

The precarious lives of outcasts: re-examining Anand's *Untouchable* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

*An outcast is a person who doesn't fit in with the mainstream and who is not accepted by a group of people or by society. These outcasts have to endure the unjust and nasty treatment in society. In every social order, there are some segments of people deprived of socio-economic opportunities and are victims of cultural, political and social ostracism. This paper intends to analyse the social prejudice and caste exploitation in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Anand and Roy delineate the social realities of their time in their fictions. Both the novelists delve deep into the social, political and economic malaise pervading all around the nation. They sketch the condition of the lives of the protagonists and their desolations foisted by the so called superior caste and class people. The novels of both these authors awaken the people from their deep slumber and enflame them to ponder over India's social evils and social inequality that is kept alive. This paper examines how the authors attack the social injustice, inequality and caste exploitation. Over the last five decades, drastic changes have been realized in almost every walk of life, provoking the basic conventions and beliefs and bringing under ruthless scrutiny age-old faiths, customs and theories. The main purpose of this research is to scrutinise and mirror the pathetic plight of outcasts who were subjected to irreducible social indignities and inequalities. Being the social realist, they raise the existential questions of outcasts and their search for identity with a taciturn voice in this modern, democratic and*

complicated world. The silent voice of outcasts for their identity is echoed through the main characters as Bhakha, Shohini, Ammu and Velutha who have frail voices lost in the cacophony of life.

Keywords: outcasts, social ostracism, malaise, ruthless, desolations, cacophony.

INTRODUCTION

The theme of outcast has been an issue of social concern in contemporary English literature. The word 'outcast' means a person who has been discarded or ostracised by their society or social group. They have no place in the system as the society or group refuses to accept them. Both the authors have emphasised the predicament of the outcasts in conservative and custom-bound societies where they are treated as diffident and oppressed groups in hierarchical social structure. These outcasts are embraced in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Both the novels represent the outcasts being dehumanised by the governing hegemonic ideology. Many of the characters are in precarious societal and political situations. The problems of outcasts are represented mainly by Bhakha, Velutha, Sohini and Ammu.

The main purpose of this paper is to exhibit how society affects the protagonists of Roy's and Anand's fiction negatively. It also deals with the exploration of how they are degraded at the hands of the superior caste people at different levels. The novelists have portrayed very sensitive issues of untouchables and marginalized segments of pre and post-independence India. Caste plays a very crucial role in Indian society and untouchables are decied as the dirt of society by the so called superior class people. Anand's Bakha is an untouchable who is a toilet-cleaner or bhangi whereas Roy's Velutha is of an untouchable caste named as Paravan. Both the untouchables live in very unhygienic and inhuman conditions which are inflicted on them by the superior class. They are not permitted to live near Hindus. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy exhibits the house of Velutha, the paravan as it

“... was dark and clean. It smelled of fish curry and wood smoke. Heat cleaved to things like a low fever... Velutha and Vellya Paapen's bedding was rolled up and propped against the wall....a grown man

could stand up straight in the centre of the room, but not along its sides.”¹ (Roy 2002, 208)

Mulk Raj Anand also sketches the realistic picture of the outcasts' colony. He delineates;

“The outcasts' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together into rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcasts from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with the crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and the filth of the public latrines situated about it, the Adour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffalos heaped up to be made into fuel cakes.”² (Anand 2001, 1)

The lives of outcasts are brought into light through many incidents in both the novels the water incident of the fiction *Untouchable* is very distressing. The untouchables were not authorised to touch and draw water from the well. They were depended on the generosity of their superiors to pour water into the pitchers. The indignity and humiliation imposed on the ill-fated segments of society are focused through the constant refrain of Bakha: ‘Posh, posh, sweeper coming’. (Anand 2001, 38) Bakha is slapped as he belongs to an inferior caste by a man. Bakha's powers or position in society are directed only by his being a subaltern or Dalit. Concerning this kind of maltreatment, P.K. Rajan in *A Dialogue with Mulk Raj Anand* states about Anand's creation of Bakha as,

“I meant to recreate the lives of the millions of untouchables through one single person. In only one incident. The slap on the face of the hero. Now the slap on the face evoked all the human relations . . . of the sixty-five millions of people whom the hero represents, against the millions of caste Hindus.”³ (Rajan 1986, 102)

In one of the instances, Bakha obtains both abuses and pancakes flung at him by a housewife from the house-top. They are maltreated as sub human species hanging between humans and dogs.

“‘You eater of your masters’, she shouted, ‘may the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence ... You sweepers have lifted your heads to the shy nowadays.’”⁴ (Anand 2001, 63)

Such degradation is common for them as they are outcasts and Arundhati Roy also narrates the helplessness and pitiful conditions of the underprivileged and their treatment as inferior. There was a time when:

“Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a paravan’s footprint...They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.” ⁵ (Roy 2002, 73-74)

Roy in *The God of Small Things* delineates the condition of the underprivileged through Mammachi when she describes how the untouchables are maltreated during her days to Rahel: "Papachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched." ⁶ (Roy 2002, 73)

Velutha, the protagonist and ‘The God’ of small things was brutally and mercilessly punished by the big, the upper class and hypocrite society. Here the author created a social picture of the postcolonial realm where the untouchable still endures a hostile society that inspires them to search for their identity. Velutha, the God of small things was never accepted in society. His goodness and purity only aided to emphasise the tragedy of his violent ending. Ranga Rao very pertinently asserts that,

“Roy’s book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small things: children and youth, women and untouchables.” ⁷ (Rao 1997, 13)

In both fictions, the novelists poignantly depict the conversion of outcasts into Christianity which did not show the fruitful result in changing their life pattern. When the British approached in Malabar, several paravans, pelayas, pulays (among whom Kelan, Velutha’s grandfather was one) converted themselves into Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to rescue from the curse of untouchability. They came to be known as Rice-Christians as they were given some food and money by the British. But in reality, they faced humiliation and caste discrimination. They came to sense discrimination when they, “were made to have separate churches with separate services and separate priests” ⁸ (Roy 2002, 74)

In *Untouchable*, Bakha also experiences the same. The degradation and humiliation inflicted on the unfortunate sections of society are highlighted through the repeated refrain of Bakha 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming'. The upper caste people often derive benefits from their ignorance and exploit the underprivileged. In both fictions, one can easily comprehend the oppression imposed by the upper caste people upon the inferior caste people. They are not permitted to enter or touch things, people, or houses of the superior castes. But it is very satirical that when these superior caste people need untouchables for heavy labour, they ignore the caste barriers and draw out hard work from these deprived sections of society.

Patriarchal societies have always subjugated matriarchal societies and it is noticeable that patriarchal societies endorse the male rather than the female and she remained outside of the hegemonic power structure. Subsequently, women have been deprived of economic, social, and cultural parity the world over. As Simon-De-Beauvoir avows,

“women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own, and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat... they live dispersed among the males, attach through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain main- fathers or husbands- more firmly than they are to other women.”⁹ (Simon 1949, 19)

The God of Small Things deals with the misfortunes of women as a daughter and a wife in a patriarchal society. Women have become the sufferers of gender subjugation. Ammu's mother has no understanding and compassion for her daughter. Being a female, she is deprived of higher education. Pappachi asserted that a college education is: 'an unnecessary expense for a girl'. Mammachi has experienced feebleness as a woman as she was being maltreated by her husband in the past. Despite this, she does not hesitate to penalise Ammu & Velutha and her approach towards Velutha is like an animal. she is staggered at Ammu's being able to love him, “how could she stand the smell? They have a particular smell, these paravans,”¹⁰ (Roy 2002, 257)

Even Ammu experiences ill-treatment from her husband. Ammu thought that she has found her identity after marriage but in a

short time, her dream shattered when her spouse compelled her to go to Mr. Hollick to protect his job. Even then, “he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort.” ¹¹ (Roy 2002, 42)

This society fails to accept man less woman and put up with fatherless children. A divorced daughter from a love marriage has no place in her parent's home but contradictorily her brother, Chacko after his divorce was welcomed as inheritor of the family's wealth. It was also shocking when Chacko flirted with women, he was supported by his mother Mammachi but for Ammu all this was against society and traditions so she was battered and closed in a room. Her brother, Chacko tried to marginalize her but her contravention of the caste, class and religion turned her into a rebellion and transgressor against this social boundary.

Instances of degradation of women can be traced in the novel *Untouchable*. Sohini is disgraced by the washerwoman as she abuses her;

“Think of it! Think of it! Bitch! Prostitute! Wanton! And your mother hardly dead... Ari, you bitch! Do you take me for a buffoon? What are you laughing at, slut? Aren't you ashamed of showing your teeth to me in the presence of men, prostitute?” ¹² (Anand 2001, 17)

Such treatment with the underprivileged was very frequent in the early decades of 20th century India. M. K. Naik notices that the viciousness of untouchability is the outcome of years of dominance of a specific class on religious grounds; “The caste Hindu is armed with the feeling of 6000 years of a social and a class superiority, a feeling which refuses to accept the fact that the Untouchable is a human being, but insists on treating him like a sub-human creature, to be ignored or bullied or exploited as the occasion demands.” ¹³ (Naik 1982, 29)

Temple incident highlights the hypocrisy of Hindu society. Pandit Kalinath, the so called custodian of the temple or religion does not accept Bakha touching the steps of the temple but on the other hand, he desires to seduce beautiful untouchable girl Sohini. He accelerates an alarm off,

“Polluted, Polluted, Polluted! shouted the Brahmin below... get of the steps, scavenger! Of with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony.” ¹⁴ (Anand 2001, 53) In this regard, Ravi

Jauhari and Kiran Kamboj in *A Social Evil in Untouchable* draws attention to the fact that religious bigotry and deception were actual weapons to exploit the Untouchable.

Untouchable and *The God of Small Things* are the saga of outcasts, who were socially and economically marginalised. Both the fictions showed the predicament of Indian women and castaways and their unending brawl for carving their identity in this male subjugating, inhumane and conservative framework. These outcasts face many upheavals with inadequate choices for gratification and happiness.

Mulk Raj Anand became the crusader of the outcasts when the nation required moral service and support to eliminate untouchability and superstition. He stood by the circumstance with his debut fiction *Untouchable* in 1935. It was addressed as a minor classic and he could institute his name as an immortal battler against the atrocious practice of untouchability. Bakha, the protagonist created ripples in the minds of the people. Naik says,

“It is highly significant that Anand’s very first novel, *Untouchable*, is a triumphant assertion of his humanitarianism. To choose an untouchable as hero in the year 1935 was, in a sense, a revolutionary gesture in Indian fiction in general.”¹⁵ (Naik 1973, 29)

Arundhati Roy is deeply associated with India’s social problems. She has portrayed all the complications faced by the common person. She has tried to accentuate the burning problems of society. The fiction is a forceful appeal for the upliftment of the downtrodden, deprived and subalterns. In the words of Rama Kundu,

“Roy tries to sensitize thin society to the cruelty of some of its traditions by artistically challenging certain common age-old complacently held out dehumanizing social taboos. She also shows how the women and untouchables are treated as impersonal and subjugative objects in this social structure; how things are decided for both by the patriarchal ideology of an ancient culture which also cultivates the pervasive snobbery and violence of the ‘Touchables’ towards the ‘Untouchables’.”¹⁶ (Kundu 2007, 13)

CONCLUSION

Anand and Roy depicted their characters with the acquaintance of their understanding and personal experience they encountered in life and

presented India as they beheld before and after the independence era. They disclose social evils in their fictions that arise from the economic condition, gender and class division. The significance of the study exists in the fact that even today the barbarism of the so called Hindu society and problems conversed by Anand and Roy in their fictions are widespread in our complex modern life. While delineating the social realism of our country, the writers anticipate that a lot of sensitive readers of their fictions must take note of their sincere voice and would confederate with their protesting soul as a social activist and insurgent spirit.

As progressive writers, the aim of both the fictionists is to see a new social order devoid of discrimination, corruption, exploitations and inequalities. They picture the pathetic condition of the protagonists and their desolations imposed by the so called superior caste people. They exhibit a complete understanding of the human condition and discrimination of moral values and listen to the deep lament of these human beings who are treated as untouchable sub-human beings. Their fictions create hope of change in the corrupted society for the amelioration of the generations to come.

Even in this Post-colonial world where we revel in democracy with equal rights, they are still the victim of discrimination and discernment. In actuality, outcasts are still struggling to shape their identity and they require the support of intellectuals.

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