

ARTICULATION OF DALIT EXPERIENCE IN THE INDIAN NOVEL IN ENGLISH

Dr. Nazneen Khan
Associate Professor
Department of English and
Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow (U.P.)
nazneenkhanlu@gmail.com

Abstract

Literature, being mimetic, mirrors society. It is a reflection of its culture, tradition, manners, morals, ethos and mentality. It not only reflects but also shapes the complex ways in which society organizes itself. It also exposes the mechanism of power, caste and patriarchy. The literature of this country, however, until very recently, has never focused on the problems of the untouchables/dalits – the groups of people located at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Until the mid twentieth century, literature had been the domain of high castes. Untouchables were either mostly absent from literary representations or shown as victims in need of saviours, as objects without voice or agency. However, prompted either by sentimental compassion or a zeal for social reform, several writers of India fiction in English took up the theme of Dalit representation in their writings. Only a handful of the Indian English novelists have prioritized the Dalit issues and experiences in their works. This paper attempts to analyze few such Indian novels in English from the perspective of articulation of Dalit experience in them.

India has long been reckoned as having the most stratified society of the world with myriad forms of superordination and subordination. Indians are deeply involved in moral and ethical questions regarding the caste systems, cultural diversity and economic inequality which form the central issues of social stratification. Caste is a form of stratification in which an individual is assigned to a particular status based on his/her designation of birth. The caste or verna system in India has segregated thousands of Dalits from mainstream culture to a subhuman and debased existence. The institution of caste laid restrictions for the lower classes. The system of elevating and belittling the human beings appeared in the practices of untouchability and stratification. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel, inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits. The actual Dalit world is filled with dreadful,

terrible, humiliating events. Despite the legal abolition of untouchability in independent India and official reservation of jobs and of seats in legislatures and Parliament, the effects of the discrimination continue even to this day.

Literature, being mimetic, mirrors society. It is a reflection of its culture, tradition, manners, morals, ethos and mentality. It not only reflects but also shapes the complex ways in which society organizes itself. It also exposes the mechanism of power, caste and patriarchy. The literature of this country, however, until very recently, has never focused on the problems of the untouchables/dalits – the groups of people located at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The pen has, by and large, been in the hands of those who wielded power and those outside the grid of authority and agency have generally been rendered invisible in the so-called great literary texts. As a consequence, the untouchables remained voiceless for several centuries. They continued to remain neglected and ostracized in literature as in society. It was only at the turn of the twentieth century that a few upper caste Indian writers started portraying the lives of the untouchables, driven either by zeal for social reform or by sentimental compassion. Only a handful of the Indian English novelists have prioritized the Dalit issue in their works. Dalit aspect has yet to take the shape of a movement in Indian English fiction.

It was only after the advent of the Gandhian mass movements in the 1930s that the Indian novel in English became more socially relevant. Nearly all the major novelists of the post-independence era started writing in the 1930s. The publication of Mulk Raj Anand's first and perhaps the most acclaimed novel, *Untouchable* (1935), is a landmark in the history of Indian novel in English. The novel is remarkable because of its ideological involvement with the Gandhian movement for the uplift of the so-called *asprishya* or 'untouchables' designated as *Harijans* by Mahatma Gandhi and their assimilation in the mainstream of the Indian society.

Right from the beginning of his writing career, Mulk Raj Anand is known for his concern with social justice. He deals with the working classes and underdogs of the society and often he gives them a central place in his creative work. In this connection K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger writes of Mulk Raj Anand : "In writing of the pariahs and the bottom dogs rather than of the elites and the sophisticated, he had ventured into a territory that had been largely ignored till then by Indian writers". (Iyenger 333)

Untouchable, now a classic in Indian English literature, narrates, in the Joycean "stream of consciousness" technique, a single day in the life of Bakha, an eighteen year old so-called 'untouchable' boy and, in the process, presents before the readers the vicissitudes in the life of such marginalized people in the traditional framework of our social hierarchy. While the novel examines the nature of the degradation imposed on the lower castes by the caste Hindus, it also expresses the upper caste people's hypocrisy and double standard.

Through Bakha, the novelist realistically interrogates the issues of untouchability, segregation and oppression in the Indian context.

Bakha, the untouchable protagonist of the novel, is a victim of the caste-ridden society. He belongs to the sweeper community and lives with his family in the extremely filthy outcaste colony located at the fringes of the town of Bulashah at a considerable distance from the caste Hindu settlements. Bakha has the normal urges of a teenager - he wants to taste good food, wear clothes of the Sahebs, smoke, play games and even aspires to learn English. He is an efficient worker too and performs his job of cleaning the latrines quickly and earnestly. Bakha is intelligent, able bodied and strong and when he works, the novelist writes :

Each muscles of his body, hard as a rock when it came to play, seemed to shine forth like glass... What a dexterous workman the onlooker would have said. And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean. (Anand 1981:18).

But Bakha is reluctant to perform what he is supposed and compelled to. He has to clean toilets and bring about sanitation at the cost of his own hygiene. Every now and then he is disparaged and called “defiled and polluted”. As the day progresses, Bakha, through repeated humiliation, becomes conscious of the injustice on which his entire life is based. On this crucial day Bakha encounters different forms of discrimination and wakes up, as it were from an unthinking boyhood when he had taken all his suffering passively as his fate, to a self-reflexive state of manhood.

The day brings out for Bakha his fresh recognition of the various manners of isolation and oppression: caste-bound wells, his exclusion from formal education, the sin of having the audacity to smoke, the difficulty of buying something when one cannot touch or be touched, being forbidden from entering into temples, his sister Sohini’s molestation at the hands of the temple priest, Pandit Kali Nath in the temple yard, the difficulty of moving along a street without touching or being touched and even being accused of defiling a high-caste boy he carries home who was injured on the hockey field.

The end of the novel brings Bakha in contact with people who offer him different solutions to his problem. The British clergyman of the town, Hutchinson, Mahatma Gandhi and the poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar offer Bakha their individual sympathies and suggestions for the eradication of the discriminatory system of untouchability. Bakha has to choose from three options – conversion to Christianity which would free him from his caste identity; Mahatma Gandhi’s vision of social reform to end the miseries of the untouchable; and the modern mechanised system of sanitation which would no longer require an untouchable to do his/her job manually. Perhaps these were the only choices which the novelist could think of in the context of colonial India.

Bakha is a type and an individual as well. He is characteristic of the repressed, depressed and underprivileged class. Towards the end of the novel, insulted and abused several times during the day, he is still in a state of confusion. Bakha cannot reach a solution because the novelist cannot offer any. *Untouchable* was written at a time when even legal or constitutional measures had not been taken to correct the social inequality in India, and the writer himself was not sure in which direction a future solution might lie.

Mulk Raj Anand's *The Road*, written in 1961, also deals with the theme of untouchability. Bhikhu, the protagonist of the novel, is the new-generation protagonist of post-independence India who is neither vulnerable nor irresolute like his fictional predecessors. Bhikhu is a revelation of Bakha of *Untouchable*. He is a strong, defiant and aggressive *Harijan* young man. He is a road worker who helps sort out the difficulty of transportation. The work in progress is done under the patronage of Dhooli Singh, a caste Hindu from Govardhan village. He shows sympathy for the untouchables. The novel has its share of romance in the form of the unequal love between Bhikhu, a *Harijan*, and Rukmani, the young daughter of the *Lambardar* of the village. The *Lambardar* is jealous of the untouchables. One day, the *Lambardar*'s son Sajnu sets fire to the huts of the caste people to teach them a lesson and defiant Bhikhu is attacked by high-caste people because he refuses to have water given to him in a brass cup.

Bhikhu ultimately decides to leave the village for good and goes to Delhi, "where no one knew who he was and where there would be no caste or outcaste". (Anand 1987 : 96). Road symbolizes progress and Bhikhu's departure from his village stands for the fragmentation of the village community and the agrarian society. In trying to be realistic in his approach to his subject, Mulk Raj Anand takes an escapist route of anonymity for his dalit protagonist in this novel.

Red Hibiscus (1962) by Padmini Sengupta is another significant Indian novel in English which fictionalises the awakening of *Harijans*/Dalits under the spell of Mahatma Gandhi. It is a woman oriented novel set in rural Bengal in the colonial era. The Second World War at the world level and Gandhian mass movement, especially the Quit India Movement, at the national level form the background of the narrative. The story of Sita, the protagonist, is presented in perspective with that of Rasmi, a married untouchable woman of sweeper caste. Rasmi is a good looking sweeper-woman. She is a very conscientious worker and loves leading a pious and noble life. She believes in cleanliness and is sure that one day Mahatma Gandhi's faith in the oneness of God will be acquiesced to by everyone. She feels very sad because the untouchables though called "children of God" are looked down upon by everyone and treated most callously and shabbily at the hands of society :

The Hindus called them outcastes and the Muslims said they were beyond God's grace because they bred pigs and killed and ate them. Only Mahatma Gandhi, Rasmi knew, loved them and of course God himself. (Sengupta 14).

In the course of the story, Rasmi is abducted and her husband, Ramadan, is stabbed while rescuing her. While the novelist cleverly shows Rasmi, a dalit woman, offering a red hibiscus to the Goddess in the Kali temple, she also points out that the dalits are also objects of victimisation by persons from other less privileged communities.

On the day of Indian independence, while Sita is giving birth to her first child, Rasmi starts working as Sita's domestic help although she is a dalit. *Red Hibiscus* narrates Padmini Sengupta's personal affiliation with the theme of marginalisation through Gandhian ideology, the women question and the emancipation of the Dalits which formed the essence of nationalist politics of the pre-independence India.

Another Indian novel in English that focuses on Dalits is Shanta Rameswar Rao's *Children of God* (1976). The central characters of the novel are dalits and the novelist presents a down-to-earth picture of caste oppression through its woman-narrator, Lakshmi, a Dalit woman, who sees her family disintegrate before her own eyes. Through the life of Lakshmi, her parents, her brothers and sisters, the novelist describes the miserable life of the scavengers and cleaners of human filth. Using very poignant words the novelist conveys the tragic conditions of the lowest of the untouchables who have lived in the most pitiful conditions, far from the dwellings of the caste people. The untouchables live in a temple town, named Venogopalapuram, which stands on the river Vasumati. When the rains come the Vasumati water grows dark and foams, overflowing the banks, causing floods, bringing cholera. The narrator reports :

The temple is the centre of our town and the untouchable's quarter is about a mile away from the temple. Everyday we set out with broom and pan from here to clean the latrines of Venogopalapuram. Our people have done this for generations because this is our caste, we are scavengers. Our fathers and grandfathers and all our forefathers who went before us, have been scavengers and therefore untouchables, and of all the untouchables, we who clean the latrines and carry human filth, we are among the lowest. No one will associate with us . . . we are the scavengers of human filth. (Rao 7-8).

The narrator, Lakshmi, describes the year that her son Kittu is born as "the year of our freedom" (1). There is great rejoicing at the time of Kittu's birth and the politicians tell the people : "All men will be equal in free India and the divisions of caste will be closed and no men will be untouchable" (2). However, Kittu is beaten, stoned and burnt for entering a temple more than twenty five years after independence.

Like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and other dalit narrations, *Children of God* also gives an account of the various forms of social abuse. The background of the novel is Indian freedom struggle with Mahatma Gandhi's temple entry movement as a central reference point. Interestingly, the novel makes oblique references to the Dalit complicity in the self-degradation of their own classes. As Acharya Harichandra tells the Dalit woman narrator :

You have been called untouchable only because you have allowed men to call you and treat you as such. You have allowed yourself to be treated worse than animals, and held out your hands for the shackles that men have put upon you. (96).

Romen Basu's *Outcast* (1986) highlights the cause of the so-called 'outcast' people in the post-independence rural Bengal. The novel documents the socio-political transition in the decolonized country. The village of Basuli in *Outcast* is a place where, "Not only were men and women of the lower castes barred from entering the temple courtyard, but even their animals were badly beaten if one strayed in by chance". (Basu 11)

Outcaste is a thoroughly sociological novel. It deals with the injustices meted out to the lower castes. Sambal, a *chandal*, suffers abject humiliation at the hands of the Zamindar. The Zamindar treats Sambal's father as a worm. The untouchable is accused of entering the Kali temple and the Zamindar shouts at him, "If God cared for you, how could you be born a chandal, untouchable who burns dead bodies, you son-of-a-bitch" (2). The temple entry of an untouchable is an unpardonable sin according to the Zamindar. Even the neighbours of Mahanta who belong to the lower caste blame him for his unholy act. They question him, "What came over him to enter a place so sacred, when even the worst criminals have resisted the temptation?" (5). The police inspector who is supposed to implement the governmental law reproaches Mahanta instead of supporting him. The inspector shouts accusingly at Mahanta, "that's obvious, you son-of-a-pig. Had you no fear of punishment for walking up those holy steps, where you and your kind are debarred?" (1).

Sambal, the hero of *Outcaste*, unlike the other *chandals*, understands that the exploiters cannot be wiped out as long as the exploited people allow themselves to be exploited. He is courageous enough to oppose the injustice. The novelist presents Sambal, the village *chandal*, as the instrument of a new social order. Sambal's father was beaten and ostracised for entering into Kali temple. In his righteous indignation, Sambal becomes an iconoclast and tries to fight against the caste and class injustices. In the process, he suffers a lot and the novel ends on a tragic note. However, Romen Basu drives his message home successfully.

Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), makes a realistic and insightful study of isolation and oppression of several dimensions in different contexts : women, children, Syrian Christians, Dalits, and so on. The novel can be viewed as an attempt to reckon with some of the main questions driving the field of Subaltern

studies. The bulk of the novel is set in the small Indian village of Ayemenem, near the larger town of Cochin. Velutha, the dalit protagonist, is highly intelligent, an excellent carpenter with an engineer's mind but he is also a paravan by caste, the lowest in hierarchy and actually untouchable. He is treated as the 'other' of society and is not allowed to touch the touchables of the society. Mammachi recalls the days when untouchables like Velutha were looked down upon, "When Paravans were expected to crawl backward with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmin and Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into paravan's foot print". (Roy 73-74)

In Mammachi's time paravans, like other untouchables, were not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouth when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. Velutha is a talented man who could have done well in his life if only he had not been a paravan. However, the shackles of the caste system confine him to be only the "other" of the society. Velutha, the dalit protagonist, contravenes the hegemonic norms by having an affair with a woman of high caste. The ultimate outcome of this affair is the tragic death of an "Untouchable" by the "Touchable Boots" of the police, an incident that caricatures the very idea of God. Velutha, "The God of Loss", is punished for breaking the norms of society, for moving from his place of "other" and for his attempt to articulate his voice, which was supposed to be kept unarticulated. Velutha, the outcast, thus epitomizes social injustice and inequality.

One has to admit that quantitatively, the number of the Indian novels in English articulating the Dalit experience is not very impressive. However, a couple of them are of quite enduring quality. Contemporary Indian English fiction, under the influence of postmodernist and postcolonial tendencies, has also created a new milieu of marginal discourses including that of Dalits. With Indian English novelists progressively turning their attention towards the ground realities of Indian life, and the force with which Dalit movement is gaining strength, it is expected that we may have more novels focusing on Dalit issues and themes in the days to come.

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