiographical self. However, she progressively incorporates caste into her perception of structural exclusion due to her extensive involvement with socially excluded people. The purpose of the autobiography is to document hardships and their capacity for transformation. One goal of Krishnan's memoir, according to the Author's Note, is to help readers comprehend "the past struggles that have shaped this organization" (Krishnan ix). Her focus on struggle transforms the book into a history of experiences with marginalisation, exclusion, institutional opposition, and societal transformation rather than just a chronicle of individual accomplishment.

Instead than being based on strict ideological loyalty, Krishnan's approach to social issues is based on an ethical commitment to mankind. "Being a humanist is what I most identify with," she says as she considers her developing social consciousness (Krishnan 43). However, humanism in *I Am What I Am* does not imply a lack of awareness of social differences. Krishnan, on the other hand, is forced to acknowledge the systems that impede equal human dignity as a result of her growing exposure to marginal populations.

The memoir's most significant caste-specific declaration comes when Krishnan talks about her friendship with activist Geeta Menon. "My own understanding of caste and class was just evolving," she admits (Krishnan 43). Caste is the main analytical issue for the purposes of this study. The term "evolving" is important because it indicates that caste consciousness is not an established intellectual framework but rather a slow process. Experience comes before interpretation: Krishnan only starts to comprehend the structural patterns of peripheral places after first entering them.

When she says that "the majority of the women in prostitution belonged to the lower castes or were minorities," it becomes very significant (Krishnan 43). In the societies she visited, this discovery turns caste from an ethereal social category into a discernible pattern. Although Krishnan does not assert that caste explains every marginal life, her observation shows that when analysing the social makeup of highly stigmatised communities, lower-caste location cannot be disregarded. As a result, the narrative raises issues regarding the connections between inherited identity, stigma, marginalisation, and social respectability.

A caste-centered understanding is further reinforced by Krishnan's criticism of social labelling. "Labelling—of any kind—does not help," she declares (Krishnan 14). The concept is especially important in a caste culture because caste itself operates through inherited labels, even though the immediate context goes beyond caste. Before being met as

a person, a person is frequently recognised by their community origin. When difference is turned into hierarchy and an inherited name becomes a permanent societal judgement, such classification becomes oppressive.

Therefore, using the ideas of caste consciousness, stigma, inherited social identity, social distance, marginality, dignity, belonging, solidarity, and resistance, this study explores *I Am What I Am*. It does not assert that every instance of marginalisation in Krishnan's autobiography is directly related to caste. Rather, it investigates how her broader critique of social branding and marginalisation illuminates the mechanisms through which caste stigma occurs, building on the memoir's particular caste observations. According to the study, Krishnan's journey shows a shift from social distance to solidarity, stigma to dignity, category to personhood, and passive acknowledgement to transformative action.

Review of Literature

T. Kavya, in "Between Care and Control: Biopolitical Practice in Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am*," (2026) uses Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower and governmentality to provide a theoretically complex interpretation of Krishnan's memoir. According to the essay, anti-trafficking activity occupies a difficult area between institutional regulation and humanitarian compassion. It makes the case that rescue, rehabilitation, discipline, legal action, and monitoring may all work together to combat neglect and take part in governance processes. The article's examination of power over disadvantaged groups is helpful to the current study even though it does not specifically address caste because caste stigma also entails systems that classify, control, and regulate marginal bodies. By questioning whether intervention always redistributes power or occasionally reorganises existing structures of authority, Kavya's work offers a critical perspective to celebratory portrayals of NGO involvement. (The Literariness Journal)

Sumithra Prasanna's "*I Am What I Am: Sunitha Krishnan's Crusade against Sex Trafficking*," (2024) concentrates on the memoir's ongoing discussion of social reintegration, stigma, rehabilitation, rescue, and dignity. Because it emphasises Krishnan's aversion to being permanently labelled by an externally imposed name, her review is particularly helpful for the current paper. Prasanna underlines that the book challenges readers to reevaluate how society allocates identity, shame, and guilt to stigmatised people. She also notes that rehabilitation involves more than just physical rescue; it also entails fighting social stigma and regaining one's dignity. Because caste stigma also turns socially assigned identity into a persistent obstacle to reintegration and equal recognition, these issues have a significant intersection with caste. (Moderate)

I Am What I Am, according to Chavan Sarika's "*Sunitha Krishnan's Life Is a Story of Grit, Determination, and Persuasion*," (2025), is a gripping account of three decades of activity and five decades of Krishnan's life. Chavan highlights the memoir's integrity, compelling story, fortitude, involvement in policy, and Krishnan's unwavering struggle

against institutional barriers. Her story is helpful in analysing resistance as an ongoing social practice as opposed to a single act of defiance. Chavan's focus on tenacity helps contextualise Krishnan's slow realisation of structural marginality and her resolve to change societal perceptions of populations viewed as unacceptable for a caste-centered study.

The memoir is an unsettling but motivational story of social action, according to M. Menon Priya's "Book Review of 'I Am What I Am': The Value of Honesty" (2024). She emphasises that the book challenges societal perceptions of survivors and exposes harsh reality rather than just recounting Krishnan's upbringing and advocacy. Menon focuses on the memoir's concern with reductive identity, which is the way a person's entire accomplishment can be eclipsed by a name connected to the past. Because caste also operates by reducing complicated personhood to inherited social identity, this concept is crucial for caste analysis. Menon also highlights Krishnan's commitment to solving problems rather than just describing them, as well as her action-oriented worldview.

The review of Mantripragada Lakshmi, "Book Review of Sunitha Krishnan's 'I Am What I Am'" (2024) views the memoir mainly in terms of equality, human dignity, collective responsibility, purpose, empathy, and tenacity. Her evaluation highlights how Prajwala grows with the help of many societal groups and how Krishnan becomes a voice for those who are unable to gain public exposure for themselves. Mantripragada's focus on the human being behind the social category is especially pertinent to this essay. According to her interpretation, the memoir emphasises personality over stigma by urging readers to "recognise the 'who'." This realisation is in line with the claim that caste resistance necessitates a shift away from hereditary social classification and toward an appreciation of personal humanity.

One of the main issues of Krishnan's advocacy, according to Smruti S. and Sneha Sadhukan's "Prajwala Founder Sunitha Krishnan on Her Fight for Dignity for Survivors of Assault" (2024), is dignity. Their piece places *I Am What I Am* in the context of Krishnan's protracted fight to alter public perceptions of scarred and stigmatised groups. They highlight Prajwala's integrated emphasis on awareness, institutional engagement, social reintegration, and rescue. Because efforts against caste hierarchy also revolve around dignity, the article is helpful to a caste-centered reader. Caste discrimination creates uneven levels of human worth rather than just excluding people. Therefore, all inherited social value hierarchies are ethically challenged by the demand for dignity.

According to Renu Sud Sinha's "I Am What I Am" by Sunitha Krishnan: Of Hope and Resilience" (2024), the memoir is a story of hardship, tenacity, and institutional change. She emphasises the scope of the organization's rehabilitative efforts and Krishnan's path from early intervention to the founding of Prajwala. Her review is valuable because it acknowledges the development of structured communal action from personal resilience. In

order to oppose hereditary inequalities, individual consciousness must also develop into social organization. This movement offers a crucial comparative context for caste opposition. Krishnan explains in retrospect why she authored the memoir and how she views victim-centered intervention in the News Minute interview, “I Am What I Am: Sunitha Krishnan’s Memoir on Her Battle Against Sex Trafficking,” The News Minute (2026). She emphasises that instead of letting public perceptions define her, she wanted to tell her own story. Her topic on compassion, institutional attitudes, rehabilitation, and the necessity of allowing survivors to choose their own course of action is very pertinent. This focus on self-definition and agency is crucial to caste studies because, in order to be freed from inherited social stigma, marginalised people must have the freedom to choose their own identities rather than conform to those that are imposed by dominant society.

Objectives

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

To examine the connection between the memoir’s portrayal of marginality, social stigma, and lower-caste placement.

To look into Krishnan’s criticism of labelling as a theoretical framework for comprehending caste stigma that is inherited.

To research how caste identity, social distance, belonging, and human dignity are related.

To examine how Krishnan’s interactions with marginalised populations shifted from humanitarian sympathy to solidarity and group resistance.

To assess I Am What I Am’s contribution to current literary debates about caste, identity, dignity, resistance, and social freedom.

Methodology

A qualitative textual and interpretive methodology is used in the investigation. I Am What I Am’s blatant references to caste and lower-caste marginality are examined through close reading. The memoir’s concerns of stigma, labelling, identification, social exclusion, dignity, belonging, and group action are examined in conjunction with these allusions. Reviews and pertinent secondary research offer crucial contextual help.

Discussion

Caste Consciousness as a Changing Understanding

I Am What I Am’s caste component must start with Krishnan’s own admission of intellectual development. She doesn’t act as though she had a completely formed structural understanding from an early age. Rather, direct interactions are how social knowledge develops. “My own understanding of caste and class was just evolving,” Krishnan acknowledges (Krishnan 43). The explicit acknowledgement that her understanding of caste had started to expand is crucial for a caste-centered reading.

The concept of “evolving” separates theoretical certainty from experienced social consciousness. Interpretation comes after Krishnan’s initial entry into marginal communities. She regularly interacts with groups that are typically shut out of respectable social visibility because of her activism. She eventually has the ability to recognise more

general patterns in those interactions. Thus, caste consciousness is portrayed in the narrative as a shift from experience to interpretation.

Krishnan's explanation that she could "connect her ideas on those topics with what I already knew about prostitution" (Krishnan 43) reinforces this movement. According to the statement, theoretical discussions provided her the conceptual language to reinterpret what experience had already shown, rather than creating her experience.

The procedure is crucial because, when social misery is personalised, caste often goes unnoticed. A disadvantaged person could be seen as a singular instance. When recurring personal experiences are acknowledged as a component of a larger social pattern, caste consciousness emerges.

Lower-Caste Location and the Marginality Structure

This study is based on Krishnan's most obvious caste finding, which states that "the majority of the women in prostitution belonged to the lower castes or were minorities" (Krishnan 43). The term "most" is what gives this remark its meaning. Krishnan finds a recurrent societal pattern rather than a singular instance. There is no proof in the memoir to support the assertion that caste is the only cause of any experience she has. The text's complexity would be made simpler by this decrease. However, it is important to pay attention to the disproportionate exposure of lower-caste identities in a highly stigmatised area.

It's not always the case that social fringes are occupied at random. In the past, caste has produced uneven levels of acknowledgement. Communities at lower levels of the caste hierarchy have historically experienced isolation and stigma. According to Krishnan's finding, even in situations where explicit untouchability is not being discussed, such inherited social status is nonetheless significant. As a result, her recognition shifts the focus of inquiry from individual circumstances to structural location. A caste-centered interpretation examines how dominant social norms normalise such patterns and why some tribes consistently find themselves in positions of social rejection.

Humanism and Caste Recognition

Krishnan does not conform to strict ideological classifications. "Being a humanist is what I most identify with," she says (Krishnan 43). Her humanism comes right before her discussion of changing caste consciousness, which makes this statement significant.

Here, humanism does not imply a rejection of caste. Finding the systems that keep people from being treated equally is necessary for achieving true equality.

Therefore, acknowledgement rather than erasure is how Krishnan's humanism functions. She observes people, but she also gains insight into how the caste system impacts them.

The following is one way to express the conceptual relationship:

Humanism → Acknowledgement of Structural Differences → Unity → Respect.

Caste no longer counts because everyone is human, according to a caste-blind understanding of humanism. This is insufficient, as demonstrated by Krishnan's experience. Universal

statements of equality cannot take the place of structural analysis if members of lower castes are disproportionately situated in areas of stigma.

The Politics of Labelling and Caste

Krishnan's persistent criticism of labelling may be the most helpful conceptual link between her autobiography and caste discourse. "Labelling—of any kind—does not help," she declares (Krishnan 14).

Historically, caste has been an inherited designation. Before a person's distinctive traits are understood, they are identified by birth and positioned into a social hierarchy.

Krishnan goes on to chastise people who "stigmatise someone because of their looks or origin" (Krishnan 14). When it comes to caste analysis, the term "origin" is especially important. A person does not choose the family or group they are born into; caste is socially inherited.

Identity turns into captivity when origin is used as a foundation for ongoing social judgement.

Therefore, part of the violence associated with caste is the transformation of a single aspect of identity into a comprehensive description of an individual. It's possible for a community name to serve as a shorthand for intelligence, occupation, morality, purity, talent, or value. Such reductionism is directly contested in Krishnan's critique.

The Permanence of Caste Stigma and the Label "for Life"

"The label is for life," Krishnan notes elsewhere (Krishnan 13). Although the mechanism she describes is quite similar to caste, her immediate reference is to another type of stigmatised identity.

Additionally, caste has historically been seen as permanent.

Caste identity can endure despite changes in educational institutions, professions, cities, languages, social networks, and individual goals.

One of the ways that inherited hierarchy perpetuates itself is through the label's persistence. Thus, Krishnan's opposition to permanent classification becomes philosophically significant for caste freedom. Agency is limited by a societal structure that prevents people from identifying themselves outside of their inherited identities.

Therefore, the right to reject the interpretations given to inherited labels must be a part of liberation.

Identity and the Rejection of Diminishment

Krishnan vehemently disagrees with attempts by society to reduce a person's entirety to a single identity. She describes how one social label "distilled" her "entire identity" (Krishnan 14). The term encapsulates the operation of caste essentialism even though the context is not explicitly caste. To "distil" identity is to eliminate complication.

A caste-marked individual may no longer be acknowledged as a citizen, scholar, activist, administrator, teacher, writer, or artist. All other accomplishments are viewed through the organising theory of caste. Therefore, Krishnan's autobiographical resistance

points to a crucial idea: stigma tries to freeze human identity, yet it is multifaceted and dynamic. Restoring the right to complexity is necessary for caste emancipation.

The Shift from Social Distance to Proximity

Social distance has historically been used to maintain caste. Separation guarantees the perpetuation of inherited stereotypes. Krishnan's activity keeps going in the other direction. She spends time with marginalised people, purposefully enters socially stigmatised settings, and cultivates relationships through consistent interaction.

Her recollection that the women she had previously found difficult to approach became into "allies on the same team" (Krishnan 9) effectively captures the metamorphosis. The expression represents the shift from division to unity. An "ally" is neither an anonymous social category nor an object of charity. Relationship and a common goal are prerequisites for alliance. The caste system is based on "us" and "them." This antagonism is undermined by solidarity.

From Personhood to Social Category

The relationship between Krishnan and Laxmi undergoes a particularly significant change. She acknowledges that a socially stigmatised role influenced her early perception of Laxmi. "Now I saw her as a person I could connect deeply with," she writes later (Krishnan 9). A caste-centered ethics of recognition revolves around this sentence. When category comes before personhood, caste bias starts. This order is reversed by Krishnan. She notices the individual. Although this seems straightforward, it has significant ramifications in a hierarchical social organization. Stereotypes passed down through caste groups become unstable when people are truly faced as individuals.

The motion is:

Category → Meeting → Identification → Relationship.

A crucial cultural component of caste freedom is this kind of relationship change.

Origin, Social Reintegration, and Stigma

When the past is consistently utilised to manipulate the present, social stigma becomes especially harmful. "How is social reintegration possible when your past looms heavily over your present?" Krishnan queries. (Krishnan 16). Applying the question to caste can be beneficial. Caste is a social manifestation of inherited history. Even if a person has little influence over their ancestry, discrimination and preconceptions can constantly reactivate that identity in society. Such stigma is not always eradicated by formal inclusion. Reintegration is not complete if the social past always "looms" over the present. Therefore, caste liberation necessitates changing the mindsets that marginalised populations face in addition to granting them access to social institutions.

Caste and the Desire to Fit in

Krishnan learns about "the loneliness and the need for belonging that isolation creates" from her own experience of institutional isolation (Krishnan 64). Caste has a significant impact on belonging. In the past, caste discrimination has worked by creating uneven social membership. While some communities are positioned in the actual or

metaphorical periphery, others are seen as important and legitimate. Therefore, the demand for caste equality is equally a desire for inclusion. Constitutional citizenship is insufficient if people continue to be viewed as outsiders in society. Membership without humiliation is necessary for liberation.

The Destruction of Social Hierarchy and Dignity

According to Krishnan, she became aware of “processes that stripped away the dignity of a person” (Krishnan 64). One of the best ethical foundations for caste analysis is provided by this term. In the end, caste hierarchy is a hierarchy of dignity. It produces birth-based inequality in social value. Therefore, the fight against caste must be viewed as both the restoration of dignity and resistance to prejudice. Krishnan’s humanism becomes politically crucial at this point. Caste cannot lawfully distribute dignity based on inherited status if it belongs to the individual as a human being.

Social Transformation and Collective Action

Another important lesson Krishnan learns from her activism is that she “experienced the power of collective action” (Krishnan 32). Caste is passed down jointly. Caste presumptions are passed down through families, communities, institutions, practices, and public cultures. Thus, group mobilisation is also necessary for caste resistance. Although a person may reject bias in private, social practices must change for transformation to take place. The significance of group platforms is demonstrated by Krishnan’s shift from individual intervention to organised activism. When it comes to caste, the idea is straightforward: disorganised resistance needs to be transformed into organised social assertion.

Cleaning, Pollution, and the Language of Exclusion

The response to the devastation of a stigmatised area is described in one unsettling episode of the narrative. Some people applauded an effort to “cleanse” the region, according to Krishnan (Krishnan 75).

This incident is not clearly classified as caste violence, and it shouldn’t be misrepresented as such. However, because caste hierarchy has traditionally been structured around concepts of purity and pollution, the vocabulary of “cleansing” has considerable conceptual importance to caste. Groups deemed to be polluting are transformed into social issues, and their elimination is perceived as purifying.

This whole rationale is rejected by Krishnan’s humanistic viewpoint. It is impossible for humans to be pollutants. Therefore, the paragraph contributes to the understanding of the larger cultural mechanism that allows marginalised people to be portrayed as dangers to respectable social space.

Opposition as Action

At last, Krishnan’s philosophy shifts from awareness to practice. “What brings change is action,” she says firmly in response to the question of whether thoughts and intentions alone can alter society (Krishnan 22). An appropriate conclusion for caste opposition is provided by this remark. Caste recognition is just the first step. Social action must follow awareness. Labels need to be questioned. It is necessary to overcome social

distance. Institutions need to acknowledge human dignity. Marginalised communities need to be given more agency and a voice. Therefore, caste consciousness gains significance when it results in change.

The trajectory in *I Am What I Am* can be interpreted as follows:

Interaction → Acknowledgement → Caste Consciousness → Stigma Criticism → Human Closeness → Unity → Group Action → Dignity → Freedom.

There is no methodical idea of caste destruction in Krishnan's memoir. Its contribution is distinct but significant: it shows how long-term interaction with marginalised groups can change a person's perception of social systems. Her consistent rejection of labels and social stigma, along with her open acknowledgement of lower-caste marginality, result in an ethics that is essentially incompatible with caste hierarchy.

Conclusion

Through its ongoing criticism of stigma, labelling, exclusion, and lowered dignity as well as its evolving awareness of lower-caste marginality, Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am* adds to the conversation around caste. Every experience of marginality in Krishnan's book cannot be classified as caste oppression because she does not narrate herself as a traditional Dalit autobiographical subject. However, a key structural insight is provided by her observation that many of the women she met were from lower castes. An ethical foundation for opposing caste hierarchy is provided by her rejection of forced labels, insistence on personhood, shift from social distance to solidarity, affirmation of belonging, and dedication to group action. In the end, the book suggests that self-definition and dignity are essential pillars of social liberty.

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