



PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN SELECT WORKS OF INDIAN DALIT FICTION

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ABSTRACT

At the very outset it's not the skilled pen that demanded Dalit writing but it's the pain of a suffering heart. As Toni Morrison rightly said it's not the curse to be alienated and oppressed but the force of some 'so called' on innocent people. Whether or not accepted but the cause for the writing of Dalit literature is found in the system of Hindu religion. The four-Varna system which gave birth to untouchability is a terrifying force which divided Indian society into thousands of castes which is irrational and grinds humanity remorselessly under its wheels. This system gave a fourth place of Shudra to adivasis, untouchables, other backward classes and women. The Shudras and those far worse than the Shudras were made to live a life of wretched, beggar like homeless and considered them as ignorant, filthy, polluted, inferior sinner and lowliest of the low. Their lot was worse than that of slaves and that slavery had no parallel. Their freedom of mind was destroyed and they were made to live under the state of mental slavery. This casteism and religious fanaticism have had a very pernicious effect on their minds. Caste- system, untouchability and suppression of women remained the law, culture, religious practice and mentality of Indian religion. No man is basically a dalit or untouchable but this very system deteriorated the life of the downtrodden and made them lead a life of drudgery. The magnitude of deplorable plight of the untouchables was appalling. In short, it is the most artificial social order the world has ever known.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is a new independent stream which has opened a new trend and enriched Marathi literature. It depicts vividly the miserable conditions and traumatic experiences to which the segregated class of the Indian society was subjected to in the Manu and post-Manu

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days in India. This school of writing has been the inevitable outcome of the great awakening that took place in India from Mahatma Phule's days down to Dr. Ambedkar. This awakening gave the Dalits a new consciousness and insight into the oppressive system in which they were made to live. This awakening was based on the change and Dalit literature also talks of the change and demands change for the better in the lives of the oppressed masses of Indian society. Therefore Dalit literature has been the most powerful rebellious expression of the twentieth century. It is also a reaction to the outcast entity thrust upon the Dalits, untouchables, women, nomads, etc.

Although Dalit literature talks of the misery of the caste and class systems, it ultimately aims at a casteless and classless social structure. It firmly believes that man becomes great only if he adheres to the values of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice and values propagated and advocated by Gautam Buddha like Pradnya (Prudence), Sheel (Character) and Karuna (Compassion). Establishment of a new social order on the principles of these values 'is the aim of Dalit literature through which the deplorable plight of the Dalits can be brought to an end. Therefore, Dalit literature is not only a literary movement but also a kind of social reformative movement which has a capacity to attract the attention of research scholars all over the world. In short, Dalit literature is marked with the features of revolt and misery since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom, equality and fraternity of social, economic, cultural and political levels. It is a voice and identity of a perennially deprived and oppressed sections of the Indian social hierarchy. It is essentially a literature of protest against fossilized caste-system.

The level to which Indian women were oppressed in the Indian social system can be seen in *Manusmriti*. Manu gives women a status almost of slaves; she is given a completely inferior place on the ladder of social status. According to Manu, women are physically and intellectually inferior to males; they are weak, sentimental and dependent. Hence, they can never rule. On the contrary, they will always remain a ruled class and they should always obey the males as slaves obey their masters. He further says that women are frail and of weak character. Manu seems to be thinking that they are a kind of consumable commodity. The paternal family system gave further validity to the slavery of women. Therefore, *Manusmriti* could be taken as a manifesto of women's slavery. Surprisingly, some of the western philosophers also seem to be toeing Manu's line as far as women's place in society is concerned. Thinkers like Aristotle, in his book *Politics* says that a male is naturally superior to a female and a female is naturally inferior to men. That is why a male dominates a female and she accepts his domination. Further, he defines a woman as an 'impotent male'. Philosophers like Rousseau, Kant, Hegel also seem to be thinking along the lines of Aristotle about the reasoning power of women.

**Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*:**

Since independence we have come a long way but the narrow walls of casteism and racial discrimination still divides us which is responsible for the marginalization of half of the population of society commonly known as 'Dalit' whose identity in society is determined by their origin. They feel powerless to stand against the injustice done to them. So they have chosen literature as a medium to delineate harsh realities of their life. By unlocking their miseries they wish to get a proper and dignified place in society. Dalit literature is a powerful protest against the caste and class discrimination of our society as it describes the sufferings and humiliations which a downtrodden encounter throughout his life. Arjun Dangle gives a horrifying picture of Dalit's wretched life in poem entitled 'Chhavni Hilti Hai' (The Cantonment Begun to Shake)

*We fought with crows
Never even giving them the snot from our noses
As we dragged out the upper lane's dead cattle
skinned it nearby
And shared the neat among themselves
They use to love us then.
We warred with jackals-dogs-vulture-kites
Because we ate their share.'*

Efforts have been done by various writers to bring oppressed people in the mainstream of society and Mulk Raj Anand is a prominent writer who raised his voice for the rights of underdogs of society because he was a firm believer in art for life sake. He was very sympathetic for Dalit as himself called them 'flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood'. Through his writings he tries to stand against the inhuman practice of caste and class differences created by the upper class Hindus/ Mulk Raj Anand's one of the best creation *Untouchable* is a pathetic and heart-rending cry of author against the callousness and hypocrisy of upper class. Mulk Raj Anand in his novel *Untouchable* accounts the miseries, sufferings, and injustice done to Dalit. *Untouchable* not only directs the attention of readers towards the sufferings and miserable plights of subaltern of society but also condemns the inhuman attitude of Hindus who still believes in 'pollution by touch'. Anand reveals out the pathetic and wretched living condition of Dalit through the protagonist Bakha who desires but can't take a stand against the age old injustice and exploitation of dominant caste. Bakha a young sweeper a very dextrous workman bit superior to his job, not the kind of man who ought to be doing this (cleaning toilets).



In *Untouchable* Anand not only brings out the harsh realities and humiliations which a downtrodden encounters throughout his life of being born in a Dalit family rather his main motive is to make Dalit community aware about their rights and also instigate them to protest against the inhuman practice of untouchability. Through the character of Bakha Anand tries to show the determination and self-confidence which separates him from his others fellow mates. Though he could not able to fight against the class discrimination but at least he tries to revolt which shows that if we are determine to change our circumstances then nobody can stop us. This is a kind of narrative saga that portrays the inhuman physical and mental tortures inflicted on Dalits by the upper class and by un-ravelling horrifying truth about shallow and hypocrite behaviour of Brahmins it calls for a 'shame' to them and expresses the urgency for a social change, which is fortunately taking place at a very fast pace. Anand realistically delineates pre-independence problem of untouchability to capture the attention of upper caste for social change; sincere efforts of social activist and literary persons have brought significant change in their life. Now they have reservation in both education and government jobs which is helping them to come out of their miserable plights but still much s left to do, to give them a better society.

For example, Bakha's love for Sohini is unmistakably seen in terms of colonization and appropriation. His love for her is presented in images which verge on incest and signalize his repressed sexual desire for her: He could not think of her brutalized by anyone, even by a husband married to her according to the rites of religion. He looked at her and somehow a picture of her future life seemed to come before him. She had a husband-a man who had her, possessed her. He loathed the ghost of her would be husband that he conjured up. He could see the stranger holding her full breasts and she responding with a modest acquiescence. He hated the thought of that man touching her. He felt he would be losing something. (Untouchable, 55)

The interrogation of Sohini by Bakha after her molestation by Pundit Kali Nath and his reaction to it, further point to the same muffled sexual drive in Bakha's heart for Sohini. He is tormented by the doubt that the Pundit might have violated her and so 'stung to the quick' he questions her: "Tell me, tell me, that he didn't do anything to you!" (Untouchable,54). Not satisfied with her answer, he again questions her: "Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if ..." (Untouchable,54). Bakha's sudden violent reaction showcases as much the masculine connection in his mind between 'chastity' and 'honour' as his subterranean sexual leanings for Sohini. His reflections on the helplessness and vulnerability of women born in low castes aptly present the connection between powerlessness and femininity wherein women become a treasure to be safeguarded against all odds and thus a burden to the male members of the family. Added to it, a beautiful woman in a low caste ever remains in danger of sexual exploitation and thus becomes a curse for her family, demanding careful watch and constant



vigil. Any attempt on her virginity becomes a cause of concern as she is seen as an embodiment of the 'prestige' of the family. Not only the act, but even the attempt is supposed to stain the honour of the woman irrevocably, making her a victim of jeers and humiliations as 'polluted woman' while bestowing no such stain on the perpetrator, "How can she show her face to the world after this? But why didn't she let me go and kill that man? Why was she born a girl in our house to bring disgrace upon us? So beautiful and so accursed! I wish she had been the ugliest woman in 'the world! Then no one would have teased her". (Untouchable,56-57)

Mulk Raj Anand here, through Bakha, seems to be castigating the notion of viewing women only in terms of their body and a tool for sexual gratification, thus making the beauty of a woman her greatest enemy and a burden on the family. Sohini has many admirable qualities. She is a modest girl who waits patiently for her turn at the well. She remains calm even when Gulabo, the washerwoman upbraids her for no reason. Despite all provocations from her, she does not lose her composure. Her inertness and indifference to humiliations cast on her by Gulabo become her defining trait during the ordeal at the well. Though illiterate, like Bakha, she possesses a sensitive and reflective soul, "Sohini was a bit frightened at first and grew pale, but she kept intensely still and avoiding the shock, subsided into a listless apathy. As she looked away, however, and cast her eyes up to the blue heavens overhead, she felt a sort of dreariness, a pain, which, though she accepted it resignedly, brought a hurtfulness with it". (Untouchable,17-18) Sohini is not able to grasp the evil intentions of Pundit Kali Nath who invites her to sweep the courtyard of his house in temple and goes there unsuspecting. Though timid, she successfully resists the lurid gestures of the Pundit and exposes his designs before Bakha. When Bakha wants to go and kill Pundit Kali Nath, she begs him not to go as she is well aware of the power of privileged upper caste Brahmins. Sohini, thus, is portrayed as a modest, sensitive dalit girl, an object of lust for unprincipled upper castes who feel no prick of conscience in making sexual advances to an untouchable girl while raising the phantom of untouchability all the time. Though sensitively drawn, her character lacks the fire and protest of dalitism which is supposed to be hallmark of any real dalit individual by dalit writers.

Another significant dalit female character in the novel with considerable idolizing traces is Bakha's mother. She, for Bakha, represents everything that was good and is gone. Whenever he is tired and does not get his due, he remembers her. The mother of Bakha is seen through the fond eyes of a child for whom his mother represented as escape from the harsh realities of life, "He often thought of his mother, the small, dark figure, swathed in a tunic, a pair of baggy trousers and an apron, crouching as she went about cooking and cleaning the home, a bit too old fashioned for his then already growing modern tastes, Indian to the core and sometimes uncomfortably so (as she did not like his affecting European clothes), but so



loving, so good, and withal generous, giving, always giving, buying him things, kindness personified". (Untouchable, 6) The animosity and hierarchical power equation between different untouchable sub-castes is hinted through conflict between female characters in the novel. Gulabo, who belongs to washer caste, considers herself superior to other untouchable castes. Her jealousy for Sohini and Bakha can be understood, to some extent, due to the hierarchy of power and prestige between different castes. In her treatment of sweeper caste, she reveals the same haughtiness and contempt as is a characteristic of upper castes towards dalits. Her jealousy for the beauty of Sohini finds expression in the caste specific degrading invectives which she frequently showers over her at the slightest pretext. There is not much difference between the language used by Gulabo for Sohini and an upper caste women for all dalits: "This inauspicious sweeper woman has started my auspicious day so badly" (Untouchable,18).

Another group of female characters in the novel is that of upper caste women which flings abuses on the untouchables with or without provocation. While in upper caste males we have some exceptions, for instance in the character of Havildar Charat Singh, who reveals his humane side in his sympathetic treatment of Bakha, there is no such woman in the novel belonging to upper castes who is beyond caste observances. Rather, they seem to be more orthodox in their treatment of untouchables as compared to their male counterparts. When Bakha goes to sweep the lanes in lieu of his father and falls asleep on the steps of a house, he is abused mercilessly by the mistress of the house. Later, the same woman throws a piece of bread to him from the top of the house and is perturbed at not receiving the due acknowledgment. Her supplication before the sadhu and her abuses to Bakha become symptomatic of a consciousness which has internalized the caste and religious prejudices in toto. In the same way in Babu's wife, whose son gets hurt during Hockey match, we have another instance of an upper caste woman for whom untouchables are nothing less than criminals ever ready to cause injuries to her children. For her the pollution of her child by the touch of a sweeper is more harrowing than the injury of the child. The irrational nature of her accusations makes Bakha reflect, "Why should the boy's mother abuse him when he had tried to be kind? She hadn't even let him tell her how it all happened. Of course, I polluted the child. I couldn't help doing so. I knew my touch would pollute. But it was impossible not to pick him up. He was dazed, the poor little thing. And she abused me." (Untouchable,107)

Hence it would not be an exaggeration to deduce that dalit women writers' presentation of the pathos of being born a woman in a patriarchal society is amply illustrated in the autobiographies and novels they have written. It is revealed in their taking up of women related issues as the prime concerns of their autobiographies and novels. These issues are an integral part of their existence as women and as dalit. Their dalitism defines their feminism and their feminism informs their dalitism.



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