



NEGOTIATION OF CASTE AND GENDER IN DALIT LITERATURE

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Abstract

The paper traces back to the introduction of Dalit Literature and the caste and gender negotiations of Dalit characters. Here I have taken two novels as Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable" and Bama's "Sangati" for discussion of the negotiation of caste and gender. The heart touching explanations and sense of taking back expressions we can see a lot in the presentation of these novels. The theme of gender discrimination, sexual exploitation, social discrimination, gender biased, economic exploitation of dalits, caste discrimination all well portrayed in this presentation. As far as I am concerned I tried to do justification of all the factors suffered by this suppressed class.

Introduction

The history of Dalit literature can be traced back to centuries. But Dalit literary/cultural expressions were never taken into consideration due to the hegemonic nature of the field of literary production. The emergence of Dalit as a political category and identity coincide with the emergence of Dalit literature. Current researches by scholars reveal the widespread character of Dalit writings in various parts of India. Research also shows that Dalit literature had long before acquired a distinct language through its heterogeneous and plurivocal character which challenged dominant literary canons.





Dalit literature acquired a recognizable identity towards the middle of the twentieth century. The term 'Dalit literature' – 'Dalit' meaning oppressed, broken and downtrodden — came into use officially in 1958 at the first conference on Dalit literature in Mumbai. The emergence of the Dalit Panthers (a political organisation formed in 1972 in Maharashtra) is a significant moment in the history of Dalit literature which was furthered by various political/literary movements across India.

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

In this row Mulk Raj Anand is a great novelist with a mission. His aim is to evoke compassion in the minds of the upper class and privileged sections of the society for the poor. His novels expose the silent passions that burst in the hearts of the people who are forbidden to rise up and express themselves. His purpose in writing fiction has been to focus attention on the suffering, misery and wretchedness of the poor and the down-trodden people of the society. He is against all types of exploitation whether by the 'White Sahibs' or by the 'Brown Sahibs'. All the victims of exploitation portrayed by him are based on people in real life. All these real people are the untouchables, the coolies, the poor peasants and the uneducated 'pathans', fighting an unpleasant battle for survival. His humanism makes him to write for the betterment and upliftment of the underdogs of the society.

The first novel Untouchable deals in particular with Anand's humanitarian concern for the untouchables. They are also called as 'Dalits'. He dared to transmute into art the life and feelings of the latrine cleaner Bakha. The novel is about the sweepers of Bulanshahar. Untouchable is not a caste but a group of untouchable castes where sweeper is the lowest rung. Caste plays a significant role in every aspect of Indian life. The novel is about the story of the lowest caste 'Bhangi'. It is a caste which is considered 'untouchable' even among the untouchables themselves. The Hindu society considered the 'dalits' as the dirt of the society. They never respected them even as human beings. Anand felt that the role of literature is not only for entertainment but for social reform. The theme of the novel is an eventful day or





Bakha, a Bhangi boy. The tragic suffering of the Bhangis is clearly revealed through the central character Bakha.

As the novel opens, we see Bakha receiving so many derogatory epithets by Lakha, e.g. „son of a pig“ (P.15), „you illegally begotten“ (P.1), „scoundrel of a sweeper son“ etc. We also get the detail description of the uncongenial surrounding where Bakha has to live: “The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various season, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive smell.” (P.11). Bakha is a boy of eighteen. He is the son of Lakha, the Jamadar of all the sweepers in the town. Bakha has to do the unclean work of cleaning upper castes dirt from their latrines. He is very responsible and duty-conscious. Bakha goes to the town to sweep the streets. There he faces many experiences. Anand, a strong believer in the dignity of man and equality of all men, is naturally shocked by the inhuman way in which the untouchables are treated by the superior castes – especially the Brahmins. The untouchables are forced to live away from the village. They cannot use the public well as the caste Hindus, because the high caste Hindus think that their touch will pollute the well.

In the ‘Well Incident’ in the novel, Anand tries to show the water problem among the untouchables. The Dalits have to wait at the well for a long time, until a caste Hindu is kind enough to draw water from the well and pour it into their pots. Sohini, Bakha’s sister faces the same problem. She goes to take water. She waits for a long time; no one comes forward to fetch water for her. After some time Kalinath, the priest comes there. He is presented as a lustful creature. He is attracted by Sohini’s youthful beauty and draws a pail of water for her from the well. Then he orders her to come to his house to clean the courtyard. When she goes to his house, he tries to molest her. She screams loudly. Suddenly he shouts at her and accuses her for polluting his home. A crowd of angry caste Hindus gathers there to scold her. This incident clearly shows that justice is denied to the untouchables’ even though they are right. As a result they usually become the victims of the upper caste’s lust. Kalinath is supposed to lead a





life of purity both inwardly and outwardly. Here, Anand exposes the hypocrisy and the practice of double standards.

The sad experiences of Bakha, in the town, are revealed by Anand pitifully. In the town Bakha sees many shops and he buys a packet of 'Red-Lamp' cigarettes and cheap sweet meats which are thrown at him by the shop keeper because of the fear of pollution. Even the nickel coins paid by him are purified by sprinkling some water on them. This cruel act shows the ruthless behavior of the high caste people. While he walks, unfortunately a Lalaji, an upper caste Hindu gets touched by him as Bakha forgets to announce his arrival. It is a custom at that time, to announce their approach by beating a drum, so that the man who does not want to get touched by the untouchables be on guard. But, here he forgets to announce his arrival. Lalaji starts shouting at him and also gives him a slap. Tears trickle down from his eyes. He stands motionless without uttering any word. The entire crowd gathered there forms a circle around him but takes care to keep a distance of several yards from him. They all are at the side of the Lalaji. No one is on Bakha's side. He feels extremely insulted and embarrassed. He also recognises with a shock, his social position. It illuminates the inner walls of his mind. He realises that though he possesses, like any human being, head and heart, flesh and blood, he is in the eyes of the world an 'Untouchable'. Here, Anand raises a question. If an untouchable boy touches a caste Hindu, it is considered as pollution. But a priest like Kalinath tries to touch an untouchable girl for his physical need is not considered as pollution. Why is this strange logic? It is the logic of injustice.

Another example of their sufferings is shown through the 'Temple Incident'. Bakha after being hurt by the Lalaji in the town goes to the temple to sweep the courtyard. He sees the devotees in the temple are chanting 'Ram, Ram'. He wants to go up and see the deities, but he does not have the courage to go inside. Because, being an untouchable he is not allowed to move beyond the courtyard. Finally, he decides to go inside and climbs five steps. Then he has a glimpse of a sanctuary which had so far been a secret, a hidden mystery to him. He looks at the deities and unconsciously joined his hands and bowed down his head in the worship of the





unknown God. He hears just then a loud cry. He is seen by a priest worshipping the God and the priest scolded him and said that he had polluted the temple.

Towards the end of the novel Bakha meets Colonel Hutchinson, chief of the Salvation Army. He talks to Bakha about Christian faith, but Bakha cannot get peace of mind in his words. Then he listens to the speech of Mahatma Gandhi in a meeting. His speech plays a great role in the novel. He says that untouchability is the greatest bolt on Hinduism. He calls Untouchables 'Harijans', the sons of God. Bakha is highly influenced by his words. He also meets a poet in the meeting. The poet's name is Iqbal Nath Sarshar. He says that the problem of untouchability can be solved, if the flush system is introduced. After hearing all these words, Bakha's wounded heart gets consoled.

Anand's novel *Untouchable* is considered as the 'Dalit novel' by the 'Non Dalit'. To crown the effect, Anand has introduced Gandhi as a character in the novel. Both Gandhi and Anand stand for the exploited against the exploiters and do not believe in passive acceptance of injustice. Anand's life and experience in the novel 'Sabarmati Ashram' proved extremely useful in realising the characters of the novel. For staying in the Ashram he is asked to take few vows. Especially his cleaning of latrines in the ashram is a lesson in recognising the dignity of labour. He realised that devotion to duty is the highest form of worship and all labour is a kind of creativity.

Main themes of the novel explained with Quotations:

According to Premila Paul, Bakha serves as a mirror to the pathetic correlation of the untouchables. He represents all those sweepers who are doomed to live life worse than the slaves. E.M.Forster in his Preface to *Untouchable* rightly observes;

....The slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse.... (10).





1. The theme of exploitation is best expressed through the character of Sohini, Bakha's sister.

"She had in her docile and peaceful bearing." . Gulabo, a washer woman, a caste superior to all other outcastes exploits Sohini. "Now Sohini, being of the low caste among the outcastes would naturally be looked down upon by Gulabo".

2. She becomes the victim of sexual exploitation due to her caste and poverty. She is very beautiful but she has not enough clothes to protect her beauty from the hungry eyes of the male. Saros Cowasjee in *So Many Freedoms* observes:

Her figure could have vied with the sculptured images of Konark and Khajurao, but she has been condemned by birth to walk the path of the outcastes and to suffer their mortification. (Cowasjee 90)

3. Bakha's father Lakha is the symbol of passive submission to the exploitation by the high castes. He is so afraid of them all that when Bakha talks about retaliation, he says,

"We cannot do that. They are our superiors. One word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kind."

4. Denial of education to the outcastes is a part of social exploitation. Bakha aspires after education and wishes to go to school when he was a child.

"But then his father had told him that the schools were meant for the babus, not for bhangis. He hadn't understood the reason for that then."

5. By confronting supreme arrogance of the high caste exploiters against the low caste exploited, Anand creates sympathy for the low caste. Those who clean dirt are treated like dirt by the high castes. The caste Hindu feels, "They ought to be wiped off the surface of the





Earth!" On the contrary, Anand shows the depression of the untouchables through the question of the protagonist "What have I done to deserve all this?"

6. Anand exposes the hypocrisy of these high caste shop keepers even. "They accept the money paid by the outcaste by splashing water on it and throw at them the things they buy. He caught the jalebis which the confectioner threw at him like a cricket ball, placed four nickel coins on the shoe-board for confectioner's assistant who stood ready to splash some water on them".

Bama's Sangati

This paper is a study or the analysis of dalit marginalization, discrimination, isolation and humiliation from common tradition of life especially the tragic condition of dalit women in Indian society. In India there is a huge campus of religion situated in the society. There are four major caste divisions in India, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The lowest caste people came under Shudra's. They are regarded as dalits. These people are suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalized in every sphere of life. These people are also regarded as untouchables/ Achoot/ Harijan. In Indian society some communities are at the lowest step like: dalits, females, poor, eunuchs, etc. If the woman belongs to dalit community they suffered of two types: first being a woman, second belongs to the lowest community. Therefore it could be said they are "doubly oppressed."

In 1980's first feminist criticism became much more electric. It focused upon attacking male version of the world to exploring the nature of female experiences. In the Indian social ladder dalit refers to on the lowest step. Dalit feminism points out repeatedly that Dalit struggle has tended to forget a gender perspective. In dalit society every women live under the double power of caste and patriarchy. They are doubly oppressed.





Women's are considered as the symbol of sex and object of pleasure. A study of dalit feminist writing reveals a tale of endless miseries, inhuman victimization and shocking gender discrimination. Bama was already, formulating a dalit feminist. She was a Tamil Dalit Christian.

Sangati was originally written in Tamil in 1994. It was translated by Laxmi Halmstrom into English. The whole narrative is divided into twelve chapters. The word *Sangati* means events, and thus the novel through individual stories, anecdotes and memories portrays the event, that takes place in the life of a woman in paraiya community. The novel also reveals how Paraiya women double oppressed. *Sangati* deals with several generation of women: the older women belongs to narrators grandmothers generation Velliamma Kizhavi's generation, and downward generation belongs to narrator, and the generation coming after as she grows up.

Sangati is an autobiography of her community, which highlights the struggle of Paraiya women. Bama chooses only a woman protagonist for every story in her novel *Sangati* contributes both to the dalit movement and to the women's movement in India specially Tamilnadu. "*Sangati* is a look at a part of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them and through this, they the courage to revolt." (2005.8.)

Sangati also refers news and the book is full of interconnected events—the everyday happenings of dalit community. It goes against the notions of traditional novel. The book does not carry any plot in the normal sense, but it is a series of anecdotes. The author herself says the purpose of writing the book in her acknowledgement.

"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 culture, passion about life with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories." (9.)

Women are presented in *sangati* as wage earners as much as men as working as agricultural and building side labours, But earning less than men do. Yet the money that earn in their own





to spend as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family. Women are also constantly victim to sexual harassment and abuse in the world of work.

Sangati encapsulates the author's experience of working within an erogenous and appressed society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news and events as narrated in the book, from an autobiography of a community. *Sangati* is a portrayal of many trouble witnessing stories as ones writers Paatti said "Once you are born a woman can you go and confront a group of four or five men?" Should you ever do it? (28.)

This narration accommodates more than 35 characters most of whom.....female, but in conventional sense there is no individual who may be tagged as hero or heroine. Bama gives another picture of the community. Although both men and women came after a hard day's work in the field. The men went straight to the bazaar or chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the women they return home wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, gather firewood, go to the shops to buy rice and other provision boil some rice, make a kazhambu or a kanji feed husband and children before they eat what is left over and go to bed.(59)

Even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain; they were not allowed to sleep. Whether she dies or survived, she had to finish his business. Women were not allowed to take part on any occasion, the man themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow us to join in. (32)

The book deals with gender bias faced by dalit women right from the childhood. Girl babies are always considered inferior and taken less care. Dalit girls are hardly enjoying her childhood. They have little time to play as she has to take care of their younger siblings. Maikkanni is one such girl who has started to work from the day she learns to walk. (70).

Bama on the whole gives a vivid portrayal of physical violence like hanging, beating and canning that are faced by dalit women from their fathers, husbands and brothers. Bama explores the





psychological stress and stairs. She is a writer who is more prone to use Tamil dalit slogans. She used to address the village woman the the suffix 'Amma' (mother) along with their names. She is unique in addressing the names of places, months, rituals, ornaments, clothes, etc. She interminably uses various Tamil words. She also criticises to a large extent of Indian church. Bama as a unique being raises her voice for Paraiya women in her works. The important character of this novel are Vellaiamma Patti, a small girl and the narrator herself, gets the story from her grandmother which later turns out to be the development of novel. In this novel Bama shows the courage of many female characters who could break the fetters of people in power. She claims that they live their life under pressure and get their full life being enjoyed.

In India there is prevalence of caste –hierarchy within sub castes of dalit community. In *Sangati*, the Catholic priests were also gender biased and treated the converted dalit confessional and the other, is conventional. And thus she goes deep up to the historical perspective of dalit community. Bama has personally experienced the marginalized. She sums up their situations in following lines:

“Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and humiliation.....Became we have not been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die, As if we are blind, even though we have eyes”.

Sangati examines “the difference between women and their different ways in which they are subject to apportion and their coping strategies”. In the novel the language of dalit women is rich and resourceful giving way to proverbs, folklore and folk songs. Bama as a feminist writer, protests against all forms of oppression and sufferings faced by dalit women in the first half of *Sangati*. But later part of *Sangati* moves away from the state of depression and frustration. Instead it presents a positive identity to dalit women focusing their inner strength and vigor. She also attracts our mind towards the education system about dalit community. She gave the example of Pecchiamma, who belongs to Chakkili community, studied only up to fifth class. The girls of that community do not go to school all that much.





Through *Sangati* Bama holds the mirror up to the heart of dalit women. She makes an appeal for change and betterment of the life of a dalit women in the variety of fields, including sex and gender discrimination, equal opportunity in work force, education rights etc. Actually gives the narrator a key function and controls all the incidents and events in a proper way. The narrator becomes both omniscient narrator and a controlling agent of their story, who speaks out historical aspects of dalit community through variety of characters, and it becomes development of novel. Bama is clear that no one is going to help the hopeless women in her community, it is up to the woman themselves to take their lives into their own hands. Hard labor and precariousness of dalit women leads to a culture of violence, and this runs through the novel.

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