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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE AND ROHINTON
MISTRY'S A FINE BALANCE

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to discuss the plight of the outcastes and the quest for identity by the marginalized has been portrayed in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. These novels deal with the outcasts or the marginalized of the society even though they have been written sixty years apart. They have been written during times of political turmoil and unrest in India. While the entire nation is facing the unsettled times, the outcastes are twice repressed. Anand has tried to showcase the plight of the harijans while Mistry has dealt with the others like poor tailors.

Keywords: subaltern, untouchable, marginalized, identity, quest, politics, colonial rule, emergency, displacement

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand wrote *Untouchable* in 1935. Back then, Said's concept of other (1972) and the voice of the subaltern (starting 1982 with Ranajit Guha) were still to see the light of day. But, in 1848, Karl Marx had published his theory of a society based on worker revolution against capitalism and in favour of communism. Against the backdrop of colonial empires, we find an urge for decentering the empire, of getting freedom from a foreign rule. In 1915, mahatma Gandhi returned to India to fight against the injustices of a foreign rule just as he had fought against apartheid in South Africa. Similarly, Gandhiji also insisted on the rights of the Harijans i.e., the untouchables.

Mulk Raj Anand too was moved by the plight of the harijans. He centered his novel *Untouchable* on an untouchable boy Bakha. Written sixty years later in 1995, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* also

deals with the other, the voiceless subalterns. He does not deal specifically with the untouchables but the unfortunates of the society like poor tailors against the backdrop of Emergency.

Discussion

Indian English fiction began with the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864. But it was not until the advent of Mulk Raj Anand to the Indian literary scene that the plight of the untouchables finds any expression in Indian fiction. It was Anand, who in the words of C. D. Narasimhaiah "brought into fiction the coolie, the cobbler and the untouchable, who form the bulk of the Indian people." *Untouchable* is set in India during its struggle for Independence. Bakha, the principal character of the novel works as the jemadar of the barracks and lives in the outcastes' colony. The East-West interaction that began with the onset of the colonial rule started wroghting

deep-seated changes in the Indian mindset. Bakha dreams of “becoming a gentryman”. He is affected by what he himself calls “fashun.” He buys western (read military) attire as well as a blanket from a second-hand shop. He refuses to be treated as dirt. He complains to his father, “They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt.” This is in stark contrast to his brother Rakha who is described as being “a true child of the outcaste’s colony.” He doesn’t remain confined within the limits of social interaction and plays hockey with the upper caste boys. However, the caste system allows Bakha no means of escape, unless, he after Rousseau’s ideal plan is placed outside the social order. Bakha feels that if he goes to clean the city streets, perhaps his job would be less obnoxious. However, when he accidentally touches an upper caste, the furore that ensues, shatters all his hopes. It is only with the advent of technology that Bakha can free himself from this lowly job.

In Rohinton Mistry’s novel *A Fine Balance* we find the same stirrings of the quest for identity in Dukhi and his progeny, Ishwar, Narayan and Omprakash. While Dukhi had lived the prime of his life before independence, Ishwar, Narayan and Omprakash grow up during the Emergency. Dukhi too is motivated by the same ardour as Bakha and tries to break free from the shackles of the caste system. Ill treated and humiliated in the village, Dukhi decides to leave the village and go to work in the city, though even there in the scope of a cobbler. Like Bakha who discovers that the dirt to be cleaned in the city is no less obnoxious than the dirt in the barracks, Dukhi too discovers that the dirt in people’s shoes smell the same everywhere. He decides that the only way he can hope for betterment for his sons, Ishwar and Narayan, is by giving them another profession than the one to which they were born. He decides to train them to the profession of tailoring. He sends them to a Muslim for training, which is in itself an act of rebellion. It is people’s shifting from place to place and the inter-mixing between the castes and religions that give rise to social mobility and can finally remove the stigma of untouchability. However, this is doomed to failure in Mistry’s novel since Narayan, Ishwar and Om (Narayan’s son) play

out their destiny in the backdrop of the Emergency, a time “when” in Mistry’s words, “the system went out of order. And it went out of order because the rule of law was suspended...” (Oprah Show). Narayan loses his life and brings about the death of his family residing with him in the village, when he protests against the practice of lack of choice in voting during the elections; the elections as such were dominated by the upper castes. On the other hand, the Beautification drive causes Ishwar and Om to first lose their home and then their physical well being and their jobs to the Sterilization and Garibi Hatao drives of the then government.

Another major difference between the two novels lies in the presentation of the sufferings of the subalterns. While Anand tries to draw our attention to their miserable existence through compassion and understanding, Mistry uses the realistic mode to feelingly describe the harassment, sexual exploitation, brutal repression, and mass killings of the chamars in sordid and gory detail.

Through direct narration as well as through the stream of consciousness technique, Anand tries to awaken our sympathy for the sufferings of Bakha. Anand writes explaining Bakha’s miserable predicament, “The mind which has once peeped into the wonderland of the new...is shocked and disappointed when living reality pulls in the reigns of the wild horse of fancy...The vagaries of Bakha’s naïve tastes can be both explained and excused. He didn’t like his home, his street, his town, because he had been to work at the Tommie’s barracks, and obtained glimpses of another world, strange and beautiful; he had grown out of his native shoes into the ammunition boots that he had secured as a gift” (pg. 98) but with shock realizes that “they would ill-treat us even if we shouted.”

In Mistry’s novel on the other hand, we find vivid and realistic presentation of the lives of the outcastes in the village in Chapter III “A Village by the River”. We are shown how they live in dire poverty and humiliation. When a stone mortar accidentally breaks, Dukhi is accused of breaking it and turned out without his due returns. Dukhi’s wife, Radha, has to prostitute herself in lieu of the fruits that she goes to steal from neighbours’ orchards because she

can't afford to buy any. We also get vivid glimpses of the life in slums, the sufferings caused by the Beautification drive and numerous other drives, which ultimately leave Ishwar and Om homeless, crippled and jobless. About the Beautification drive, Mistry writes, "The hutment dwellers were massed on the road, fighting to return to their shacks, their cries mingling with sirens of ambulances ... The police had lost control for the moment. The residents surged forward, gaining the advantage. The police rallied and beat them back ... The hutment dwellers struggled back from the pulse of the assault, spent, venting their anguish in helpless rage. 'Heartless animals! For the poor there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing, now it's less than nothing!" (pp 291)

As India was struggling to gain Independence, she was also trying to loosen the grasp of casteism from her society. The attempt of the colonized to regain their lost territory also inevitably led to the call for the subalterns of the society to regain their position and prestige in the society. Writing while India was still struggling for Independence, when the Indian society was going through a period of change, Anand tried to awaken people's compassion for the outcastes. While Mistry, writing so many years after Independence when efforts of the downtrodden for their betterment had played itself out so many times, presents to us the spectacle of how their efforts are often thwarted by the vicious circle of poverty and casteism and also by various political and social movements, of which the worst sufferers are often the most backward with vivid realism. A watchword of Mexican politics, coined by Carlos Hank González, is "Show me a politician who is poor, and I will show you a poor politician." This can as well be applied to the Indian situation and can be found to be the root cause of the continued misery of the outcastes in our society since the current politicians are too like the erstwhile colonial British capitalists who had "taken the Indian bourgeoisie more and more into partnership in order jointly to exploit the masses ..." Moreover, a backward community would ensure a field upon which votes could be gathered with promises (to be soon broken and replaced) for betterment.

Conclusion

Since Anand wrote *Untouchable*, we have come a long way in fighting against casteism. But the struggle still continues as can be seen in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

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