

Dalit Consciousness: A Critical Analysis of *Untouchable* a Novel of Mulk Raj Anand

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Article History: Submitted-30/01/2021, Revised-22/02/2021, Accepted-25/02/2021, Published-28/02/2021.

Abstract:

Dalit Consciousness means to make aware Dalits about their oppression, humiliation, agony, caste system, and root and reason of it. Dalit Consciousness also means to follow universal discourse and try to establish society based on equality, fraternity, liberty and justice. It also means to protest evil, superstitious, crafty politics, injustice, inhuman nature, irrational, and so on. It urges to the world to follow democratic principles and values. For the same Dalits mostly follows the path of Dr Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule, Buddhism and so on. These were saviours, who had revealed the aesthetic of Dalit Consciousness to Dalits. They have been propagators of the essence of it. And Dr Ambedkar has been father of Dalit Consciousness. It is an umbrella term.

Keywords: Dalit consciousness, caste system, hierarchy, oppression, ideology, hypocrisy, Bakha.

The researcher aim is to focus on Dalit Consciousness through a non-Dalit writer. It is a true that Dalit literature has brought consciousness among Dalits to free themselves from hegemonic nature, culture, literature and caste politics of upper castes and Brahmins. The similarly more or less there are few non-Dalits writers of the nation has narrated the issues, suffering, pain, oppression and so on throughout their literature. The writers like, Premchand, T. Shivshankar Pillai, Padmini Sengupta, Tare Sherka, Bandopadhyay, Gopinath Mahanty, Kanhu Charan Mohanty, Babani Bhattacharya, K. Shivram Karanth, Shashi Warriar Mulk Raj Anand, S. Menon Marath, Mahashweta Devi, Parashuran Mund, Rajendra Awasthi, Shashi Deshpande, Pratibha Roy, Raja Rao, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Jumpha Lahiri etc. have been well known who have presented the life of Dalits through their literary works.

Novel is a major form of literature which is being used by them for the same. Through the present research paper, the researcher has done a critical study of Mulk Raj Anand's novel

Untouchable to introspect the Dalit consciousness. It is determined to explore the aesthetic of Dalit literature. It has been discussed and analysed critically and thoroughly as follows:

It is a debut novel of Mulk Raj Anand. Through the present novel the writer has delineated the hellish life of Dalits. It speaks about agony, oppression and humiliation of Dalits by upper castes and their discourse. The novel compels to reader to see how inhuman treatment was being given to Dalits unnaturally, illogically, and foolishly by their forefathers. They had made to accept the oppressive discourse to Dalits under false things such as religious and mythical books, epics etc. They were convinced that the caste system is Godly made and they used to follow discourse of *Manusmriti* for the oppression and to have forever capitalistic monopoly over poor, peasants, workers, women and Dalits. But the bitter reality reveals that Dalits have been greatly affected by the system and ideology. Their life was worse than animals. The same things about Dalits Mulk Raj Anand have explored through the present novel.

He may be the first person as non-Dalit writer, dared to pen down Dalits sufferings and oppressions through his select novels. It was an age when people from bourgeois/elite community hardly used to think about Dalits and write on them. It is found that Anand began his career with his first novel *Untouchable* it appeared in 1935. The novel is woven around the life of Bakha. He is a Dalit character and the protagonist in the work. It has autobiographical and realistic touch, because Bakha, the hero of the novel, is a childhood playmate. He is living in the outcaste's colony of a North Indian Cantonment town. The novel is stereotype in nature. It narrates about the evils of caste system and the same P. K. Singh asserts, "It exposes the evil of caste system and deals with the misery and wretchedness of the poor and their struggle for a better life."¹

Through the novel the writer is exploring aged old traditional picture of Dalits. They used to live out site the village or city and were not allowed to sit with upper castes, and also warned them that do not touch water and upper caste people and so on. Similar humiliation is narrated through the role of Bakha. He was a swapper boy and used to do his duty so honestly. But upper castes used to abuse him because he was an untouchable and doing work of cleaning their latrines. There are few incidents happened with Bakha shows how the upper castes treating inhumanly to Dalits or untouchables. Once he was coming back after finishing his sweeping work, he stopped at a shop to buy a pocket of 'Red Lamp' Cigarettes. He puts an Anna on the board. The shopkeeper dashes some water over the coin, picks up it and throw it

into the counter. The he throws the packet of cigarettes at Bakha. The humiliating incident the novelist has portrayed in the following way, “Then he flung a packet of ‘Red-Lamp’ Cigarettes at Bakha, as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop.”²

This insult annoys the sensitive lad but he goes his way. This is the way a sweeper is treated in the human society. What a horrible thing is that the ideology itself made Dalits to accept such menial works nevertheless their sincere job became a reason of Dalits humiliation, hate and oppression. That is a great irony of upper castes found throughout the novel.

Such similar more incidents happened with Bakha, while he wanted to buy Jalebi, the shopkeeper also done same as cigarettes seller did, he had hurled the pocket of Jalebis at Bakha. It was kind of beggarly treatment Bakha was receiving, although there was no fault in him and his works. There is another painful incident happened with Bakha, when he was going toward home. He unknowingly touched to upper caste person Lallaji. The person started making the issue of his touch with shouting and abuses, because he understood that Bakha is an untouchable sweeper boy, his touch polluted me. There Lallaji gave a sound slap on Bakha’s cheek in the presence of big crowd as a reward for what he has done.

In the novel it finds that he was able to fight with anybody even he could have physically fought with the evil man, but he could not do the same. The reason is shown that Dalit code of conducts were defined by the autocratic people and its system. So, he Bahka is found helpless. He faces moral and physical barriers to reply the person at the movement. So, he seeks apology from Lallaji in spite of his any fault. The situation made him to surrender to the discourse of the time. Bakha sincere apology could not produce any sympathy and empathy for him. Hence, he received the slap in the presence of the crowd. The novel is also criticism on the nature of common people that how the society is also water to such evil things to grow high. Because when Bakah was being abused and slapped in the presence of the big crowd, but no one came forward to stop injustice and humiliation. They are found as watchdogs and thoughtless and inhuman. Therefore, the novelist has portrayed in the novel at the movement only Muhammadan horse cart driver comes forward from the crowd to comfort Bakha and restrains him from losing his anger and temper.

Lallaji’s slap awaked the consciousness of Bakha, and started furiously to think reasons behind his humiliation. torturing, agony and subjugation. Bakha understood that we are doing dirty work for these community. The menial work and service for the upper caste made us

untouchable. And therefore, the elite class hate and humiliate us. The novelist notes Bakha's anger, outcry and revolutionary mind in the following words, "The cruel crowd: All of them abused, abused, why are we always abused? They always abuse us. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That is why I came here. I was tired of working the latrines every day. That's why they don't touch us, the high castes."³

Bakha is representing to entire untouchable community, so indirectly he is bringing consciousness among other untouchables who are still being humiliated, and oppressed. He explores that it will not get stopped until and unless they do not stop doing such menial and dirty work for upper castes. The novelist through the role of the protagonist of the novel brings awareness among Dalits that they are being oppressed due to their caste, and menial works. As result of it today we see in India, oppressed always seek for good works like upper castes and do not like to do such dirty works, but still in India menial works are being done by lower caste only. This is a tragic reality of our nation. It was also condemned by social saviours of Dalits like Dr Ambedkar. He has advised them to go for higher education. It has been informed that the education will bring respect and dignity.

In the novel it is also shown that Bakha condemned Hinduism and its practices. There is an event the writer portrays that Bakha's beautiful sister Sohini also used to do the traditional work of cleaning latrine. So, while she was cleaning toilet a priest made improper suggestion to her when she was doing her menial work, and misbehaved too. And himself started shouting that the girl polluted him and the temple. This shows that how priests were ardently following the evil ideology which was superstitious and illogical. But the novelist did not forget to depict outcry of Bakha, as he came to know the truth from his sister, immediately became very furious and determined to kill the priest. The novelist exposed another hypocritical nature of Brahmins or upper castes that they used to keep away Dalits from them, but why they did not stop or hate themselves for molesting Dalit girl or woman. While doing evil thing with Dalit girl they did not think about the untouchability. It exposes that upper castes'/Brahmins' caste system was baseless and their nature about it was pretentious too. It highlights that how upper castes made Dalits to hate evil things of the time. It compelled to become revengeful to Dalits. And it is one of the causes behind the emergence of Dalit Panthers and other similar militant Dalit movements in the nation. The novelist notes the same radical nature and fury of Bakha through the novel as, "He stood aghast. Then his whole continence lit with fire and his hands use no more joined. Tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. The cumulated strength

of his giant body glistened in him with the desire for revenge, while horror, rage, indignation swept over his frame.”⁴

It clears that why do Dalits follow non-violence way of revenge. It is caste system, humiliation and oppression made them to accept the way of eradication the system and oppression. It is a Marxist way of emancipation which sometime between the period 1972 to 1980 Dalit Panthers have also followed the way. It was social militant organization of oppressed, who had come together to protest the evil things of the time. The similar instinct the novelist reflects through the novel through Bakha’s anger against oppressive nature of upper castes.

But, in the novel we also observe that Bakha is found helpless, inactive and passive. He and his sister the both are victim of inhuman oppression and convention of the society. The brutal convention stopped him to be rebellious and could not help to gather enough courage to raise voice or protest the system of oppression. The same novelist notes when gets true information from his own sister about the molestation by the priest. It is as, “A superb specimen of humanity he seemed whenever he made the high resolve to say something, to go and do something, his fine form rising like a tiger at bay. And yet there was futility written on his face. He could not overstep the barriers which the conventions of his superiors had built up to protect their weakness against him. 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 lapsed back.”⁵

This makes clear that how Dalits were being stopped and misguided to protest the injustices, oppression, and humiliation under the name of convention. The novel reveals the root of marginalization and exploitation of Dalits.

The writer has explored another reality that upper castes were really so blind and did not have logic. The untouchables did not get admiration and appreciation for their praiseworthy work. They had been always ignored and humiliated although they save upper castes’ children or kids. And Bakha had encountered with the cheap mentality of the people. Once an upper caste boy got injured while playing, and on the same ground fortunately Bakha was there at the time, so without thinking a lot and wasting a moment he saved the boy by doing required things. And with great sympathy and love Bakha picked up the boy and reached to his house, when mother of the boy saw his son in the arms of Bakha, she started abusing instead of showing gratefulness. Prof.R.S. Singh has truly noted it through his book as, “They refused to

recognised his sentiments and even his acts of kindness. Even when he saved the child from accident and brought him back to his mother, he was not praised for endangering his life to help the child. On the contrary, he was condemned for polluting the child lifting him in his lap.”⁶

This vice we found in upper castes. It has been also shown through another literary piece, *A Corpse in the Well* of a Dalit writer. Through such literary works writers wanted to show ironical picture of the society and its follies. The novel exposes that a child of modern India has been shackled by aged old traditional oppression and system.

The novelist also exposed another crafty politics of the society that Dalits were not being furnished proper upbringing facilities and attention so, they could not develop themselves and find ways of emancipation and empowerment. It is also one of the reasons of their oppression. The novelist has pointed the same about Bhaka as, “I glimpsed the truth that the tragedy of my hero (Bakha) lay in the fact that he was never allowed to attain anything near the potential of his qualities of manhood.”⁷

It focuses on capitalistic discourse of upper castes who had intentionally tried to put away Dalits from their monopoly and power. They took advantages of Dalits’ illiteracy for many centuries. Dr Ambedkar, and Mahama Phule have also revealed the same politics of upper castes and caste system through their writings, speeches and movements. Mulk Raj Anand attempted to make aware to Dalits that they should not lie in generated archetypical image; they should work hard to change status.

Conclusion:

The novel has made crystal and clear that how Dalits were being oppressed by upper castes and Brahmins under false ideology for centuries. It brings consciousness among Dalits that it is poverty, dirty work, caste system etc. are the main reasons of their exploitation. The novel is crusade on evil things of caste politics and cunningness of upper castes. It makes aware to Dalits that sometime they have to accept way of revolutionary to demolish evils which suppress and stop them going ahead. It brings radical consciousness among Dalits. It also highlights indirectly role of education, is the window of progress and emancipation from evil discourse. The novelist finally has urged to the nation to have equality, fraternity, justice, honour, liberty, in society to go ahead and condemned evil discourse of discrimination and oppression on the basis of caste, colour, work, poverty, gender, and so on. It is criticism on

Hinduism, caste politics and evil things of it. His expectation is that the nation should follow universal discourse of rationality. The essence of the novel is thought provoking.

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