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Humiliation, Humanity, Caste and Religion: A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract:

Human plight might be eternal everywhere in this world. We may see the recognizable discrimination in the life of Jews (racial), Africans (slavery), and Indians (caste). The reason may be unlike for human trouble, but the difficulties are as same as every human being irrespective of cast, color and creed. For example, if we read Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) the protagonist Bakha might resemble the symbol for humiliation.

The authors' portrayal of protagonist may vary from nation to nation and novel to novel but the degradation is as usual universally. This paper attempts to read Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and his representation of repeated humiliations of the protagonist Bakha and his sister Sohini, on the other hand showing the great lengths of humanity by the other Caste. It also explores from the perspective of *outcaste* and *other caste* along with Brahmanical hegemonic construction of Hinduism, whereas other religions scattering love, humanity and equality. It also seeks to represent the thoughts of Gandhi and Ambedkar with special reference to *caste* and *religion* in India. This paper also examines the concept of Caste from the various perspectives.

Keywords: Humiliation, Humanity, Cast and Religion.

Construction of Caste in India

There are several unsolved problems in India. Among, caste is one of the major burning issues which India is facing today. India is one of the best electoral stages for caste and religious politics. That is why, Caste is unable to eradicate from the lives of Indians. So, it became part of their day to day life and their occupations have gone to others hand but their caste is still alive with them. It established very strong roots in the Indian society.

There are different opinions about Indian caste system. Kristopher .K.W. states in his *Cast(e)ing Narrative* "Caste originates from the Brahmanical Varna system that divides people into a graded hierarchy of inequality on the basis of birth (Varna in Sanskrit means 'color'). The Varna system incorporated four varnas: the Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra, said to have emerged from the head, arms, thighs and feet of purusa (the primordial man or God), respectively. Textually there are only four varnas (chaturvarna), but actuality

there are thousands of castes. The Dalits are not a part of the Varna system because they are not regarded as humans in the first place (87).

Kristopher's comment is thought provoking, and essential to examine in the perspectives of Indian Caste System. A general analysis can give a glance on the four varnas and it splits into many other sub-castes. There are many castes and tribal communities did not appear in the humanmilieu of Indian history, culture and heritage, no one account their presence in the Indian society and no one brought them into the lime light. This analysis may justify Prof. Kristopher's comment 'they are not regarded as humans' in the first place.

Similarly, Madhava Rao in his *Joshua's Gabbilam (Bat)*, he tries to illustrate Brahmanical hegemonic construction of Manusmrithi and its chaturvarna. According to him:

The caste system untouchability, social and religious discriminations are dealt at length in Manusmriti. It divided the society into four different caste groups – Brahmins, Kshathriyas, Vysyas and Sudras. Of the four castes originally contemplated in Manusmrithi, the Sudras were later further subdivided into untouchable and touchable. Brahmins, the priestly group, were assigned to study and preach Vedas and manage and administer religion. Kshathriyas, the warrior group, are to rule the state, protect people, wage wars, etc... Vysyas are to do farming and trading, etc... Sudras have only one duty and that is to serve Brahmins, Kshathriyas and Vysyas. The caste groups are supposed to be so divided because of their origin. Brahmins are supposed to be born from the face, Kshathriyas from the shoulders, Vysyas from the thighs and "lowly" the Sudras from the feet of the Creator, Lord Brahman (VI).

In fact, Gail Omvedt says a different opinion about Indian Caste system by understanding Nehru's secularism in his *Understanding Caste*. He says:

Thus caste was a group system based on services and functions. It was meant to be an all-inclusive order without any common dogma and allowing the fullest latitude to each group... the organization of society being, generally speaking, competitive and no acquisitive, these divisions into caste did not make as much difference as they might otherwise have done. The Brahmin at the top, proud of his intellect and learning and respected by others, seldom had much in the way of worldly possessions (7).

Gurram Joshua's *Gabbilam* is a well known Telugu poem was translated by Kaki Madhava Rao in 1969 in that Joshua says:

The untouchable
This unwanted child
Of the great mother
Bharat that is India (1)

The above poem invokes Indian constitution's definition 'India that is Bharath'. Who is the untouchable and unwanted child also belongs to this nation, and also son of the great

mother Bharat. In the poem, the protagonist Gabbilam (Bat) is a messenger to the God, the poet who personifies himself as Gabbilam (Bat) to convey the plight of an untouchable to lord Shiva. Karunaker in his *Subversion and Resistance in the English Incarnation of Gurram Joshua's Gabbilam*: He says:

Gabbilam is the only bird in the entire avian family which hangs upside down. It looks as if it is meditating in front of God Shiva. The poet says, because of its unique character, it will bring dignity to untouchables. "Meditating upside down through the day to attain a sagely status (7).

Karunaker states that "Joshua was critical of the 'Varna System'. Many castes emerged because of Varna System. The Panchama Caste is at the lowest rung in the stratified caste system and is the worst victim of all kinds of discrimination by other castes" (71). Joshua, like any child of his age is excited at the prospect of going to the play. Oblivious of the fact that he is an untouchable, he heads for the street stage. He is promptly and contemptuously thrown out by the ticket vendor. Joshua becomes conscious of his station in life although he is too young to realize why it should be that way.

The injury and insult is reflecting a deep and cruel social malady. Those were the dark days when the untouchables were banished to live on the outskirts of the village, not allowed to draw water from the village wells, lakes and not permitted into hotels and public places. Such social ostracism, combined with economic exploitation, condemned the untouchables to a weak and dispirited life, sapping them of all aspiration and enterprise. To exhort them to question and challenge the people who were driving them to deprivation. He wanted them to realize that their plight is not an act of God, but the consequence of the selfish design of fellow human beings who stand to gain by such exploitation. Joshua modelled *Gabbilam* on the lines of Kalidasa's *Meghadutam*, which translates into English as Cloud Messenger. Joshua says:

When you are hanging upside down in the temple
Quite close you will be to the Siva's ear

Narrate the story of my suffering to god

Making sure that no priest is around (9).

The protagonist Gabbilam has the individual soul. God Siva has the universal soul. The universal soul has to hear the entreaty of the individual soul. But the priest has become an impregnable barrier and selects Gabbilam to by pass this barrier and convey his message to God. Joshua's choice of a Bat has great significance. The Bat dark and ugly bird, is considered a bad omen and can therefore, relate to the plight of the untouchable.

Dr. Ambedkar became a powerful rallying point for the untouchable and he demanded separate electorates, freedom and protection for his caste men as a greater priority than political independence from the British. Gandhi and congress party saw the writing on the wall. Gandhi stated a movement for abolition of untouchability. For *Joshua*

The scourge of untouchability
Can denigrate the country in the comity of nations
Tears of untouchables will burst like thunderbolt
And doom the nation to destruction. (43)

This realization spurred Gandhi to toil for emancipation of untouchables. Kristopher states that:

A weekly started by Gandhi in 1933. It is important to note that the word Harijan was used patronizingly by Gandhi to refer to the 'untouchables' which means 'the people of God'. The term Harijan was used by Narsinh Mehta, a poet saint and reformer of Gujarat (seventeenth century). The term was also used for the children of the devdasis (temple prostitutes), who were also referred to as the children of the gods (harijans). Dalits have rejected Gandhi's term. (68)

In a way, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* provides us a heart rending painful experience when we read the protagonist Bakha's one day life in the town of Bulashah. He portrays Bakha's character with great lengths of repeated humiliations thorough out the novel. Bakha's characterization may resemble the life of untouchables in the Indian sub-continent. The book was inspired by his aunt's experience when she had a meal with Muslim person and was treated as an Outcaste by his family. Here the protagonist Bakha, a young sweeper, who is untouchable due to his work cleaning latrines in an Indian township called Bulashah and he lives in the outcaste colony.

Humiliation

In the novel, Anand used derogative language to describe protagonist's one day experience and repeated humiliations. On the other hand he witnesses the great lengths humanity by other and upper caste people. Bakha's day starts with his father's abusive calls. For example "You lover of your mother...Get up, ohe you Bakhya, you son of a pig...Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten," came his father's shout again and again early in the morning (2-6). That is the subsequent early morning calls of his father. At work, Havildar Sharath Sing shouts, "Oh Bakhya! Oh, Bakhya! Oh, you scoundrel of a sweeper's son! Come and clear a latrine for me ... Why aren't the latrines clean, you rogue of a Bakha! ...Do you know you are responsible for my piles" (7). "There is not a latrine clean. You must work for the pay you receive," said Ramanand (a money lender) (11).

When Bakha wanted to buy Cigarettes, he faced the shopkeeper with great humility. Bakha:

Joined his hands begged to know where he could put a coin to pay for a packet of Red-Lamp. The shopkeeper pointed to a spot on the board near to him. Bakha put his Anna there. The betel-leaf seller dashed some water over it from the jug with which he sprinkled the betel leaves now and again. Having thus purified it he picked up the

nickel piece and threw it into the counter. Then he flung a pocket of Red-Lamp at Bakha. (33-34)

In the same way when he wanted to buy Jalebis the shopkeeper threw at him like a cricket ball, he has to catch the Jalebis. Anand describes it “as abutcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the counter of his shop” (33-34).

When Bakha touched a Hindu unconsciously, he was constantly received abuses by the upper Castes. The upper Caste Hindu says:

You, low cast vermin! ... Why don't you call, you swine, and announce his approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take bath to purify myself...you swine, you dog...Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me! ...The man who did not satisfy dumb humility of Bakha. He says, “Dirty dog! Son of bitch! The offspring of a pig! (38)

Another rich Hindu merchant trembles his lips which hissed like a snake and says, “This dirty dog bumped right into me! So unmindfully do these sons of bitches walk in the streets” (39). Don't know what the word is coming to! These swine are getting more and more uppish! Said a little old man” (38-39). The defiled person says, “He walked like a Lat Sahib, like a Laften Gorner! Then a child says, “Ohe, you son of a dog! Now tell us how you feel. You, who used to beat us” (40)! Bakha protested against this complaint. He asked forgiveness for touching the man. The crowd looked at him without any strain or pity.

Bakha asked himself why was all this? And he says with the tonga-wallah:

The cruel crowd! All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That's why they didn't touch us, the high castes (42-43).

Bakha saw a well dressed wrinkled old Hindu, wearing, like a rich man, advance to the place where the bull was enjoying its siesta and touched the animal with his forefingers. That was the Hindu custom. Bakha knew. “What the meaning of it was, he didn't know...How queer, the Hindus don't feed their cow although they call the cow “mother” ... “they are kind to the cows” but not to the fellow humans (45).

The call of sadhu who had come for alms awakened Bakha. The women came to their rooftops. The lady at whose door-step Bakha was resting. When the lady saw Bakha, she abuses to say:

You eater of your masters, she shouted, may the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you perish and die! You have defiled my house! Go! Get up, get up! You eater of your masters! Why didn't you shout if you wanted food? Is this

of your father's house that you come and rest here? Then he says, "Forgive me, mother. But she says, "You eater of yours masters! Why did you sit down on my doorstep, If you had to sit down at all? You have defiled my religion! You should have sat there in the gully! Now I will have to sprinkle holy water all over the house! You spoiler of my salt! Oh how terrible! You sweepers have lifted your heads to the sky, nowadays! (63)

While the women offering alms to sadhu, she says, "Please accept these, the house is all right; he didn't really pollute it...may you die, the women cursed Bakha, thinking she had acquired enough merit by being good to the holy man and wouldn't lose much of it by being unkind to the sweeper" (64).

When the little son of the Babu received a wound and fell unconscious. Bakha picked him up in his arms and took him to the hall of his house. She shouts at him like anything. She says: Oh, you eater of your masters! What have you done? You have killed my son! She wailed, flinging her hands across her breasts and turning blue and red with fear. Give him to me! Give me my child! You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son! ...Get away, get away, you eater of yours masters! (106)

Bakha felt dejected and thinking, "Then 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...I do nothing else but pollute people" (107). This is the way they call and humiliate Bakha repeatedly throughout the novel.

Sohini is an important female figure in the novel. She is the sister of Bakha. She suffers from humiliation like her brother. Gulabo who finds a potent rival in Sohini's beauty is bent upon quarreling with her. When Sohini comes to the well for water, Gulabo starts to abuses:

Go back home...There is no one to give you water here!... This sweeper girl goes about without an apron over her head all day in town and in the cantonment...Think of it! Think of it! You bitch! You prostitute! Wanton! And your mother hardly dead...the washerwoman exploded. (16-17)

But Sohini smiled evasively and keep mum. She has patience, courage, fortitude and modesty. She does not yield to the desires of Pt. Kali Nath. But Bakha's eyes flared wild and red, and his teeth ground between them the challenge: I could show you what that Brahmin dog has done." When, Bakha asks Sohini, "Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if...he shouted. He-e-e just teased me, she at last yielded. And then when I was bending down to work, he came and held me by my breasts. The son of a pig! ...I will go and kill him" but Sohini appeased him. "No, no. comes back. Let's go away" (54-55). Bakha had a thought to retaliate but she does not retaliate for her humiliation.

Humanity

Throughout the novel, Anand is not only highlight the condition of inhumanity faced by them in the society, but also spread humanity with rest of the characters within in the society. Anand portrays Sohini's character as a symbol of Indian female figure. Sohini treats her family like a mother. When Bakha was tired, "She had sensed with her deep woman's instinct the feeling in her brother's soul...She had felt like a mother as she issued from her home to fetch water, a mother going out to fetch food or drink for her loved once at home" (15).

When Bakha wanted to enjoy a cigarette but he had no match box. He saw a Muhammadan who was puffing at his hubble-bubble at his Barber's stalls and asked his permission "Mianji, will you oblige me with a piece of coal from your clay fire-pot ... He asked Bakha, "Bend down to it and light your cigarette, if that is what you want to do with a piece of coal" (34). Bakha felt very happy because he did not take such liberties with anybody.

When Bakha touched a Hindu in the market, he stood amazed, and embarrassed. "He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralyzed. Only fear gripped his soul" (38). "Leave him, never mind, let him go, come along tie your turban," (42). A tonga-wallah came up and gave a warning to the crowd to disperse. "Who being a Muhammadan and thus also an untouchable from the orthodox Hindu point of view, shared the outcaste's resentment to a certain degree" (42).

Bakha is an excellent specimen of humanity. He could not tolerate the idea of any assault on his sister Sohini. He had a mind to retaliate but he could not revolt. He felt sorry for his sister and say, "I could have sacrificed myself for Sohini ...With a sudden burst of tenderness and humility he gripped her arm close and dragged her along, writhing the conflicts in his soul, trembling with despair" (56-57).

In the novel, the call of a sadhu who had come for alms awakened Bakha. After listening to sadhu's call two women came to their rooftops. The lady at whose door-step Bakha was resting abused him. The other women "The first she put into the holy man's bag, the second handover to Bakha, adding kindly: My child, you shouldn't sit on people's door steps like this" (63).

When Lakha noticed Bakha's lost looks and tense appearance. He asked him what the matter was. Bakha wanted to suppress the secret but "he was touched by the strange sympathy evinced by his father" (70). It provokes him to narrate the pollution episode and molestation of Sohini by Pt. Kali Nath. "My son, said Lakha, with a forced mixture of anger and kindness, didn't you give a warning of his approach? ...Why weren't you more careful, my boy? (70) Lakha was touched but he was too full of servile humility to entertain the prospect of retaliation against the high caste men. According to Lakha Hakim Bhagvan Das was essentially a good man.

Charat Singh a Havildar and famous hockey player, he promised to Bakha to give him a hockey stick in the afternoon. Bakha's soul became full of love, admiration and worship for his hockey hero who was a hero as a man also as he was free from caste prejudices. For this man, he said to himself, "I wouldn't mind being a sweeper all my life. I would do anything for him" (96). Bakha's whole body and mind were tense with admiration and attitude to his benefactor.

Colonel Hutchinson was a chief of the local Salvation Army. ("Tum udas (you are sad), said the colonel, putting his hand on Bakha's shoulder" (113)). He came and put his hand on Bakha's shoulder. Bakha shocked to hear the broken Hindustani of a person he presumed to be an Englishman. Colonel's wife who was irreligious and she said, "I can't keep waiting for you all day while you go messing about with all those dirty *Bhangis* and *Chamras*" (123). Bakha was afraid of her and came out from the colonel's house. He was also afraid of the thought of conversion.

In the public meeting, Gandhi explained his stand on untouchability. It touched the most intimate corners Bakha's soul. Gandhi told the story of an untouchable Uka. He said that at the age of twelve "I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful; it could not be sinful" (U 137). Bakha felt an empathy with Uka. Gandhi expressed his genuine love for the outcastes by saying that "I do want to attain spiritual deliverance. I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an untouchable" (U 138). At the end, Gandhi exhorted the public to abolish untouchability.

Madhava Rao's *Joshua's Gabbilam (Bat)* and Anand's *Untouchable* have an identical concept of Untouchability. The intentions of both writers, their sympathy for untouchables were same, but they came from different social backgrounds. Joshua writes as an empathizer (who observed from the inside), whereas Anand writes it as a sympathizer (who observed from the outside). However, they both have commitment to reveal the deep-rooted social evils in the Indian society made them to create *Gabbilam (Bat)* and *Bakha*. They successfully showed how untouchables are not accepted in society and ill-treated by people of other caste. They also highlighted the faith of Indian people in God and blind religious practices in the society. Their aim is to abolish this caste (sin) system from the Indian society.

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