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RESISTANCE AND STRUGGLE IN *UNTOUCHABLE* BY MULK RAJ ANAND AND *JOOZHAN* BY OM PRAKASH VALMIKI: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

On 26th January 1950, an independent India adopted the new constitution and untouchability was legally abolished. But the Dalits continue to face the pain of oppression socially, economically, and politically. Dalit literature which emerged in the 1950's is a revolt against dominant ideology and the unjust social order. *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand (1935) belongs to the pre-independence era whereas *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki (1950) belongs to the post-independence era. Both the works deal with the life and struggles of the low castes, with their quest for identity, dignity, justice, and equality. One cannot help but feel restless while reading between the lines in the two novels, The comparative study of these texts is a sincere attempt to give expression to the sufferings, tortures, social discrimination, oppression, and inhuman treatment meted out to them by the upper castes. They portray their struggle for social equality and individual dignity. This paper tries to delve deeper into the horrors of discrimination faced by the characters in the novels and reopen the dialogue in the realm of dalit literature.

Keywords: Caste, Untouchability, Protest, Exploitation, Dalit

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar argued in *Annihilation of Caste*: "This is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster." It is sometimes said against the mainstream Indian writers that they can give only the external picture of the dalit life and culture. It is argued that to write on dalits is not enough because they cannot articulate like the dalit writers themselves what it means to be a dalit in Indian society.

DISCUSSION

According to Premila Paul, "*Untouchable* is the result of an impassioned obsession and has no story interest as such, since it records a day's events in Bakha's life which serves as a mirror to the pathetic condition of the untouchables who form not only the lowest stratum of our society but also the bottom of the moral scale." Mulk Raj Anand wanted to create in his readers a strong awareness of the social evils like caste system and untouchability which he found quite dehumanizing. He had very intimate personal experiences because as a boy he had actually played with the untouchable boys of the sweeper colony which was attached to

the regiment where his father was working. His novels clearly show that he himself is inspired by the love of man when he incorporates in them the philosophy of humanism.

The autobiographical account *Joothan* portrays the pain, poverty and humiliation which the author and his community had to undergo just because they belonged to the untouchable Chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh. They had to depend on the Joothan of the upper caste Tyagis of the village and were treated like lifeless objects by them. For centuries, dalits have not only been compelled to consume but also relish this Joothan. Valmiki gives the example of his community how Joothan became a part of its folklore when during the marriage season their elders narrated, in thrilled voices, stories of the bridegrooms' party that had left several months of Joothan. The author's struggle to get education in the school where upper caste Tyagis dominated, was really exhausting. The very fact that the untouchables should be given opportunities to get education and become their equals, made the untouchables the victims of the wrath of Tyagis. Valmiki narrates an incident which throws light on the upper caste teacher and a dalit student relationship. He writes: One day headmaster Kaliram called me in his room and asked: "Abey, what is your name?"

"Omprakash," I answered slowly and fearfully.

"Chuhare ke?" Headmaster threw his second question at me.

"Ji."

"All right.... See that teak tree there? Go. Climb on that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation."

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is the story of one day of Bakha, the protagonist's life who represents the trauma of being a dalit in the pre-independence India. He lives in the separately marked colony of the outcastes in a village of Bulandshahr which is located in the interior of Panjab. Living in this colony, a living picture of misery

and insanitation, Bakha carries out his task of cleaning the public latrines of the upper caste Hindus. He gets up early and does his job from morning to evening very efficiently and sincerely. But still he is treated in a very humiliating way and no one recognizes his worth. He doesn't get angry when Havildar Charat Singh says, "Oh, Bakhya! Oh, Bakhya! Oh, you scoundrel of a sweeper's son! Come and clear a latrine for me!" (7) Humiliation, trauma and exploitation of the dalits is clearly visible in these words. Anand gives a detailed description of the life being led by dalits in the following words: "The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were to draw water from it, the Hindus of three upper castes would consider the water polluted...So, the outcastes had to wait for chance to bring some caste Hindu to the well, for luck to decide that he was kind, for Fate to ordain that he had time- to get their pitchers filled with water." (14-15) Anand attacks the social, economic, cultural and political exploitation of the dalits. Pandit Kalinath represents the high caste Hindus who get polluted by the very touch of the untouchables but they don't mind seducing a sweeper girl like Sohini. This picture presented by Anand is in no way different from the one presented by Valmiki in *Joothan*.

Whereas Valmiki is successful in showing resistance, Bakha also wants to protest against caste discrimination but ends up as a victim and a passive sufferer. He is totally dissatisfied with the life he is being compelled to lead and has a dream to change the society. The author describes his anguish vehemently when he tells his father that they think that "We are mere dirt because we clean their dirt." (70) Anand writes, "But 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." (42) Unlike Valmiki's father, Bakha's father doesn't have much courage. When Pandit Kalinath tries to molest his sister Sohini, Bakha becomes so aggressive that he wants to kill him to take revenge. But he somehow controls the anger because he is just reminded of his low caste. He comes back home very upset. When

his father comes to know about everything, he tries to pacify him. Anand writes, 'No, no, my son, no' said Lakha, 'we can't do that. They are our superiors. One word of theirs is sufficient to overbalance all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us...' (71) Bakha wants to revolt but he is rooted in such a society where he is reduced only to be a silent rebel. So Bakha is both a rebel and a victim at the same time. It is therefore only in the end he sees hope in Christianity, Gandhi's movement against untouchability and the modern sanitary system.

CONCLUSION

Though Valmiki and Bakha both represent the dalit psyche, a close study of these two characters shows that resistance and protest is on the rise as we move from *Untouchable* to *Joothan*. This is clearly reflected so far as their behaviour, frustrations and aspirations are concerned. Bakha only dreams and then accepts everything as his destiny but Valmiki is successful in breaking the traditions of the caste based social and economic order by his attempt to get education, becoming a writer and refusing to become a sweeper in life.

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