

## **Caste and Conscience: Social Stratification in Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan***

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### **Abstract:**

Gopinath Mohanty's Oriya novel *Harijan* (1948), recently translated into English as *Harijan* (2021), is widely regarded as one of the most powerful indictments of caste oppression in modern Indian literature (Mohanty). Set in urban slums inhabited by manual scavengers during the late colonial and early post-independence period, the novel traces the tragic lives of a Mehentar (a Dalit community engaged in sanitation work) family caught between entrenched caste hierarchies and limited social reforms. Through characters like Sania and others in the Mehentar basti, Mohanty exposes the brutal mechanics of social stratification: ritual pollution, untouchability, economic exploitation, internalised inferiority, and the perpetuation of Dalit exclusion by broader society.

The paper argues that *Harijan* represents caste not merely as an external structure of domination but as an internalised “conscience”—a deeply moral and psychological force that regulates behaviour even in the absence of legal or economic sanctions. As Mohanty demonstrates, caste consciousness operates at multiple levels: the upper-caste fear of ritual contamination, the Dalit internalisation of shame and self-loathing, and the tragic ambivalence of reformist interventions—such as Gandhian *Harijan* uplift, missionary conversion, and recourse to colonial courts—which often reproduce rather than dismantle hierarchical relations. By juxtaposing the rigid caste order of urban society with wider social transformations, Mohanty presents caste as a historically contingent ideology rather than a timeless religious essence, while simultaneously revealing its remarkable resilience in the face of modernising forces.

Drawing on ethnographic detail and psychological realism, *Harijan* thus emerges as both a sociological document and a moral critique, exposing the persistent violence of caste consciousness well before the emergence of what later came to be called Dalit literature. Its unflinching portrayal of humiliation, sexual exploitation, and ritualised degradation continues to compel readers to confront the enduring presence of stratified consciousness in contemporary India.

**Keywords: Untouchable, Ritual Pollution, Economic exploration, Realism, and conscience.**

**Article History:** Submitted-20/01/2026, Revised-11/02/2026, Accepted-16/02/2026, Published-28/02/2026.

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Gopinath Mohanty (1914–1991), a pioneering figure in modern Odia literature, is renowned for his ethnographic realism and deep engagement with the socio-cultural margins of Indian society (Mohanty). His novel *Harijan*, published in 1948 and translated into English as *Harijan: A Novel* by Bikram Das in 2021, stands as a seminal work that interrogates the intersections of caste, class, and conscience in colonial and post-colonial India (Mohanty). Set against the backdrop of urban slums in Odisha, the narrative centers on a community of Mehentars (manual scavengers or latrine cleaners), who portray their daily struggles with unflinching detail (Mohanty). Mohanty, drawing on his broader literary focus on marginalised communities, exposes the rigid hierarchies of social stratification, where caste operates not only as a system of economic and ritual dominance but also as an internalised “conscience” that perpetuates subjugation (Mohanty).

The title Harijan Gandhi’s term for untouchables, meaning “children of God”—is ironic, as the novel reveals how such euphemisms mask the brutal realities of exploitation (Mohanty). Through characters like Jema (a resilient Mehentar woman), her daughter Puni, and Sania (a young scavenger), Mohanty illustrates how caste consciousness manifests in shame, resistance, and hypocrisy (Mohanty). This paper explores these themes through a close reading of the text, supported by quotes from the novel and insights from critical literature. It argues that *Harijan* transcends mere social realism to critique the psychological underpinnings of stratification, where conscience becomes both a tool of oppression and a site of potential rebellion (Mohanty).

The evolution of caste themes in Odia literature reflects a broader shift from ancient egalitarian ideals to modern critiques of untouchability, influenced by reformers like Gandhi and Ambedkar. Early Odia works, such as Sarala Das’s *Mahabharata*, portrayed Savara (tribal) communities positively, integrating Arya and Anarya elements without rigid hierarchies. Poets like Balaram

Das in *Laxmi Purana* and Jagannath Das in *Bhagabata* advocated for equality at sacred sites like Jagannath Dham, rejecting caste distinctions. By the 19th and 20th centuries, influenced by Tagore's humanism, writers like Mayadhar Mansingh and Radha Mohan Gadanayak addressed Dalit issues amid communalism.

Gopinath Mohanty occupies a central place in this trajectory, with *Harijan* exemplifying his focus on marginalised lives (Mohanty). Critics like Sitakanta Mahapatra praise Mohanty's lyrical intensity and portrayal of exploitation as a universal human struggle against fate.

Kartikeswara Sahoo views *Harijan* as a story of denied happiness and economic control, emphasising realistic depictions of destiny shaped by money. Tithi Ray's analysis frames the novel as a voice for Dalits, highlighting their transition from anonymity to assertion against social dogmas (Ray). Similarly, in *Unheard Voices: Exploring Subalternity in Gopinath Mohanty's Harijana*, the focus is on untouchables' painful journeys amid societal cruelty, with caste as a corrupting force (Mahapatra).

Comparative studies link *Harijan* to Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Premchand's *Godan*, noting Mohanty's empathetic portrayal from an upper-caste perspective while critiquing the physical and mental humiliations of untouchability rooted in Hindu texts, such as the Purusha Sukta (Mohanty). Scholars like André Béteille and Eleanor Zelliot underscore how caste moulds economic inequalities, rejecting conversions as superficial solutions. Other Odia writers, including Fakir Mohan Senapati in "*Rebati*" and Kalindi Charan Panigrahi in *Matira Manisha*, bridge caste gaps, while dramas like Rama Shankar Ray's *Kanchi Kaveri* protest untouchability. This body of literature positions *Harijan* as a pivotal text in Odia Dalit discourse, blending realism with calls for empowerment (Mohanty).

Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* (1948), Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), and Munshi Premchand's *Godan* (1936) form a triad of seminal Indian novels that interrogate caste as a mechanism of social control, deeply intertwined with economic exploitation and the nascent stirrings of conscience among the oppressed (Mohanty). Comparative studies show how these books, which have their roots in the Progressive Writers' Movement, depict caste as a dynamic order that is strengthened by class oppression rather than as a static ritual. Although *Godan* moves to rural peasants and *Untouchable* and *Harijan* focus on urban Dalit scavengers, all three show how caste insidiously combines with economic dependence to undermine human dignity and ignite dispersed uprisings of conscience (Mohanty). This analysis draws on *Harijan's* quotes to illuminate parallels and divergences.

### **1. Caste Stratification: Ritual Pollution and Spatial Segregation**

Caste in these novels manifests as an impermeable barrier of ritual impurity, spatially and socially isolating the lowest strata. In *Untouchable*, Bakha, the young sweeper, navigates a single day in a North Indian town, where his touch pollutes upper castes, forcing him to announce his presence with cries of "Posh, posh, sweeper coming!" to avoid accidental contact (Anand). Anand vividly captures this: "The outcaste was firmly bound down under a whole array of collectives, the appellations of which were not his" (Anand 47). Similarly, *Harijan* depicts the Mehentar (scavenger) basti adjacent to the opulent home of upper-caste Abinash Babu, symbolising the grotesque proximity of privilege and degradation (Mohanty). Puni, a central Dalit woman, embodies this isolation through her internalised shame and enforced humility (Mohanty 44). In *Godan*, caste intersects with rural feudalism; Hori, a low-caste peasant, faces boycott from his village for sheltering Selia (also known as Siliya), a Dalit woman exploited by upper-caste men

(Premchand). Premchand underscores the “insurmountable caste walls,” where Selia’s touch defiles utensils, mirroring the hypocrisy of her sexual exploitation by the same men (Premchand). The comparison indicates a continuum: *Untouchable* and *Harijan* highlight the visceral misery of urban untouchability (latrine cleaning as an existential burden). At the same time, *Godan* integrates it into agrarian hierarchies, where caste exacerbates landlessness (Mohanty). However, they present segregation as a purposeful societal design, as emphasized in research relating these books to Gandhi's Harijan upliftment, which Harijan ironically undermines by demonstrating the hollowness of reform (Mohanty).

## 2. Economic Exploitation as the Reinforcer of Caste

Economic domination is the linchpin that perpetuates caste across these works, trapping the oppressed in degrading labour cycles (Mohanty). In *Untouchable*, Bakha's family relies on his scavenging payments, which are meagre and irregular, making them subject to moneylenders and arbitrary evictions, recalling colonial census rigidities that assigned castes to vocations (Anand). *Godan* amplifies this through class struggle: Hori’s endless debt to exploitative landlords like Rai Sahib and moneylenders like Datadin drains his family’s resources, with untouchability compounding peasant poverty, interest swells loans beyond repayment, leaving families starved (Premchand). Premchand underscores the debilitating effects of this blind exploitation on Hori and other peasants (Premchand).

*Harijan* bridges these by fusing caste-specific drudgery with class critique, as Mohanty contrasts the Mehentars’ slum with Abinash Babu’s palace (Mohanty). Jema laments the economic vice: “Will they offer food without any work? ... Much strain; but little money. Relying on fate, ours is the same work ... What shall we do more?” (Mohanty 15), her words indicting a system where

untouchability bars alternative jobs, forcing generational scavenging (Mohanty). Unlike *Godan's* broader peasant focus, *Harijan* and *Untouchable* spotlight sexual-economic abuse: Aghore exploits Puni sexually in exchange for regular work and undeducted pay (Mohanty 109), paralleling Selia's violation in *Godan* and Bakha's sister Sohini's molestation in *Untouchable* (Anand). Comparative lenses position *Harijan* as extending Anand's urban realism to regional Odia contexts, emphasising how poverty impoverishes the untouchable body and soul (Mohanty).

### 3. Conscience: Awakening Amid Oppression

Conscience emerges as a frail, internalised resistance born of shame but restrained by survival demands that connects these narratives (Mohanty). Bakha's day-long epiphany in *Untouchables* culminates in awe at a missionary's sermon and Gandhi's distant promise, but ends in resigned pride in his work despite the world's contempt (Anand). In *Godan*, Hori's moral quandary over selling his cow for debt reflects a passive conscience, eroded by caste-class fatalism; Selia's suicide signals the system's crushing weight, with no collective uprising (Premchand).

*Harijan* intensifies this into active defiance, influenced by Gandhi's Odia visits, yet critiquing reformist paternalism (Mohanty). Sania's plea, "Kill as much as you like. We are poor untouchable scavengers. Who will support us! It is your kingdom, go on killing us" (Mohanty 187), develops into an organized revolt led by Dhani Budha, echoing the novel's humanist protest (Mohanty). Puni's climactic inversion "I am not untouchable; but you ... your look creates sin" (Mohanty 218) reverses the pollution narrative, paralleling Bakha's quiet dignity but surpassing Hori's resignation with gendered fury (Mohanty). Jashoda's response, "I am not living under your feudal jurisdiction" (Mohanty 142), rekindles collective consciousness, as do *Godan's* brief village boycotts turned inward (Premchand).

Studies describe *Harijan* as a "work of art that raises complex issues," comparing *Untouchables'* individual revelation with *Godan's* communal sadness, but all trace awareness back to Gandhi-Ambedkar debates on reform vs. radical equity (Mohanty).

### **A Shared Indictment, Regional Inflexions**

These novels belong to a "creative turbulence" of egalitarian fiction, from Premchand's rural Marxism to Anand and Mohanty's urban humanism (Mohanty). *Harijan* uniquely intersects caste with class via Odia specificity slum-palace adjacency, symbolising systemic adjacency while echoing *Untouchables'* scavenger pride and *Godan's* debt traps (Mohanty). Together, they expose caste's economic scaffolding, where conscience flickers as rebellion's spark, urging readers toward Mohanty's radical vision: not paternal uplift, but dismantling the hierarchy that devours the oppressed (Mohanty). As Puni curses her fate yet defies it, these texts endure as conscience's collective cry (Mohanty).

### **Caste as a Structure of Domination**

In *Harijan*, caste functions as an immutable structure enforcing social stratification, confining Dalits to menial labour and spatial isolation (Mohanty). The Mehentars live in "dirty hovels in a derelict part of Cuttack town," in contrast to the palatial homes of upper-caste figures like Abinash Babu (Mohanty). Mohanty vividly depicts ritual pollution: untouchables are denied access to wells, temples, and markets, their shadows deemed defiling (Mohanty). Puni's first day scavenging illustrates this: "What are you staring at, stupid? Haven't you seen shit before? Why did you come here if you are so dainty?" (Mohanty 32), as Ranga scolds her. Later, "Ish! What ish! You have shit all over your back!" underscores the dehumanising labour (Mohanty).

### **Economic exploitation reinforces caste:**

Dalits earn meagre wages, with supervisors cutting pay for delays (Mohanty). Jema laments, “Will they leave us? Will they offer food without any work? What shall we do? We are poor people. We have neither strength nor support” (Mohanty 15). Upper-caste hypocrisy is evident in Abinash Babu’s false promises and the burning of the slum to displace them (Mohanty). Critics note this as a “world of haves and have-nots,” where caste denies opportunities.

Gopinath Mohanty’s *Harijan* (1948; English translation by Bikram Das, 2021) relentlessly shows that caste survives and hardens not merely through ritual pollution or social taboo, but through deliberate economic exploitation (Mohanty). The Dalit scavenger community is kept in perpetual poverty and indebtedness so that they have no choice but to continue the very work that marks them as “untouchable” (Mohanty). Economic domination thus becomes the most powerful instrument for reproducing caste hierarchy.

### **Forced Labour and Wage Slavery as Caste Enforcement**

The novel opens with the brutal reality that the only employment available to the Mehentar (scavenger) community is cleaning human excreta (Mohanty). It is not an accidental economic outcome; it is the deliberate design of caste society (Mohanty).

Jema, the elderly scavenger, explains the trap with devastating clarity:

“Will they leave us? Will they offer food without any work? ... If we want a menial job, being untouchable, no one can allow us to move near them. If any job is available there, it is very negligible. Much strain, but little money. Relying on fate, ours is the same work ... that we all do. What shall we do more?” (Mohanty 15)

Here, economic compulsion and ritual untouchability work together: the upper castes refuse to give Dalits any other work because they are untouchable, and they remain untouchable because they do this work (Mohanty). The circle is unbreakable.

### **Sexual Exploitation as Economic Leverage**

The most chilling examples come when upper-caste men use the promise of money or employment to exploit Dalit women sexually (Mohanty). The cleaning supervisor, Aghore, forces Puni into a relationship by controlling her livelihood:

“You will have to satisfy me ... then only you will get the work regularly and money without any deduction” (Mohanty 109).

Puni later reflects on this double degradation, economic and sexual, while carrying the basket of faeces:

“Son of the rich man! Let him stay at his house. What a blackish work of cleaning human waste from others’ latrines every day at dawn! ... Society pays nothing but abhorrence and avoidance” (Mohanty 109).

Economic power gives the upper-caste man the ability to violate the woman’s body while simultaneously forcing her to continue the polluting labour that justifies her caste inferiority (Mohanty).

### **Debt and Hunger as Chains**

When Jema falls ill and cannot work, her wages are immediately cut (Mohanty). The family slides into starvation, and the municipality (controlled by upper castes) shows no mercy (Mohanty). Puni realises:

“It is getting tough to restrict herself from puking ... She was occupied with the thought of why all this happened to her. ... She must carry this dirt basket and walk with a hanging head to earn a living – perhaps that is the plan of the Almighty” (Mohanty 44).

Hunger silences protest (Mohanty). Economic desperation forces even the awakening conscience to submit—for the moment.

#### **4. Destruction of Alternative Livelihoods**

When young Sania tries to escape scavenging by seeking work as a mason, the upper-caste contractor refuses him because of his caste and later has him beaten for alleged theft (Mohanty). Sania’s bitter outburst reveals the economic blockade:

“Kill as much as you like. We are poor untouchable scavengers. Who will support us! It is your kingdom, go on killing us” (Mohanty 187). Every path to economic independence is deliberately closed, leaving only the latrine basket (Mohanty).

#### **Conscience Born in Economic Suffering**

However, it is precisely this crushing economic exploitation that finally ignites revolutionary conscience (Mohanty). Puni reaches a breaking point and throws her defiance at her exploiter: again for the last time ... ‘I am not untouchable, but you’. I am only poor, and your look creates sin, if touch defiled” (Mohanty 218).

Jashoda, another scavenger woman, confronts the landlord’s wife:

“Whose face will you break, lady lord? ... I am not living under your feudal jurisdiction” (Mohanty 142).

An old Dhani Budha begins organising the poor, declaring that only collective refusal to clean the town's filth will force change (Mohanty).

In *Harijan*, Mohanty demonstrates with merciless precision that caste is not an ancient religious idea floating above material reality; it is a living system of economic domination (Mohanty). By monopolising land, jobs, wages, and sexual access, the upper castes keep the Dalits locked into the very labour that stigmatises them (Mohanty). Economic exploitation is therefore not an unfortunate by-product of caste; it is the primary mechanism that continuously reproduces and reinforces caste stratification (Mohanty). Only when the exploited begin to see this link, when conscience emerges from the experience of hunger and humiliation, can the prospect of revolt emerge (Mohanty).

Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* (1948; translated from Odia by Bikram Das, 2021) probes the psychological undercurrents of caste stratification through the lens of Dalit scavengers (Mehentars) in an urban Odia setting (Mohanty). The novel illustrates how caste hierarchy—rooted in ritual pollution, spatial segregation, and economic subjugation—manifests as an internalised conscience among the oppressed (Mohanty). This conscience is a dual-edged psychological construct: it enforces self-debasement and resignation to fate, yet it also germinates seeds of awakening and rebellion (Mohanty). Mohanty, drawing on realism traditions, reveals the mental toll of untouchability, in which characters like Puni, Sania, Jema, and Jashoda internalise social scorn, resulting in identity crises, helplessness, and final rebellious self-assertion (Mohanty).

This analysis explores these dimensions, highlighting how stratification psychologically entrenches oppression while conscience evolves from passive acceptance to active resistance.

## **2. Psychological Dimensions of Caste Stratification: Dehumanisation and Internalised Inferiority**

Caste stratification in *Harijan* operates as a psychological regime that dehumanises Dalits, compelling them to view their degradation as inherent and inescapable (Mohanty). The untouchables are confined to polluting occupations like scavenging human waste, which not only marks them socially but also erodes their self-worth, fostering a psyche scarred by humiliation and self-loathing (Mohanty). Mohanty portrays this through vivid internal monologues, revealing how constant exposure to contempt internalises a sense of inferiority, turning external oppression into self-imposed barriers (Mohanty).

Puni, the young Dalit protagonist, exemplifies this psychological burden during her menial labour, where the physical revulsion mirrors her mental anguish: “It is getting tough to restrict herself from puking, somehow managing to control that forcefully. Puni walked on, resting the basket of faeces on her waist, and looking down. She was occupied with the thought of why all this happened to her. Why did she rush out of the home so anxiously? Isn’t there any other task in this big world to make a living? Who is she and what is she carrying? And to where? She is visibly broken, cursing her fate. She must carry this dirt basket and walk with the hanging head to earn a living – perhaps that is the plan of the Almighty” (Mohanty 44). Puni's introspection displays a split mentality, as she questions her existence while attributing it to divine will, a common sign of internalised fatalism in caste systems (Mohanty).

Sania, Puni’s son, undergoes similar mental depression from enforced submission, his youthful energy clashing with societal constraints: “By the time he reached home, his anger had boiled down to his self-worth. Isn’t there any other way to earn a living? He is able, energetic, and young. There is so much work in this big city. What has the Almighty conspired against him, leaving his

body suitable only to clean faeces and not fit for anything else?" (Mohanty 83). This quote underscores the psychological stratification: caste assigns not just roles but bodily destinies, leading to an internalised conviction of unworthiness that stifles ambition and breeds resentment (Mohanty).

The novel contrasts this with upper-caste hypocrisy, where figures like Aghore (the supervisor) and Abinash Babu exploit Dalits economically and sexually, reinforcing psychological dominance (Mohanty). Puni's seduction by Aghore is shown with a "naturalness" that examines how vulnerability caused by poverty leads to internalised acceptance of such transgressions, as if they are unavoidable concessions to power (Mohanty).

Overall, stratification psychologically fragments the self, turning Dalits into "victims of circumstances" who navigate a world of "sham, cruelty, cynicism and hypocrisy" (Mohanty).

## **2. The Internalised Conscience: Resignation, Conflict, and Awakening**

Internalised conscience in Harijan is the psychological imprint of caste, a combination of defeatism, economic pragmatism, and hesitant acquiescence that first sustains stratification but eventually inspires revolt (Mohanty). Mohanty shows how prolonged oppression dulls sensitivity, making Dalits "inhuman towards themselves," yet this very numbness incubates a conscience that questions and defies the system (Mohanty). Characters embody this as an internal dialogue between submission to fate and emergent self-respect, highlighting the mental evolution from passive victims to agents of change (Mohanty).

## Conclusion

In *Harijan*, Mohanty demonstrates with merciless precision that caste is not an ancient religious idea floating above material reality; it is a living system of economic domination (Mohanty). By monopolising land, jobs, wages, and sexual access, the upper castes keep the Dalits locked into the very labour that stigmatises them (Mohanty). Economic exploitation is therefore not an unfortunate by-product of caste; it is the primary mechanism that continuously reproduces and reinforces caste stratification (Mohanty). Only when the exploited begin to see this link, when conscience emerges from the experience of hunger and humiliation, can the prospect of revolt emerge (Mohanty).

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