



CASTE

**An Aphasia
Reader Assistant**

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**BLACK APHASIA
WORKING GROUP**

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PART ONE: TOXINS IN THE PERMAFROST AND HEAT RISING ALL AROUND

CHAPTER ONE: THE AFTERLIFE OF PATHOGENS

In **2016**, a **heatwave** hit **Siberia**. The **permafrost**—ground that stays frozen all year—**melted**. Inside the ground was **anthrax**, a **deadly disease** that had been frozen since **1941**.



As the ground melted, the anthrax **returned**. A **young boy died**. Animals had to be **burned**. The **soil was bleached** to stop the spread.

Wilkerson uses this story to explain **caste**. She says **caste is like a buried disease**. It can **sleep for years**. But when the right conditions appear—like **fear** or **instability**—it **comes back**.

That same year, the **United States elected a president** who spoke to people's **fears**. He talked about losing **status** and **power**. He blamed **immigrants** and **minorities**. After his election, **hate crimes rose**. Wilkerson says this is caste **waking up again**.

CHAPTER TWO: THE VITALS OF HISTORY

A **doctor** must know a **patient's history** to treat them. The same is true for a **country**.

But in **America**, people often say, “That was a long time ago.” They try to **skip the past**. But **slavery, segregation, and racial violence** are part of our story.

Wilkerson says **caste is like an inherited disease**. You may not have caused it. But if you don't **treat** it, it still **hurts** you and others.

Facing the past is not about **blame**. It's about **healing**. We must know our **history** to fix our **present**.



CHAPTER THREE: AN OLD HOUSE AND AN INFRARED LIGHT

Wilkerson bought an **old house**. One day, she saw a small **bulge in the ceiling**. It didn't look serious. But when she used an **infrared light**, she saw **hidden water damage**.

She says **America** is like this house. We live in a structure with **hidden damage—slavery, racism, inequality**.

We didn't **build** the house. But we **live** in it now. If we ignore the cracks, they **grow worse**.

Caste is like the **framework** inside the walls. We may not see it, but it **shapes everything**. **Race** is the **label**. **Caste** is the **structure** underneath.

Caste decides who is:

- **Respected**
- **Trusted**
- **Ignored**
- **Punished**



Even if people believe in **equality**, caste still works quietly. It gives some people power—and others silence.

KEY WORDS

- **Caste:** A system that ranks people and keeps them in place.
- **Permafrost:** Ground that stays frozen year-round.
- **Inherited disease:** A problem passed down through generations.
- **Infrared light:** A tool that helps reveal hidden damage.

KNOWLEDGE CHECK (YES/NO + MULTIPLE CHOICE)

1. Was anthrax found in the permafrost after it melted?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. What does Wilkerson compare caste to?

- A. A storm B. A disease C. A mountain D. A law

3. Can we fix problems in the present without knowing our history?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. What is the purpose of the infrared light in Chapter 3?

- A. To paint the ceiling B. To fix the roof
C. To find hidden problems D. To decorate the house

PART TWO: THE ARBITRARY CONSTRUCTION OF HUMAN DIVISIONS

CHAPTER FOUR: A LONG-RUNNING PLAY

Caste is like a **play**.

The script was written long ago.

We are **born** into roles.

We are expected to play those roles.

In **1619**, the first enslaved Africans came to America.

This began the American **caste system**.

First, **religion** was used to separate people.

Later, **race** became the reason.

White people were placed at the top.

Black people were pushed to the bottom.

Even immigrants had to choose.

To become “**white**,” they had to reject Black people.

Wilkerson says we can **change the script**.

But first, we must realize we are **in a play**.



CHAPTER FIVE: “THE CONTAINER WE HAVE BUILT FOR YOU”

A Black girl was named **Miss**.

This was not a title—it was her **name**.

Her father gave it to force people to show **respect**.

But people pushed back.

Her **success** made others uncomfortable.

At school, a white principal refused to believe her name.

Wilkerson shares her own story.

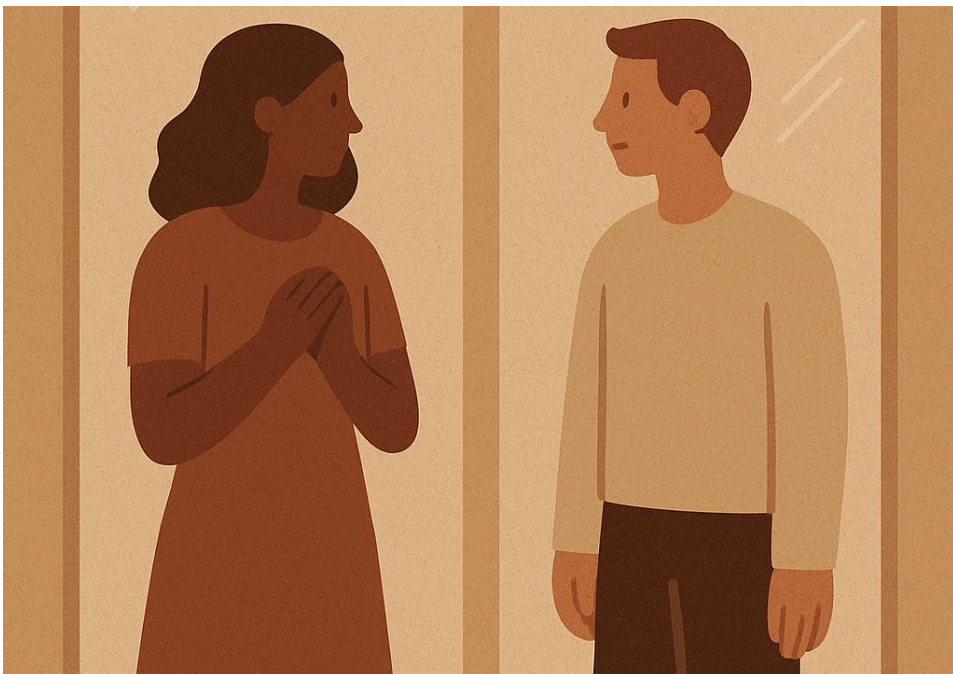
She was a respected **journalist**, but a man refused to believe she was the one he was waiting for.

She didn’t look like who he expected.

This is how **caste** works.

It creates a “**container**” for you.

If you step outside it, you are punished or ignored.



CHAPTER SIX: THE MEASURE OF HUMANITY

Wilkerson asks us to imagine a world divided by **height**.

What if short people were treated as better than tall people?

That sounds silly—but it's what we do with **race**.

Science shows we are **99.9% the same**.

Race is not real in biology.

It is something **society** made up.

Caste is deeper than race.

It decides who has **power**, who is **trusted**, and who is **blamed**.

She gives two key words:

- **Racism** = Personal dislike based on race
- **Casteism** = Belief in a fixed **social ladder**

Caste doesn't need hate.

It only needs people to believe in **order and rank**.



KNOWLEDGE CHECK

1. Is caste like a play where people are given roles?

- **Yes / No**

2. What year did the American caste system begin?

- a) 1492
- b) 1619
- c) 1776

3. What does Wilkerson say about race and science?

- a) Race is natural and based on biology
- b) Race is real because of skin color
- c) Race is not biological—it's a social invention

4. What's the difference between racism and casteism?

- a) Racism is about laws, casteism is not
- b) Racism is personal, casteism is a belief in rank
- c) Racism is about language, casteism is about clothing

5. Can caste work even if no one is hateful?

- **Yes / No**

PART THREE: THE EIGHT PILLARS OF CASTE

Caste is a system that keeps people in **set places**.

These places are not based on **talent** or **effort**.

They are based on **old rules**.

But these rules were **created by people**.

And people can **change** them.

Here are the **eight main pillars**—the big ideas that hold caste in place:

1. Divine Will and Nature's Law

Some people say caste is part of **God's plan**.

They believe the world is meant to be **unequal**.

They think some people are born to **lead**, others to **serve**.

In the past, this was backed up with **religion** and **fake science**.

But that does not make it **true**.



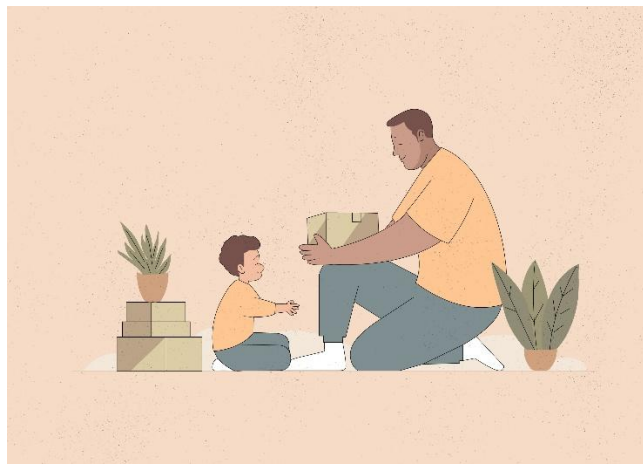
2. Heritability

Caste is passed down through **birth**.

You are born into a **rank**.

You **cannot change it**, no matter how kind or smart you are.

In the U.S., even “one drop” of **Black ancestry** meant you were seen as **Black**—and treated as **lower caste**.



3. Endogamy: Control of Marriage

Caste systems say you must marry **inside your group**.

In **India**, that means marrying within your caste.

In the **U.S.**, laws once **banned** marriage between **Black and white** people.

Keeping people apart helps keep the **system strong**.

4. Purity and Pollution

The **top caste** is seen as **clean**.

The **bottom caste** is seen as **dirty**.

In India, Dalits were banned from sharing food or water.

In the U.S., Black people could not use **the same bathrooms, schools, or pools**.

The message was: “**Stay away.**”

5. Occupational Hierarchy

Caste decides what **jobs** people can do.

In the U.S., Black people were forced to do **hard labor**.

Even after slavery, they were kept out of **good jobs** and **unions**.

The system says some are born to **work**, others to **lead**.

6. Dehumanization and Stigma

The bottom caste is seen as **less than human**.

In Nazi Germany, Jews were called **animals**.

In the U.S., Black people were treated like **property**.

This made it easier to **harm them**—and feel **no guilt**.

7. Terror as Enforcement

Fear keeps people in place.

In India, Dalits were **beaten or killed** for breaking rules.

In the U.S., Black people were **lynched** for small acts—like asking for fair pay. Even now, there is **violence and police force** used more on people in the lower caste.

8. Inherent Superiority and Inferiority

This is the biggest **lie** of all.

It says some people are **naturally better**.

Children learn it early.

It shapes how people see **others**—and themselves.

It teaches **shame** and **pride** based on **birth**, not behavior.



These eight pillars are like the **wooden beams** inside a house.
They hold the whole thing up.

But if we can **see them**, we can **take them down**.

We can build something **fairer and stronger**.

KEY WORDS

- **Pillar:** A big idea that holds something up
 - **Heritability:** Passing something down at birth
 - **Endogamy:** Marrying only inside your group
 - **Dehumanization:** Treating people like they are not human
 - **Terror:** Using fear to control others
-

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

1. Is caste passed from parent to child?

☐ Yes ☐ No

2. What does the “purity” rule say about the bottom caste?

- A. They are smarter
- B. They are stronger
- C. They are dirty
- D. They are teachers

3. Why is controlling marriage important to caste systems?

- A. It makes weddings easier
- B. It keeps groups separate
- C. It saves money
- D. It helps love grow

4. Does caste need hate to survive?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. What do the eight pillars do?

- A. Help people work together
- B. Give everyone a fair start
- C. Keep caste in place
- D. Teach people how to read

PART FOUR: THE TENTACLES OF CASTE

CHAPTER 16: BROWN EYES VS. BLUE EYES

A teacher named **Jane Elliott** did an experiment.

She told her class: “**Blue-eyed kids are better** than brown-eyed kids.”

Right away, the children **believed her**.

The blue-eyed kids acted proud.

They spoke louder and bossed others around.

The brown-eyed kids became quiet and sad.

The next day, she **switched the roles**.

Now the brown-eyed kids were “better.”

The same thing happened again—but reversed.

Wilkerson says this is how **caste** works.

It turns a **random trait** into a reason for power.

It teaches people who to **look down on**—even if it makes no sense.



CHAPTER 17: CENTRAL MISCASTING

To be **miscast** means being given the wrong role.

Black people are often seen only as **helpers** or **threats**.

Even when they are doctors or leaders, they are **doubted**.

Caste tells us what kind of person “belongs” in each role.

If someone steps outside that role, others feel confused—or angry.

This harms everyone.

It makes some people **invisible**.

It makes others feel they must always be in charge.

CHAPTER 18: STATUS THREAT

People in the top caste fear **losing their place**.

Even if they still have freedom and wealth, they may feel **attacked** if others rise.

Wilkerson calls this **status threat**.

It leads to **backlash**—fighting against progress.

To those used to being on top, **equality feels like loss**.

CHAPTER 19: SCAPEGOATS

A **scapegoat** is someone who gets **blamed** for problems they didn't cause.

In Nazi Germany, Jews were blamed for war and economic problems.

In the U.S., Black Americans are often blamed for **crime**, **poverty**, or **poor schools**.

Scapegoating takes the blame off the system.

It gives people an **easy target**.

This protects the caste system.

It keeps people **angry at each other** instead of fixing the real issues.



CHAPTER 20: INSECURE ALPHAS AND UNDERDOGS

In some animal groups, the leader is called the **alpha**.

But some alphas are not confident. They are **afraid of being challenged**.

The **dominant caste** is like an insecure alpha.

They fear losing control.

If someone from the lower caste does well, it feels like a **threat**.

People in the lower caste are expected to be **quiet, grateful**, and not **too successful**.

This keeps the old roles in place.

CHAPTER 21: CASTE IN DAILY LIFE

Caste is not just in laws.

It is in **everyday life**.

Wilkerson tells stories of being ignored, doubted, or passed over—just because of how she looked.

A Black man in a suit was skipped in line at a car dealership.

No one even noticed.

This is the **invisible tax**:

The extra stress and effort people in the lower caste carry each day.

They must always prove they belong.

CHAPTER 22: THE BOTTOM RUNG

Every caste system needs someone at the **bottom**.

That way others can feel **better**: “At least I’m not them.”

This belief stops people from working **together**.

Instead of asking, “How can we all rise?” people think, “How can I stay above?”

This **divides** people and slows **progress**.

CHAPTER 23: LAST PLACE ANXIETY

Imagine a house filling with water.

The basement is flooding—but the first floor feels scared too.

This is called **last place anxiety**.

It’s the fear of being **pushed down** if someone else rises.

Even if a policy helps everyone, people may fight it—if it also helps those they see as “below.”

This fear keeps caste alive.

CHAPTER 24: FRONT-LINERS OF CASTE

Some people are the **first** in their family to break the caste barrier.

They are the first to go to **college** or get a **leadership job**.

These people carry extra pressure.

If they fail, others say, “See?

They didn’t belong.”

If they succeed, people may still doubt them.

Wilkerson calls them **front-liners**.

They are brave.

They open doors for others.



KEY WORDS

- **Hierarchy:** A system of higher and lower roles
 - **Scapegoat:** A person unfairly blamed
 - **Status threat:** Fear of losing your social rank
 - **Invisible tax:** The extra stress placed on lower caste people
 - **Front-liner:** A person who goes first into new spaces
-

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

1. Did Jane Elliott use eye color to teach about hierarchy?

☐ Yes ☐ No

2. What does it mean to be “miscast”?

A. To win a prize

B. To forget your lines

C. To be seen as something you’re not

D. To join a group

3. What is a “scapegoat”?

- A. A real animal
- B. A group that carries blame
- C. A person in charge
- D. A leader who protects others

4. What is the “invisible tax”?

- A. A tax on homes
- B. The cost of groceries
- C. The extra stress of being treated unfairly
- D. A fee paid in secret

5. Are front-liners the first to break barriers?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

PART FIVE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF CASTE

CHAPTER 25: A CHANGE IN THE SCRIPT

Caste gives everyone a **script** to follow.

A script tells you what role you are supposed to play.

Some people are **cast as leaders**.

Others are **cast as followers or servants**.

These roles become **normal** over time.

Wilkerson shares real stories:

- A Black **surgeon** was mistaken for someone who was lost.
- A Black man with a **first-class ticket** was told to move.

Why? Because people **expected** someone else in that role.

Changing the script means **changing how we see others**.

We must ask: “Why do I expect this person to be in charge—or not?”



CHAPTER 26: STOCKHOLM SYNDROME AND SURVIVAL

Stockholm Syndrome is when a **hostage** starts to feel **close** to the person who is hurting them.

Wilkerson says this can happen in **caste systems** too.

People in the **lower caste** may begin to believe lies about themselves.

They think, “Maybe I am less.”

They may even defend the system that holds them down.

This is not weakness.

It is a way to **survive**.

People learn to **adapt** to stay safe.

CHAPTER 27: THE EROSION OF GRACE

Grace means **kindness**, **forgiveness**, and giving someone a **second chance**.

In caste systems, **grace is not shared equally**.

White people are often forgiven when they make mistakes.

Black people may be punished right away.

This creates a world where **trust is broken**.

Some people expect **kindness**.

Others expect to be
blamed.

To fix this, we must look at
who we give **grace** to—
and who we do not.



CHAPTER 28: THE COST OF CASTE

Caste hurts **everyone**.

When people are kept out of **jobs, schools, or leadership**, their
skills are wasted.

That's bad for the whole country.

Caste also hurts **health**.

People in the lower caste face more **stress**.

That stress causes **heart problems, early death**, and worse care.

Caste creates **fear and division**.

It makes it harder for people to **work together**.

Wilkerson says: fixing caste is not just **right**—it is **necessary** for
the country to survive.

CHAPTER 29: CASTE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Wilkerson explains how caste affects **health care**.

- Black people often get **less medicine**.
- They may be **believed less** when they are in pain.
- During **COVID-19**, Black and brown people died more often.

Why? Because they had **riskier jobs** and **less access to doctors**.

Even with the **same income** and **same education**, people of color often live **shorter lives**.

Caste acts like a **disease**.

It **weakens the body, the mind, and the whole country**.



KEY WORDS

- **Script:** The role you are expected to play
 - **Stockholm Syndrome:** Feeling loyal to someone who hurts you
 - **Grace:** Fairness, kindness, second chances
 - **Erosion:** Slow damage over time
-

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

1. Does caste give people a script to follow?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. What does Stockholm Syndrome mean?

- A. A type of illness
- B. A country in Europe
- C. Feeling close to someone who hurts you
- D. A kind of weather

3. Who often gets more grace in a caste system?

- A. Everyone equally
- B. White people
- C. Lower caste people
- D. Strangers

4. Can caste affect your health?

☐ Yes ☐ No

5. What does Wilkerson compare caste to?

A. A fire

B. A disease

C. A job

D. A race

PART SIX: BACKLASH

CHAPTER 30: BACKLASH

Backlash means a **strong negative reaction**.

It happens when people feel the **system is changing**.

When the old way is **challenged**, some people get **afraid**.

They fight to keep things **the same**.

Wilkerson gives an example:

In **2008**, **Barack Obama** was elected president.

Many people were **proud**.

But others were **angry** or **afraid**.

They didn't expect a **Black man** to lead the country.

Some questioned his **citizenship**.

Some refused to **say he was the real president**.



This kind of fear is not new.

After the **Civil War**, after the **civil rights movement**, and after **other big changes**, there was always **pushback**.

People who fear losing **status** often try to **stop progress**.

They feel like they are losing their **place**.

Wilkerson says:

Backlash is a signal.

It shows that something **important is changing**.



KEY WORDS

- **Backlash:** A strong reaction against change
 - **Status:** Your social position or rank
 - **Threat:** A feeling of danger or fear
-

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

1. What is backlash?

- A. A celebration after success
- B. A strong negative reaction to change
- C. A sports event
- D. A law passed in Congress

2. Who was elected in 2008 and caused backlash in some people?

- A. George Bush
- B. Barack Obama
- C. Joe Biden
- D. Abraham Lincoln

3. Did everyone accept Obama's presidency right away?

☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Why do people often resist progress?

A. They love change

B. They enjoy learning

C. They fear losing status

D. They want new leaders

5. What does Wilkerson say backlash is a sign of?

A. A problem with leadership

B. A major shift or change

C. A good economy

D. A return to the past

PART SEVEN: AWAKENING

CHAPTER 31: SEEING THE PLAY

Wilkerson says life is like a **play**.

We are all **born into it**.

The **script** is already written.

We didn't choose the **setting**, but we are told what **role** to play.

Some people are taught they belong **at the top**.

Others are taught to be **quiet** or stay **in the background**.

An **awakening** happens when we begin to **notice the script**.

We ask questions like:

- Who gets to **speak**?
- Who gets **ignored**?
- Who gets **punished**?
- Who gets **trusted**?

Awakening means we begin to **see the system**—and realize we can choose to act **differently**.

CHAPTER 32: A WORLD WITHOUT CASTE

Wilkerson ends the book with **hope**.

She asks us to imagine a world with **no caste**.

That world does **not exist yet**—but it **could**.

Caste was **created by people**.

So it can also be **taken apart by people**.

She compares the **United States** to **Germany** after **World War II**.

Germany admitted the truth.

It taught children what happened.

It did **not** build statues for **Nazi leaders**.

In contrast, the U.S. has often **honored slaveholders** and **ignored history**.

To end caste, we must: **Tell the truth**

- **Give everyone dignity**
- **Treat all people with respect**

This is how we build a **better world**.



KEY WORDS

- **Awakening:** Realizing the truth about the world
 - **Script:** The role you are expected to play
 - **Dignity:** Being treated with worth and respect
-

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

1. What does Wilkerson compare life to?

- A. A house
- B. A classroom
- C. A play
- D. A test

2. What is a script in the context of caste?

- A. A shopping list
- B. A story you write
- C. A role you're expected to play
- D. A map

3. Can caste be unmade?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. What did Germany do after World War II?

- A. Hid its past
- B. Taught the truth
- C. Celebrated war
- D. Ignored history

5. What are some steps to ending caste?

- A. Keep secrets and stay silent
- B. Give some people more rights
- C. Tell the truth and treat everyone with dignity
- D. Build more statues

PART EIGHT: EPILOGUE

Wilkerson ends with a **true story**.

At a book event, a **white man** stood up.

He said, “I didn’t know all this. What am I supposed to do now?”

Wilkerson answered:

“You didn’t build the house. But the house is yours now.”

She explains:

We all live in the same **house**—called **America**.

Even if we didn’t **create** the problems, we still have to **fix** them.

We can choose to:\n- **Repair what is broken**

- **Notice what is unfair**
- **Tell the truth**
- **Take action**

That is how we build a **better house for everyone**.

KEY WORDS

- **House:** A symbol for the country we live in
- **Repair:** To fix something broken
- **Action:** Doing something to help change

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

1. What did the white man ask at the event?

- A. "Can I buy the book?"
- B. "Where is Wilkerson from?"
- C. "What should I do now?"
- D. "Is this real history?"

2. What was Wilkerson's reply?

- A. "You should do nothing."
- B. "Blame others."
- C. "You didn't build the house, but it's yours now."
- D. "Forget the past."

3. Do we all live in the same house (society)?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. What does Wilkerson say we should do?

- A. Hide the truth
- B. Fix what's broken and act
- C. Stay quiet
- D. Change nothing

5. Can small actions help create change?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

The background of the entire image is a dense, overlapping crowd of stylized human figures. These figures are rendered in various shades of gray, from light to dark, creating a sense of depth and movement. The figures are mostly shown from the chest up, with some facing forward and others in profile. The overall effect is a textured, almost abstract representation of a large group of people.

CASTE

ISABEL WILKERSON