

AN INSIGHT INTO MULKRAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE* AND BAMA'S *SANGATI*

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**Abstract**

*Mulk Raj Anand the Charles Dickens of India wrote stories about the tribulations of the Dalit society of pre-independent India. His most critically acclaimed novel Untouchable is about one day in the life of Bakha a young man who is a victim of India's caste system. It deals with the aspirations and suppression of his young protagonist. Bama Faustina Soosairajan iconic Tamil writer in Sangati portrays the post-colonial Indian society which is still infested with the same problem of discrimination on the basis of caste. She reveals different layers of divided Indian society, highlighting the anguish and humiliation of outcasts. This paper attempts to draw parallel between the two novels, though written in different eras, they both are similar in their theme of exploitation and oppression, the most prominent difference is Untouchable has male and Sangati has female protagonists. The paper studies approaches of both the authors and their exploration of hypocrisy of high caste society in contrast to the helplessness and sufferings of lower caste.*

**Key words:** Outcast, oppression, feminist perspective, Dalit.

The term Dalit was first used in 1930 for the depressed and downtrodden classes of Indian society. In 1972 Dalit Panthers an organization of young men expanded its reference to include all men and women who were socially, politically and economically exploited by the upper caste and affluent class. This oppression is reflected in the genre of work comprehended as Dalit Literature. Initiated by Marathi Dalit writers, Dalit Literature is the collective protest of Marathi, Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Tamil writers against the tyranny and totalitarianism of upper caste. It is often compared to Afro-American literature for being a source of depictions of beleaguered marginalized society which bears the pangs of discrimination on the basis of caste, colour and religion. Mulk Raj Anand, Thakazhi Sivasankaran Pillai, Shivarama Karanth, Premchand, Namdeo Dhasal, Dilip Chitre, Vidiyelli, Bama and Arundhati Roy in their works expose the pathetic state of low-caste and the wretched indifference of upper caste.

This paper tries to draw a parallel between Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Sangati* (1994). Both novels depict the plight of underprivileged sections of Indian society. Mulk Raj Anand is the most prominent writer of Indian English Literature of pre-independent India, in his social and autobiographical novels presented misery and exploitation of the oppressed section of pre-independent India. He along with Tagore, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao brought realism in Indian Writing in English. Though born in a high caste, Anand felt the pain and anguish which people of lower caste were subjected to at the hands of upper caste Hindus. He outpours his frustration and condemnation in his novels among which *Untouchable* is: *One of the most eloquent and imaginative works to deal with this difficult and emotive subject.* (Martin Seymour-Smith)

Bama Faustina Soosairaj noted Tamil Dalit Christian who came to the literary scene with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992). Her second novel *Sangati* narrates the stories of paraiya Dalit Christian community. *Sangati* was originally written in Tamil and it was translated into French by L' Aube in 2002 and into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2005. Bama writes: *My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious nature their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour.* (Untouchable viii) *Sangati* means events hence the stories, anecdotes, and memories reveal the events that take place in the lives of the women in Paraiya community. They are the stories of neglect, torture and humiliation of Dalit women at the hands of both the upper caste men and the men of their own community. The feminist outlook of the novel portrays Dalit women's enormous endurance and struggle against atrocities of a patriarchal society.

*Untouchable* set in the pre-independent India, describes a day in the life of Bakha, the eighteen years old protagonist who like any young man lives in his world of dreams and illusions but the harsh reality of his existence thrashes down his personality and self-confidence. His only identity is that he is an untouchable- a scavenger who lives like an animal in an out castes' society among the human and animal refuse. The foul smell and filth of public latrines, hides and dung of animals form the ambience of the outskirts of the town Bulashah where Bakha lives. It is inhabited by poor, malnourished and ill-clothed untouchables who flounder in its mire, bath in its marshes, and play among its rubbish-heaps. The subhuman conditions of the surroundings have caused the death of Bakha's mother, his father is asthmatic and he himself had been severely sick when he was a small child.

Bakha starts his day with abuses of his father who orders him to clean the latrines. It is very usual for him to take abuse from not only his father but also from the upper caste community without any protest. Though he performs a dirty task but he himself remains clean, at the risk of his own hygiene he provides sanitation to others still they call him *defiled and polluted*. He is bound to believe: *They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt* (Untouchable 55). While passing through bazaar he loudly announces his arrival *posh, posh, sweeper coming* (Untouchable 36) but unintentionally commits an offense of touching a caste Hindu in the market. For that he is abused and called –*swine dog, dirty dog and brute*. The frail caste Hindu screams *Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion!* (Untouchable 38), while robust Bakha with folded hands and bent head pleads his innocence. The monstrous stranger refuses to listen, *the crowd that pressed round him, staring, pulling grimace, jeering and leering, was without a shadow of pity for his remorse. It stood unmoved, without heeding his apologies, and taking a sort a sadistic delight in watching him cower under the abuses and curses of its spokesman. Those who were silent seemed to sense in the indignation of the more vociferous member of the crowd, an expression of their own awakening lust for power.* (Untouchable 40) The physical and verbal abuses frustrate him for he

questions his demeaning existence and realizes that he is an inferior creature: *All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it to...I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an untouchable!* (Untouchable41)

He desires a respectful life where courtesy is reciprocated but he knows that his world is devoid of it. *One didn't need to employ a courtesy a greeting to become part of this gathering as one does in the world where there is plenty of light and happiness. For in the lives of this riff- raff this scum of the earth these dregs of humanity, only silence, grim silence, the silence of death fighting for life, prevailed* (Untouchable27). He dreams of becoming a sahib. He wants to be like English soldiers since he dresses up in breeches; even in bone- chilling winter doesn't use Indian quilt and is eager to learn English since he feels: *How nice it must be to be able to read and write! One could read the papers after having been to school .One could talk to the sahibs. One wouldn't have to run to the scribe every time a letter came.* (Untouchable30) Bakha's polite and compassionate gesture is also not taken in the right spirit when an upper caste boy is injured and Bakha lifts the boy up, instead of consoling her bleeding son the thankless mother screams - *Oh !you eater of your masters what have you done? .... Give me my child. You have defiled the house, besides wounding my son.* (Untouchable6) His self-respect is smashed by the callous attitude of upper caste Hindus. When Bakha goes to collect food from door to door, people throw loaves of bread towards him as if he were a dog. Even a street bull gets more respect and attention than an out caste human being. Bakha gets slapped and is insulted where else a street- bull is only mildly abused and threatened with hand.

*Sangati* is different from *Untouchable* as it is a post- independent novel still the problems of marginalized people remain same. In *Untouchable* Bakha's ghetto is devoid of any medical facilities similarly in *Sangati* there is no hospital .Vellaiyamma Kizhavi performs the task of delivering babies of her community. When lower caste people get ill either they die due to lack of medical attention or have to depend on natural medicines or beg upper caste doctors for medical attention or go to another town for treatment.

*Sangati* tells the stories of sexual harassment, gender discrimination and hard labour of Dalit women but it also delineates their rebellious nature and their eagerness to face the problems in life thus becoming a harbinger of Dalit Feminism. Bama portrays the struggle of lower caste women against exploitation at the hands of both upper caste and lower caste men. Women are treated as the lowest among lowly as they are doubly exploited first for belonging to lower caste and second for being women. *Boys are given more respect. They'll eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes and so on.* (*Sangati*7) Even their games are different as girls are not allowed to play boys' games if they play kabadi or marbles *they'll get roundly abused.* (*Sangati*7). Men are irresponsible and insensitive; they live in their own world of authority and carelessness and provide no financial support to their families, spending their money according to their will. They do not bother to look after household worries and expenditures whereas women work, in the fields, as hard as men and at home look after their children, arrange food and cook for them. They always live in fear of sexual harassment for they are treated as objects of pleasure and the means of carnal satisfaction. If they can't conceive or do not come of age it is considered as their fault. They are not allowed to raise their voice or to express their opinions even if the matter is about their own self- respect and dignity.

Bakha's sister Sohini is the only significant female character in *Untouchable*. She is another victim of caste-ridden society when she goes to fetch water from the caste well she is compelled to wait for caste Hindu to draw out water for her. Kalinath, the village priest of the temple who obliges her by drawing out water for Sohini suggests her to go to his house later in the day and clean the courtyard. When she goes to his house, he tries to molest her, and on her protest he starts shouting '*polluted,*

*polluted'*, and runs out to gather people who are his obvious supporters. When Bakha witnesses the disgrace of his sister at the hands of bias Hindus the rebel in him reacts but the helplessness of the situation and *the dead weight of years of habitual bending cast on him* (Untouchable64) and forces him to control his anger. He can't do anything except to lament Sohini's existence: *Why was she born a girl in our house to bring disgrace upon us?* (Untouchable67)

Caste Hindus abhor even the shadow of an untouchable however they do not hesitate to rape and molest subaltern women. Lustful and ogling men like priest Kali Nath treat untouchable women as objects that are to be used and thrown. When Mariamma escapes from the clutches of Kumarasami Ayya an upper caste Hindu who tries to molest her, she is advised, *it is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that it is you who will get the blame; it's you who will be called a whore.* (Sangati20) Kumarasamil, to save his reputation like the cunning priest of *Untouchable*, reports against Mariamma of behaving indecently with Manikkam a youth of paraiya community. Mariamma and the youth both are fined but Mariamma is fined Rs 200 and is forced to prostrate herself whereas Manikkam is fined only Rs 100 and is not forced to prostrate. *It's one justice for men and quite another for women.* (Sangati24) Unlike Sohini Dalit women in *Sangati* are not passive sufferers as the narrator questions the injustice and the gender discrimination. *Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, grazing at our toes .... What Patti aren't we also human beings?* (Sangati 29). Women are victims of atrocious physical violence as they are helpless against brutality of men; they devise their own ways to avert male-atrocities. Raakamma while being mauled by her husband shouts obscenities, wails, challenges him and in front of a crowd and shamelessly lifts up her sari to escape violence. She knows that if she doesn't do so her vehement husband will smash her to pulp.

There are also a few instances in *Untouchable* where the indignation of being treated as filth enrages Bakha, *there was a smouldering rage in his soul. His feelings would rise like spurts of smoke from a half-smothered fire, in fitful, unbalanced jerks when the recollection of some abuse or rebuke he had suffered kindled a spark in the ashes of remorse inside him.* (Untouchable 42) When he is utterly despaired by the debasing attitude of Caste Hindus he rushes to the courtyard of the temple. His climbing of the temple stairs represents the rebellious instinct: *He hesitated for a while. Then his will strengthened. With a sudden onslaught he had captured five steps of the fifteen that led to the door of the temple.* (Untouchable 66)

Humiliated and heart-broken Bakha meets Col. Hutchinson, the Christian, missionary, who tries to convert him to Christianity which he rejects. Then he goes to hear Gandhiji's views on social reforms to eradicate untouchability. Gandhiji's views and the proposal of a poet who advocates the need of mechanized sanitation, as the only answer possible to untouchability soothes Bakha's soul. In *Sangati* Christianity doesn't bring any relief to the untouchable women at church. They have to lick the shoes of the priest and be his slaves. Democracy seems the only ray of hope for them. It is the means which will provide them democratic strength to select their representatives, to take their decisions and to free them from the shackles of caste and gender discriminations.

Their social relationships within their own community and with the people of other religions are also intricate and ironical. When Sohini goes to a community well to fetch water, she becomes embroiled in unsuspected caste recriminations. Abandoned by the people of their own religion they draw sympathy from Muslims, Christians and sub-caste people. Bakha is offered a puff at hubble-bubble by a Muslim; when in the market place a caste Hindu hurls abuses at Bakha, a Muslim tonga-wallah comes to his rescue. The Christian missionary also talks to him with kindness and takes Bakha to his place. It is only Havildar Charat Singh among caste Hindus, who has been kind to Bakha and gives him a new hockey-stick. Bakha's sub-caste friends Ram Charan and Chota are his only solace. The major characters of *Sangati* are lower caste women; their interaction is only with their children or

husbands. There is only mention of high caste women who are referred to as dependent on their men. Women of high caste have no pity for lower caste women and treat them with contempt. The lower caste women feel that they are more self-dependent than their high caste counterparts. They feel relieved that their community doesn't have evil rituals like dowry and sati as upper caste Hindus have. Their widows can remarry and they don't suffer as widows of upper castes do.

Though written in different period both the novels accomplish that untouchables who live in a ghetto, have pain and woe as their destiny. Bakha *could not overstep the barriers which the conventions of his superiors had built up to protect their weakness.* (Untouchable 56) He is in search of his existence and in the end Gandhiji's speech awakens his hope of redemption. The women in Sangati have identified the evils that are working against them. Their self-confidence, to make things better for themselves, enable them to overcome adversities of life. Their zest to fight their own battle is probably the difference between the outlooks of people of a slave nation as in *Untouchable* and democratically developed people of independent India.

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