

Caste Discrimination and Gender Inequality in Anand's *Untouchable* and Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract—India is a multicultural and multilingual country where, on the one hand, we can find people from different religions, castes, communities and sects living together but, on the other hand, we do not have the scarcity of those who always look at others with discriminatory demeanors. Casteism and gender inequality are the main tools of discrimination in India. It has created a void between the have and have not or the people governing and the people governed. Many a souls are being trampled each and everyday in India on the basis of such man made divisions. It is in this context I have tried to throw light caste discrimination and gender inequality in Mulkh Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Karukku* respectively. In the novel *Untouchable*, Anand has hit hard on the Caste-Hindu for their discriminatory treatments of lower-caste people in India. Through Bakha he has portrayed all the insults and shames of lower- caste people who are always treated as 'others', worse than animals. They are always kept at the margin in social, political and economical matters. Their only duty is to clean the shit of Caste-Hindus, and to be submissive and accept whatever have in their fate no matter how powerful and intellectual they are. Similarly, even after conversion to Christianity Bama did not get peace of mind. In *Karukku* there we have so many instances of gender discrimination where dalit women are victimized to three-fold discrimination on the basis of gender, caste and poverty. Bama , being a dalit and woman, has witnessed and experienced number of such scenes where she has been abused, insulted and exploited for being poor, woman, and dalit.

Keywords: Dalit, Caste, gender, poverty, discrimination.

Caste as a structure is an age-old mechanism of hierarchy based on social constructs, economic manipulation, political power and cultural supremacy of a particular class of people, who are believed to be higher in the ladder than others. In every case there is a set of people who are higher and the other ones. Since caste still operates as a definite pre-condition for marriages, social relations and access to employment, millions of Dalit and other low-caste people remain behind in education, employment and access to wealth. Although untouchability and casteism is banned in India, discrimination is widely practiced and statistics draw the logical conclusion that there is a broad correlation between one's economic state and one's position within the caste hierarchy. Dalits continue to face the wrath of the caste lords and are denied of human dignity and rights, including a just share in the resources like

land, water, forests, minerals, mines and aquatic resources. The indigenous people continue to fight for their identity and dignity. Their right to a decent and dignified life is under severe threat. There are many aspects of human rights violation being talked around these days such as atrocities, discrimination, untouchability practices.

Dalit means broken, oppressed, untouchable, downtrodden, and exploited. The caste system in India has isolated innumerable Dalits, from mainstream of life. The caste system in India is built on the standard of purity and impurity. Purity means rich and white, impurity means poor and dark. Being socially segregated for centuries, they are obliged to live a helpless life without menial facilities. According to a survey every sixth person in the world is an Indian, every sixth Indian is a Dalit. In spite of the guarantee of civil rights and the special law enacted to prevent atrocities against them, the Dalits continue to be the victims of social discrimination and oppression across the country. In this context we can guess the miserable condition of Dalit, men and women. Dalits, in liberated India are still barred to use the free amenities; such as water taps, schools, temples, restaurants, hotels etc. Dalit women as well as Dalit men have been beaten by their upper caste counterparts while filling water from public taps. Dalit women are being inflicted much more insult and shame as compared to their male counterparts because they have to bear both social humiliation as well as the male dominance in the family.

This caste system has been criticized not only by Indians, especially Dalit writers but also by some western social activists and writers has hammered hard on this Caste-Hindu for their discriminatory and step-motherly treatments of their own brothers.

“Do you begin to see, then what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more

merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress toward more pain.”

By George Orwell, 1984

Caste Discrimination and gender inequality are like termite which can never let a nation, a society or a community to grow into its fullest. In other words, prosperity happiness cannot be attained where people treat each other on the bases of gender, religion, caste. Where certain people try to get hold of anything and everything and thus deprive the rest of the masses even of their basic commodities like food, shelter, water etc. That is what prompted Mulkh Raj Anand to write *Untouchable*. One of the prime concerns of the novelist is to highlight the cause of marginalized. He is not a writer of imagination but of reality, which he had found and experience in India. He has seen India dividing into two conflicting forces- the people governing or caste Hindus and the people governed or marginalized. He wished to write about the folk whom he had known from very close. As he himself observes –

“ All the heroes as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels... were dear to me because they were the reflection of the real people. I had known during my childhood and youth... when I began to interpret their lives in my writings. They were not phantoms. They were the flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood...”

(Wikipedia)

Anand exposed the hypocrisy, snobbery, and ostentation of the aristocratic people who sometime stoop very low to achieve their ends. Anand's novel expresses his great advocacy of the marginalized and defenseless against their life-long humiliation, persecution and oppression, not in the form of propaganda, but by simply giving his own account of life. Prof. G.S Balram has observed:

“ Anand deserves credit even for his thematic choice for his very first novel- a choice which is in perfect consonance with his humanistic concern for man as man, irrespective of his social states.”

In other words Anand has realized the pangs of the people who are always oppressed like slaves or even worse than slaves. As E.M Foster holds the views about sweepers in the preface to *untouchable*:

“The sweepers are worse off than a slave for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even becomes free, but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he can't escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself he pollutes other when he touches them...”

(p.10 preface to *untouchable*)

Bakha, protagonist, in *Untouchable* is not an individual but a type who represents the miseries and humiliations of Dalit , especially the sweeper community. The novelist

narrates the incidents occurred in the life of Bakha, which spans over a single day but in reality, barring few moments of happiness, everyday of Bakha's life is full of inflictions and humiliations where he has to bear the burden of caste discrimination and poverty. It makes him cry when he felt quite helpless under the weight of so called discrimination and burst into anger and fury.

““ Why was I so humble? I could have struck him! And to think that I was so eager to come to the town this morning why didn't I shout to warn the people of my approach?...All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused?... They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too...”

(p.58)

Similarly, Bama wrote *Karukku* to heal her wounded self right from her childhood. She writes in the novel,

“...I left behind my life of discrimination and... I wrote this book *Karukku*. That book written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive”

(p.ix)

Being a dalit, she has witnessed Caste discrimination at very early, at the time when she was in third standard. She saw an elderly man carries a package without touching it.

“... He came along holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood ther thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the pakage undone, and Vadai fall out? The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the Vadai.”

(p.14)

If we talk about gender inequality, it can be seen on rampant scale in the novel. Women are forced to accept passively whatever their male counterparts think, do and assign them. Bama used to work in the farm during her school days. She revealed about her experience as a farm worker where women were never paid as the men were.

“But of course, they never received payment that was appropriate to their labour. And another thing. Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why?”

(p.54)

Thus, poverty and gender play an important role in the exploitation and suppression of dalit women.

Dalits were enslaved and abused not only by Caste-Hindu but within the four walls of their domestic circle they cannot escape the burnt of being poor and dalit. They are often abused by their family members as we see in the very opening of the novel Bakha receives many derogatory epithets by his father, Lakha:

“son of a pig”(p.15), “you illegally begotton”, “scoundrel of a sweeper son”(p.17) etc.

He is marginalized in the marginalized group. He is a Bhangi who cleans the toilets and is also referred as a sweeper boy in the novel. Therefore, he is discarded even by the other lower caste Hindus such as scavengers and washerman. As Gulabo, a washer-women, rebukes and abuses her son Ramcharan when she found him in the company of Bakha, a sweeper, during the marriage of her daughter.

“Oh illegally begotten.”

(p.102)

“Are you running away to play with that dirty sweeper and leather worker on the very day of your sister's marriage...”

(p. 109)

As Bakha used to clean the shit of Caste-Hindu Bama did the same during her school days. Like Bakha, Bama is also a type not an individual. She represents her whole community where women are forced to live under male dominance. They are used as their personal property. They have always been relational to their male counterparts. They have not identified as human beings with flesh and blood. In order to get rid off caste discrimination Bama converted into Christianity. But even at convent She was considered a low-caste dalit.

“ In that school, attended by pupils from very wealthy households, people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises...cleaning out the lavatories...they spoke very insulting about low-caste people. They spoke as if they didn't consider low-caste people as human beings...”

(p.25)

Bakha, being a sweeper boy, is supposed to be submissive and passive. He has always to depend on Caste-Hindu for one thing or the other. He cannot live an independent life. Like so many other outcaste or dalits, Bakha have to feed on the leftover of others. Even after living the life of slavery and suppression Dalits are being abused, beaten and even murdered all over India. Bakha seems to be helpless when he is abused by caste-Hindu. His only crime was that he has touched, unmindfully, an upper-caste person. Bakha seems to be confused and felt he would collapse, as he saw big crowd surrounding him. Now, first time, he finds himself enslaved not by physical barrier but mental barrier,

“His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, far away from the moment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier because on push from his lefty shoulder would have been enough to unbalance the skelton-like bodies of the onlookers but a mental one.”

(p.54)

Similar kind of innumerable incidents also happened in Bama's life. Where ever she goes , she always found herself caught in dichotomy of caste and gender inequality. She narrates an incident of her college days. When a lecturer announced,

“Will Harijan students please stand; the government has arranged that scheduled caste students get special tuition in the evening”

(p.22)

At the very moment when the narrator and some other students stood up,

“Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt...”

(p.22)

Students belonging to upper-caste look at these dalits students with contempt and hatred.

During the course of the novel, Bakha could not be able to intrude into the web of caste system which almost seemed to be unbreakable to him. His marginalization made him conscious at each and every point which always forced him to return into his own shell whenever he thinks of protesting against Caste-Hindu. His fluttering soul is portrayed by the narrator;

“He could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody, especially by a low caste man. So in the highest moment of his strength, the slave in him asserted itself, and he tapsed back, wild with torture, biting his lips, ruminating his grievances.”

(p. 73)

Dalits thought that Christianity would treat them with respect and honour. So, many dalits converted into Christianity but quite surprisingly they found discrimination and exploitation in the church also. The church labeled Bama as Dalit Christian .But being a bold lady she never gave up her courage and strength and always tried to climb up the social ladder. She raised her voice against gender and caste discrimination. While doing so she always followed her brother's advice, who opines that

“...we are stripped off all that. But if we study and make progress...If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you...”

(p.17)

In nutshell, if we talk about reform so far as in Bama's case it becomes clear that education is the only weapon which can liberate Dalit, especially women, from age-old slavery and discrimination. But to get their lost rights Dalit women have to show unity and courage. As she herself retorts'

“we must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change.”

(p.28”

On the other hand, Anand’s endeavors to peep into the lives of Dalits deserve appreciation and admiration but he could not provide a clear cut solution to their slavery and oppression from the time immemorial. In the end Bakha is just confused to follow the paths suggested by the novelist. In the end the novelist suggests him three alternatives—a missionary tries to persuade him to embrace Christianity ; he listened to Gandhji who advocate social reform; and he also hears of mechanical sanitation, as the only answer possible. But Bakha remained as much bewildered as he was at the very outset because he was unfamiliar with all these terms such as missionary, sanitation and social reform.

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