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MULK RAJ ANAND AND OM PRAKASH VALMIKI AS A REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
UNHEARD VOICES: A STUDY OF *UNTOUCHABLE* AND *JOOCHAN*

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ABSTRACT

The present research article is an attempt to study Anand and Valmiki humanistic concern that finds expression in their novels where oppressed and downtrodden people are taken as the protagonist as for their mission of social reformation. Both Mulk Raj Anand and Valmiki voiced the woes of the socially voiceless communities of India. Their social concern is clearly projected in their novels. Both the writers, Anand and Om Prakash Valmiki have realistically depicted the very sensitive issue of Dalits. Dalit literature is the literature about the Dalits, an oppressed India class under the Indian caste system. It forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Dalit literature is uniquely Indian as it is a byproduct of an evil caste system that existed for centuries in our country. Dalit literature is the literature of the untouchables. It is a protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste, or occupation.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Indian caste system, voiceless, humiliation, discrimination, oppressed, Untouchable

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is an echo or reflection of the society and that is why authors have a direct association with the society and its values. They never hesitate to show a dirty and filthy image of the society at the particular era or age. The caste system is a burning reality of the Indian social system and has made a large number of people the victim of inhuman exploitation and persecution. Social fiction writers and dramatists have roused the conscience of the public to realize the damages caused by the extreme social differences and exploitations. Their writing has become social eye openers. Many studies have been made for examining the roots of the difficulties and hardships of society and such studies arise as a social response to social injustices experienced by the

individual. Mulk Raj Anand and Valmiki as socially conscious writers expose the social evils prevalent in the society and also the hypocritical attitude of the individual and the society as a whole in their novels. Both Anand and Valmiki portray the social realities of their time in their novels. Undoubtedly, *Untouchable* is Anand's modern work which is the image of his society's trodden and exploited class. This piece is considered to be an autobiographical note which came out as a form of his experiences. When Anand was a child his father was employed as a Subedar in the Indian army. During those days Anand was mixed with the children of leather workers, washermen and sweepers and came across their daily life and its realities. This association and attachment continued till the days of his youth. Whereas Om Prakash

Valmiki put in to words it through his autobiography *Joothan*.

In the book *Joothan: A Dalit's life*, Om Prakash Valmiki writes "one can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste" with this statement Valmiki highlights the rigidity of the caste system in India that has resulted in the socio-economic oppression of thousands across India over centuries merely because of the "lesser caste" to which they belong. The title of this autobiography account *Joothan* encapsulates the pain the humiliation and the poverty of the untouchable. The treatment meted out to them was worse than that of animals.

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. Of the writers of Indian writing in English Mulk Raj Anand stands out as the lone voice that lent voice to the sufferings of the socially and legally voiceless communities of India through his writings. 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. Anand's *Untouchable* is a story of the lowest caste – Bhangi, the caste was considered untouchable even among the untouchable. Earlier Hindu society has condemned untouchables as the dirt of the society. Hindu society did not consider untouchables as human beings at all. This inhuman discrimination is the shameful drawback of Indian society. The authors have realistically depicted the truth.

For Anand, literature is not only the means for entertainment but for the social reform. He says about the role and responsibility of a writer:

The writer must go straight to the heart of the problem of our time, the problem of human sensitivity in present complex, the tragedy of modern man. (Naik.M.K15)

In this novel, Anand has not only presented the tragedy of a child of modern India, Bakha (Anand11). He has depicted the misery of the untouchable caste Bhangi. The novel opens with the

description of the untouched colony of untouchables where they were living, living without any facility, since the thousands of years. Their colony is portrayed thus in this novel:

A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now spoiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows, and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. The absence of drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh, which gave out the most offensive smell. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay with it, made it an "uncongenial" place to live in (Anand 9)

Untouchables had to live in this sort of filthy ghettos. By selecting Bakha, a Bhangi boy from this sort of excluded colony as a central character of his novel, Anand has set a new trend to give a voice to the voiceless. Bakha's day begins with the reality of life. Cleaning job was given prime importance. Delay was not granted. When he could not get up in time his father has started thus; "Get up, oh you Bakhya, oh son of pig." (Anand13) "illegally begotten". (Anand15) without cleaning his teeth or taking tea, like a trained creature in the circus, Bakha has to do the unclean work, to clean upper caste night soil from their latrines. This disgusting job was imposed on this caste and it was the only job for them. Anand has aptly presented the truth. Some times the caste Hindu gave them remnant of their food left after they have taken, even for that food untouchables had to beg. In this novel begs for the food as a reward of his work. He begs thus,

Bread for the sweeper, Mother. Bread for the sweeper..... the sweeper has come for the bread, Mother! The sweeper has come for the bread. (Anand74)

For getting food even in mercy, untouchables had to do some cleaning job. Here, a woman says, "Come, clean the drain a bit and then you can have the bread". (Anand80) As a reward of his job, a pancake was flung at him.

Wherever he goes, the treatment that is given and expected to him is worse than the treatment that is given to an animal. Jilebis are given to him in a way a bone is thrown to a dog. A Hindu shopkeeper throws a packet of cigarettes at him. He has been suffering a series of humiliating experiences right from the morning. He is extremely shocked when he is slapped by a caste-Hindu, for having polluted him. The high caste Hindu further abuses:

"Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bowlegged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt! put on this morning!" (Anand 53) Of course, Bakha has the muscular strength to hit back, but he remains silent, taking all the indignities to his pace. As the novelist narrates, "...His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, for away from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the onlookers, but a moral one." (Anand 55) The action of the caste Hindu, touched by the untouchable Bakha, is typical one. It only reveals the tragic dilemma of the untouchables. As Bakha says: "...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!" (Anand 58-59) Sohini, Bakha's sister is treated badly by the high-caste Hindus. The untouchables don't have their well. As Anand narrates; The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate

the stream. They had no well of their own because it cost a lot of money to dig a well in such a hilly town as Bulandshahr. Perforce they had to collect at the foot of the caste Hindu's well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. (Anand 26)

Sohini has to wait quite a long time to fetch a pot full of water, for her tired and thirsty brother. After a long while one of the Hindus, Pandit Kali Nath, draws water for her and calls her to his house to clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. Sohini innocently goes to do so, he catches her by her breast but she refuses his designs. Anand here throws light on the hypocrisy and lustfulness of pretentious, so-called priest Pandit Kali Nath who believes to be polluted by the touch of untouchable and has strong sexual desire with Sohini, an untouchable. This duality and hypocrisy is vividly revealed by Anand in the novel. He then raises an alarm of; 'Polluted, Polluted, Polluted!' shouted the Brahmin below....Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony. (Anand 69) This is the height of hypocrisy. Bakha comes timely on the scene and the situation rages a feeling of anger in him. He realizes caste malice and hypocritical social inequities when he comes to know Pandit Kali Nath's attempt to molest Sohini, his sister. Sohini tries to tell the truth but nobody is ready either to believe or support her. Bakha bursts out in a rage with an impulse to beat him up but Sohini stops him. As both of them realize their helplessness due to the limitations of their caste, they decide to give up. Such humiliation is common for untouchables and they have accepted it as an age-old tradition. He returns home desperately and tells his father Lakha about his insult and Sohini's molestation by the Pandit. "...They think we are mere dirt, because we clean their dirt." (Anand 89) To lessen his son's grief Lakha narrates him a nasty experience of his own life. It brings Bakha back to his senses.

Towards the end of the novel, Mulk Raj Anand suggests three solutions to overcome the vice of untouchability- Christ, Gandhi and the flush system. Anand's this novel should be considered as the Dalit novel by the non-Dalit. Generally, in non-

Dalits literary works produced under Gandhian influence depict the pitiable conditions of Dalits.

Whereas Om Prakash Valmiki was a prominent Dalit writer who has written his autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. He is a forerunner among writers who laid the foundation of dalit literature in Hindi. *Joothan* literary means the scraps of food left after eating the meals. *Joothan: A Dalit's life* is based on the same theme as dalits to eat left over food due to hunger and deprivation. This autobiography was first published in 1997 in Hindi and later was translated in to English in 2003 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a professor of English at York University in Canada.

Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is written from the personal experiences of dalit who rises to prominence from his marginalized presence. Om Prakash Valmiki's voice is today recognized as an empowered voice of a writer who works on the behalf of Dalits. Himself born in a desperately poor family in North India, the lowest caste in Indian society, a community of the illiterate untouchables, he describes from his personal experiences the torments of the Dalits who even have no right to fight for education or food. He describes how these people are subjected to an institutionalized slavery. *Joothan* of Om Prakash Valmiki is a novel of the untouchable, by the untouchable and yet not merely for the untouchable but for everyone's reading. Om Prakash's narrative voice in *Joothan* brims with a quiet sense of outrage at what he had to endure as a human. *Joothan* is a book that voices the demand of the dalits for their rightful place in the society. Whereas Valmiki uses his autobiography to show the plights of dalits. Om Prakash gives an anatomy of oppression. Most significantly, though, Valmiki's story is a voice from the half of India that has been voiceless for countless generations. As a document of the long silenced and long denied sufferings of the dalits. *Joothan* is not only a contribution to the archives of dalit history, but a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness. Instead of following a linear pattern, the author moves from memory to memory, demonstrating how his present is deeply scarred by past. *Joothan* is also remarkable record of a rare Indian journey, one that took a boy from extremely

wretched socio-economic condition to prominence as an author as a social critic. Valmiki suffered a lot in his life time. He had bad experience of the life. He gives an insight in to saga of sufferings and oppression which he has undergone various phases and places of life. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* comprising some 159 odd pages presents an account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, marginalized or dalit. It gives an insight into the saga of sufferings and oppression which he has undergone in various phases and places of his life. Valmiki opens his autobiography with a graphic presentation of the residence of Chuhda community which is located of Taga, also called Tyagis, hegemonic group-privileged and dominating one. At the very outset of the autobiography Chuhdas are depicted living on the border of the village separate from the upper caste people. The condition of Dalit women is shown very miserable since the very beginning of the novel as there is no facilities for latrines in this Dalit basti and even the newly married brides have to sit in the open to relieve themselves:

"On the edge of the pond were the homes of Chuhdas. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edge of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in daylight. The purdah observing Tyagi women, their faces covered with their saris, shawls around their shoulders, found relief in this open air latrine. They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency exposing their private parts" (Valmiki 1).

This autobiography focuses on the Dalits' lives. They have to be dependent on the Tyagis—the upper-caste people of the village. The people of this chuhra basti lived in mud houses and have to work under Tyagis. They have no right to ask for their wages. Upper caste people call the people of this bhangi basti not by their names but by their caste as a general custom of the village. "We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead we got swarmed at and abused. They did

not call us by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called "Oh Chuhre". If the person were young or of the same age, then 'Abe Chuhre' was called" (Valmiki 2). Despite of their hard work, they could not get two time meals at their homes, "Even then we didn't manage to get two decent meals a day" (Valmiki 2)

Dalit people were considered very low class as they were engaged in the unclean occupations and that's why they have to pass from a safe distance from the high class people as their touch may defile them. If somebody was touched mistakenly then they used to beat then severely and an immediate bath was must for their purgation. Thus, the lives of these people were considered even worse than the animals:

Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch the dogs and cats or cows or buffaloes if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or pollution. The Chuhras were not seen as humans. (Valmiki 2)

There was no any provision of education for the lower class children and they kept on wandering in the streets or helped their parents in their works. . One day Omprakash's father, Chhotan Lal makes a plan with the village priest for Omprakash to admit him in the primary school of the village. When this news reached to other people that Chhotan Lal wants to send his son to school, they object his decision. In their opinion, the education is meant for the children belonging to the upper classes and the children from this chuhra basti need not dare to get education as this will break the rules of the upper class. Their work is just to serve the upper class people and not to rule over them by becoming educated. They thought they are trying to flow against the tide:

"What is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become a swan?" (Valmiki 6)

Omprakash's father had made up his mind to admit his son in the village school. One day he reached the school and said to the teacher Harphool Singh, "Materji, I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two." (Valmiki 2)

Omprakash's father had taken admission of his son an easy task but he did not know the hurdles of the admission in the school. The teacher told him to come the next day for many days and after many requests ultimately he was successful in admitting his son in the school. Only admission in the school was not sufficient for his son to educate himself. He has to face many problems in the school. The practice of untouchability was still in the school and he had to sit separately from the boys from the upper castes:

I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor. The mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. Sometimes I would have to sit away behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded. (Valmiki 2-3)

As he belonged from a lower poor Dalit class, he was called 'Chuhre Ka' (the son of a scavenger) by the students of the school and even his teachers also did not object it. He was beaten without any rhyme and reason at school. At the time of his examinations, Dalit children were not allowed to drink water from the glasses as Omprakash explains:

During the examinations we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass. (Valmiki 16)

Omprakash Valmiki provides the pictures of penury from a closer quarter. He tells that in his village pattals (plates made of leaves) were generally used in the marriages to eat food. The pattals were thrown in the dustbins when all the people. The Chuhras of this caste had to collect the left-over food from the pattals so that they may take it in their homes for their members of families. If in any marriage baratis don't leave enough scraps of food on their pattals then the people of this chuhra basti called them gluttons:

"During a wedding when the grooms and the baratis, the bridegrooms' party, were eating their meals, the Chuhras would sit outside with huge basket. After the baratis has eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Chuhras' basket, which they

took home to save the Joothan, sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. The joothan was eaten with a relish. The bridegroom's guests who didn't leave enough scraps on the pattals were denounced as gluttons." (Valmiki 6)

At the time of marriage of Sudhdev Singh Tyagi's daughter, Omprakash Valmiki's mother Demanded some sweets from Sukhdev Singh Tyagi so that she may take these sweets for her children. She asked sweets when everybody had eaten and gone. She begged for some sweets from him, "Chowdhriji, all of your guests have eaten and gone. Please put something on the pattal of my children. They too have waited for this day" (Valmiki 6) but Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's reply was very heart-rending. He pointed at the pattals with left-over food and roared at her, "You are having a basketful of joothan. And on the top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going" (Valmiki 10-11). This incidence of his life stirred him from inside. He feels so hurt from it that he was unable to forget Tyagi's penetrating words throughout his life. Omprakash writes, "These words of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's penetrated my breast like a knife. They continue to sting me to this day." (Valmiki 11)

Valmiki had to suffer a lot due to his caste in his life. That's why he thought that his experience should be read by the general masses. That's why he has written all of his bad experiences in his autobiography so that other people also know that there are still many people who sleep hungry daily or they are forced to eat 'joothan'.

Conclusion

Both Mulk Raj Anand and Valmiki reveal in their novels social evils that arise an account of one's birth, economic condition, and class division. They both examine such fundamental issues in their novels, and their novels throw light on many complex aspects of life which make the reader ruminate about them and wish for their eradication. Their outlook as well as understanding of society is almost identical, and their works contain their plea for human justice and equality.

Anand and Valmiki have a compassionate view of society and their writings show the enormous compassion they have for the downtrodden and the socially disabled. Their ardent humanism and the resultant keen awareness inspired them in writing the travails of the underprivileged and also to sensitize the society to the urgent need of these people to lead an exploitation free life with dignity. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that even today the problems discussed by Anand and Valmiki in their novels are prevalent in our complex modern life. Both Anand and Valmiki are of the opinion that the social evils in India are so deeply rooted in soil. Anand and Valmiki have probed deep in to crucial human problems and have artistically interpreted in their novels for the people to come to know of them and think of them and think of the ways and means to eradicating them.

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