

Indian English Literature and its caste discrimination; A Great Blow on Cultural diversity, with a special reference to Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable'**Abu Thahir P, Dept.Of English
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India as a vast and richest country in the world, has a glorious and very colourful past from the very beginning, of civilizations, of heritages and of cultural diversity also. The Indian culture, often labelled as an amalgamation of various cultures of many religions, faiths and spans across the Indian subcontinent and has been credited with shaping much of Indian philosophy, literature, architecture, art and music. Amongst the different aspects of Indian cultures, Indian literature has a recognisable heritage, mainly in epics (mahakavyam), poetry (kavyam) and dramas (natyam). Through literature which is truly diverse in nature, only we could present any subjects of literary traditions in India which is one of the richest in the world, combining as it does the diverse linguistic and cultural traditions which coexist within the Indian subcontinent. Indian writing in English, still considered an elite and esoteric brand of literature even after more than two hundred years of its existence because it has a collective well-equipped and prominent prolific writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Bhában Bhattacharya, Anita Desai, G V Dasani, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, R K Narayan, Raja Rao, Nayanta Saghal and Khushwant Singh, like in other literatures like American and British we have also many genres like novels in fiction as well as non-fiction. It is evident that the major Indian English novelists came from the privileged middle and upper classes that they are largely urban Westernised and have had access to higher education and stay abroad, and mostly they were Brahmins.

Among the novelists identified we find that Anand and Bhattacharya have PhDs from the University of London; Abbas and Khušhwant Singh are lawyers, both LLBs, the latter a Bar at-Law in addition; Ahmed Ali, Desai, Desani, Ghoseh are MA s; Joshi is an M Tech from MIT; among the others, Santha Rama Rau, Raja Rao and Sahgal have been educated abroad; only Malgonkar and Narayan, it would appear, are plain BAs from India, from this very point we could find that caste and class have major influence in Indian writing in English. all of the upper caste writers represented others with no much care about the realities of life, even though they have won the series of prestigious awards for their works, in which the depiction of low class characters were done mistakenly but scored the maximum points and portrayals of lower classes in their works have managed the upper caste authors' to win accolades.

Unfortunately, not many of our novelists writing in English care about the authorial responsibilities. Most of them still cling to such absurd themes as 'East-West Encounter',

‘Tradition-Modernity Conflict’, ‘Alienation’, ‘Spiritual Quest’, ‘Search for Identity’, and the like. That most of our English novelists live either in metropolitan cities or in foreign/ western countries is an important and deciding factor in the choice of themes and characters. They hardly have any first-hand experience of Indian life, culture and heritage, they were not able to speak of rural life, and therefore they feel more comfortable and secure with selecting themes and characters from the privileged class of people. As a result, not only Dalit, but also the under-privileged classes of Indian society rarely find space in Indian novels in English.

As a result most of the Dalit characters were portrayed by upper caste Hindus and such portrayals were based on mere observation, which turned out to be shallow, inauthentic and just stereotypes of what they perceived. In fact literature which is meant for challenging the under-representation, negative stereotyping and discrimination in society - based not just on ethnicity, but also on religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability and helped to promote equality, but it was a great failure of Indian society, where lower class people have no access to education and therefore couldn't stand at least through writings and resist themselves. Here Dalit writers who stood for all marginalised and under privileged classes who are excluded from mainstream society especially minorities and wrote their harsh realities for the sake of their betterment.

Emerging of Dalit literature as a discourse was of a great importance as Arundhati Roy has observed: "I do believe that in India we practice a form of apartheid that goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. And it is as important for Dalits to tell their stories as it has been for colonized peoples to write their own histories. When Dalit literature has blossomed and is in full stride, then contemporary (upper caste?) Indian literature's amazing ability to ignore the true brutality and ugliness of the society in which we live, will be seen for what it is: bad literature. It will become irrelevant."

When Indian novelists pen a literary work about the lower classes, there is always a risk of caricature and mirroring the realities of Dalit's life. The tradition of Upper caste writers dealing with the subject of Untouchability or Dalit life starts with the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's first novel "Untouchable"(1935). Other works by Anand Coolie (1936), Two Leaves and a Bud (1937), The Old Woman and the Cow (1960), and The Road (1961). However the problem of untouchables does not seem to have properly addressed in this novel it stands up for the cause of the untouchables, unlike his predecessor and contemporary writers.

Class/Caste Dichotomy

In Indian English literature, the dominance of caste hierarchy among the writers especially Brahmins is unjustifiable, because what they represented was the caste or Varna not the class or the race. But still there are many critics like Makarand R Paranjape who argues through his journal article ‘perspectives, caste of Indian English novel’ that really Dalit struggle was a class struggle not a caste struggle at all, using some strange arguments of elitism and de-brahamanisation. K Satyanarayana responds to the argument with sound proofs and evidences through his article in same journal ‘Politics of Self –Representation Case of a 'De,-Brahminised'

Brahmin' which establishes the very existence of caste hierarchy in Indian English novels like in 'untouchable' penned by Mulk Raj Anand. He could find that what Paranjape makes some hints about 'the privileged middle and upper class' mostly they are Brahmins which indicates that caste and class are interrelated each other and it is separable.

Another notion of De-brahmanisation which is justified by paranjape is that most of the Brahmin writers who are de-brahmanised by shedding their traditional values, symbols and ways of life since they adopted westernisation, gave up hereditary caste based privileges unilaterally and acquired other secular privileges also by marrying the women out of their caste and class even foreigners also like Ramaswamy and also by going outside for higher education which was the violation of their traditional rules and restrictions like endogamy, commensality, hereditary occupations, notions of purity/impurity, and a sense of hierarchy. But Satyanarayana redefined this De-brahmanisation as Re-brahmanisation since "the ideal Brahman hood" while giving up the "ritual surface' or traditional rules were some examples of the reformulation/reinforcement of caste identity and it was a clash between their traditional and 'progressive Brahmin hood' or we can consider it as only violation of the 'traditional caste rules' but not their identity of caste itself. The social change that the Brahmins are said to have associated with always "ensure [their survival but facilitate retaining a position of high status and authority" (p 2299). Paranjape himself admits that

"The Brahmins did not give up hereditary, caste-based privileges unilaterally, but set about to acquire new, secular privileges" (p 2301).

Then what we could understand from this is that even though class and caste both are interrelated or there is a class or caste dichotomy between each other, the fact is that we can't never change our caste or Varna, but what we can do is to change our class or race in a sense. We can ensure that Dalit struggle was not a class struggle but it was a caste struggle by any means especially in Indian writing in English.

Untouchable

Untouchable (1935) penned by Mulk Raj Anand is the story of one day in the life of a Dalit named Bakha belonging to the sweeper caste. Although he is conscious of the "six thousand years of racial and class superiority" He is attacked by the upper caste people for accidentally touching a man in the street. Then the primal instincts of the urbane high caste people and the insecurities of caste hierarchy are exposed throughout the novel.

Through Bakha, the novelist realistically interrogates the issues of untouchability, segregation and oppression in the Indian context. The plights of untouchables are represented through Bakha and his fresh re-cognition 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, dalits being forbidden from entering into temples, the difficulty of moving along a street without touching or being touched, his

clothes and cleanliness becoming objects of ridicule, and even being accused of defiling a high caste boy he carries home who was injured in the hockey field.

At the end of the day, Bakha has to choose from three options. perhaps these were the only choices which the novelist could think of in the context of the colonial India. First, conversion: a missionary advises him to become a Christian, which would free him from his caste identity and his enslavement; secondly, he listens to Gandhi's vision of social reform to end the miseries of the untouchables; and thirdly, he learns about the modern mechanised system of sanitation, which would no more require an untouchable to do his/her job manually. Insulted and abused several times during the day, Bakha is still in a state of confusion. He cannot reach a solution, because the novelist cannot offer any; he/she can merely present the realities before the reader.

Anand fails to understand the real problems of dalits and what he says is through his point of view not of dalits or low class people. Behind this there is a great history that his political and literary begins with the awareness of the oppression of British imperialism in India, with the massacre at Jalian wala bagh in 1919. a year after he came to England, where he witnessed general strike in London (1926), which was stricken in his mind of self-respect against the coolies in India, porters and sweepers also who were being kicked out from the fore front. He called them "the better off untouchables of Europe".

Bakha's aspirations for a better life, as manifest in his desiring of knowledge of the English language and of Britain military clothing, primarily as an indication of his intellectual and cultural poverty, which means that Dalit's identity is questioned both intellectually and culturally and it is very obvious that also indicates Anand's ignorance about Dalit aspirations. Anand here takes some attempts to bridge gaps between desires and access to the means of fulfilling these desires (desire for English and western clothing). Bakha's father tells him that schools were meant for Babus not for the sweepers, he is not allowed to enter school because parents would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low caste man's sons and masters also wouldn't teach the outcastes lest their fingers should touch the leaves of the outcaste's books and they be polluted.

After Anand's return to India in 1945, he began narrating his life story but was left incomplete at the time of his death, four of which were taken from well-known speech in Shakespeare's 'A you like it', where life is divided into seven ages and which begins "all the world's a stage/ and the men and women merely players". 'Untouchable' and 'coolie' were his best works and his publication of the book titled 'conversations in Bloomsbury' is about literary figures in England like Virginia Woolf, TS Elliot, DH Lawrence, Leonard Woolf, Aldous Huxley and EM Forster. Gandhi who was responsible for his writing of 'untouchable' focussing on Gandhian principles.

Gandhi and Ambedkar

Since Mulk Raj Anand was an admirer of Gandhi, he followed Gandhian principles throughout the novel, in every crook and corner of his thoughts, where he quotes his speech; "I

claim in my own person to represent the vast mass of untouchables” and he declares that of his decision to go on a hunger strike if separate electorates given to untouchables. Once the independence movement got underway, nationalist Indians like Gandhi and Nehru were expected to shed their western masculine attire and swadeshi; he began to dress upon his return in India after twenty years abroad, never having lived in an Indian village, but being from upper class society dalits suffered a lot to accommodate him, unlike Ambedkar who was most inclusive than Gandhi. Here the problem lies with treating with marginalised in a bad manner not with the doing job like sweeping or other works.

Ambedkar, having ten years spent abroad in USA and England, couldn't afford this luxury of going Indian, on his return to India but he was by “caste” a Maher, being a London-trained barrister of law like Gandhi, he had to constantly battle caste discrimination and fight against the social disparities, despite his foreign degrees and the role he was to play in the shaping of new nation. Hence, in public Ambedkar was always dressed in formal western attire, in a full western suit with a tie, with a pen in his pocket, often with a book in his hand and certainly with formal closed shoes on his feet.

He believed with education, political power and better employment opportunities only can do betterment because they are supposed to be more formal in their appearances in order to maintain their status according to the social mobility or expectations that society have of them. In the novel also Bakha's sense of self-respect and nationalist project to dress and be “Indian”.

Eleanor Zelliott states that; “while Gandhi's saint-peasant garb reinforced the identity with the Indian masses he sought, Ambedkar's western dress and his independent critical temperament underlined the new identity he sought for the Maher” then both kept their identities throughout the life but Ambedkar contributed than Gandhi did for the sake of Dalit movements and his living style was the same to that of Dalit but what Gandhi tried is to live as a Dalit refusing all luxuries of life in simplicity which is entirely different from the harsh realities of Dalit lives.

Another main deviations between Gandhi and Ambedkar were the matter of “conversion” which was selected by Ambedkar in order to escape from the caste hierarchy, understanding that standing within the framework of Hinduism he can't never get salvation from this evil because there within the ideology of Hinduism the caste hierarchy exists then by breaking this bound to religion only he can get emancipation from this deep rooted casteism that is why he chose the Buddhism to be converted in to it, where no casteist practices at all. He says that; “I was born as a Hindu but I will not die as Hindu”.

But Gandhi tried to defend casteism standing within the religion itself, not having much concern with the fact that Hinduism itself promotes the very idea of casteist attitudes, since there are myths about the births of various castes like Brahmin from head, Kshatriyas from chest, Vaishyas from knee and Shudras from the feet. We can see the success of Ambedkar where Gandhi failed because of religion. From here we can see the importance of conversion which is the only way to get salvation from these casteist attitudes.

Conversion

Conversion which was the only way of emancipation from caste hierarchy, but even though the question that whether dalits practiced the equality and justice among the society even after their conversion is still existing unanswered. But what we could understand from recent studies done by scholars is the fact that in post converted life of dalits also we can see that they are not getting the equal rights and justice they deserved especially in Kerala context, once they converted to either Islam or Christianity still they are suffering from inequalities since they are been called as Dalit Christian or Dalit Muslims by their identity. Then it is very obvious that the caste by which they were born into, is going to never change but it is the only class or race is going to adopt changes. What is my conclusion in my work is that to change the mentality of the society since we can't change their identity forever and what I am preferring is that the way chosen by Ambedkar which tells us the fact that, doing a job like sweeping is not cheap or unfair but it is the approach done by the society by treating them in not well manner and calling them as 'salvages' which is unfair and cheap.

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