

**MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE AND BAMA'S SANGATI:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

'Untouchable', the brain child of Mulk Raj Anand as a novelist, touchingly describes the trauma that the underdogs have to undergo under the pressure of a putrid and perverse social order. The novel has successfully and laudably brought to light the hypocrisy and inequity of the upper cast people and the inhuman status in the society of the so called low bred people. Smashing to dust the jagged rocks of hypocrisy, the novelist debunks the devil in court of a priest who forgets the cannons of caste purity when the comely countenance of the damsel, Sohini, Bakha's sister provokes puissant prurience in him. Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, writing under the pseudonym Bama, portrays in her novel 'Sangati' the post-colonial Indian society which is still infested with the same problem of discrimination on the basis of caste. She reveals different layers of divided Indian society, highlighting the anguish and humiliation of outcastes. This paper attempts to draw parallel between the two novels. Though written in different eras, both of them are similar in their themes of exploitation and oppression as Bama's representation of Dalit women's life span mirrors the Dalit community's struggle for empowerment and realization of a dignified existence.

Key-words: *Dalit-liberation, inequity, empowerment, inhuman, social-order, marginalization, hypocrisy, exploitation,*

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“Dalit” means “crushed” or “broken into pieces”. The term refers to those who fall outside the Hindu caste system, the “outcastes” or the “untouchables”. Dalit have been referred to by different names, the most famous being “Harijan” or children of God, which was coined by Mahatma Gandhi.

“Dalit” may have been used for the first time in this manner by Jotiba Phule in the nineteenth century, but its more famous use by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the father of Indian constitution and the greatest of Dalit leaders. It was in his journal, *Bahishkrut Bharat*, that Ambedkar first defined dalithood as ‘life conditions which characterize the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes’ Brahmanical ideology’.

The Dalit literary movement was born in Maharashtra in the 1960s and slowly spread to the rest of India. This movement made a late start in Tamil, coming to the fore only in the 1990s after the celebrations of the birth centenary of Dr. Ambedkar.

Mulk Raj Anand is a committed novelist- a Swarn Crusader against the inhuman convention that Indian society followed in the form of cast system. The novel is about one day in the life of the outcast Bakha, though bold, brawny and beautiful is cast out of favour and brings a stigma to Hinduism. We have the moving portrait of Bakha, the graphic description of the squalid situation that weep and tears that speak.

Born in the family of a scavenger, Bakha is uncommonly sensitive. He knows and feels his father’s pretences. The sun rising fills him with unusual delight but so what? He is doomed to dwell in slums and bite the wretched dust of humiliation. In spite of cleaning rows of latrines more than twice a day willingly and neatly he is perpetually insulted and his

natural growth is thwarted and dwarfed. Bakha skillfully cleans the latrines but when he returns home he has no water to wash his hands. It is his sister Sohini goes to fetch water from the well. The well episode brings to fore the humiliation the untouchables undergo even for water. Untouchables have to procure even drinking water with much difficulty. When Sohini approaches the well, she becomes the target of inter-caste abused and recrimination. She is not socially permissible to draw the water from the well. She has to wait on the chance of some gentleman of high caste taking pity on her and giving her water she needs.

Bakha, in doing his additional duty of sweeping the roads, is unfortunately touched by a caste Hindu, for this so called offence; he is abused and humiliated by a crowd of caste Hindus who block his passage. All this for which he is not responsible. After the painful experience with the touched caste Hindu poor Bakha living in a squalid hovel harbor smouldering reaction in his breast against the prevailing social injustice screams- 'Posh, posh sweeper coming'

What a heart-breaking scene it is?

It evokes compassion in our heart.

Once again Bakha has a bitter experience when nobody responds to his prayer for bread and when he falls asleep at the door of a high house, the high caste land lady abuses him for polluting his house and thereafter the woman throws a piece of bread at him as if he were a pariah dog.

In a hockey match with the boys of the cantonment- a small boy injured and when Bakha helps him home the boy's mother charges him with both injuring her son and defiling his house by carrying him in his arm. Even when he buys something, the shopkeeper flings the thing at him as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing around the corner of his shop. Thus, the novelist presents the picture and problem of untouchability.

Then, we are also introduced to the inhuman atrocities that is perpetrated on the helpless and downtrodden folk sunk in poverty and tradition. A meek and docile girl, Sohini fall an easy prey to the priest's shrewd and filthy design but ultimately escapes out of it. PanditKalinath treated her as 'juicy morsel of girlhood' wanted to molest her, to rob her chastity. Thus Mulk Raj Anand shows the lust and hypocrisy of the upper castes.

But the question remains what is the out of this quagmire? Three ways are suggested. Gandhi ji appears on the scene as a potent force to uproot this evil from society. He is a living God among people. He preaches to treat the so-called outcastes as brothers of the same family.

To Gandhiji it was the greatest sin to consider any person as untouchable. If God wished him to be reborn he would like to be an untouchable in his next life 'so that I may share their sorrows' suffering and the affronts leveled at them and then he may endeavor to free from this slavery. He told then the crowd about a Brahmin lad who worked in his ashram as a scavenger and Brahmin boy's story doing the work of a scavenger thrilled Bakha soul. They should realize that they are cleaning the filth of society.

Gandhiji concluded his speech by saying that the Hindus were not sinful but only ignorant. He appeared to the Hindus to cast off their narrowness and throw open all kinds of institutions like school, temples, roads and wells to the untouchable.

The most important man in the closing part of the novel is the poet identified as IqubalNath who become the mouthpiece of Anand. The old mechanical formulas of our lives must go. Untouchability is rooted in the caste system. Hence it is essential to abolish the caste system in order to annihilate untouchability. He talks of the machine which is likely to raise the status and dignity of the untouchables and make them useful members of the casteless and classless society. Out of the three remedies suggested, the one is that of the poet. He becomes a savior because his suggestion of machine will eradicate the evil of untouchability. It is the poet who could offer him a hope of emancipation from thousands of

years of serfdom. About the important of the suggestion of machine E. M. Forster comments in his preface-

“No God is needed to rescue the untouched no vows of self-sacrifice and abnegation on the part of more fortunate Indians but simply and solely the flush system”

But if we examine the tangible achievements in the direction of the abolition of the caste-system since we attained our independence, we hardly agree with Anand or Forster that machine is the best solution for removing untouchability. It is Gandhism which is revolutionizing the Indian mind to cast off the anachronistic slough of cast-snobbery.

But the solutions offered lacks sincerity and depth; and in that subsequent portions of the novel we discern inorganic stuff in the form of Christian Gandhian, poetic and Marxist approaches to the solutions of the problem.

Mulk Raj Anand suggests the Gandhiji may be wrong in his political and economic views but he is all right as far as the untouchability is concerned, but the novelist does not explain how Gandhiji's solution to the problem is acceptable. On the contrary he asserts that the machine alone can solve the problem. If so why did it drag Gandhiji in the novel. True, Gandhiji's love and sacrifice is sincere but his thoughts are not practical according to the novelist. Moreover, his views on the cast are anything but philosophic

How in the passage of time the cast system degenerates into unalterableness and rigidity? have not discussed in the novel. It shows a reaction against a reaction and does not present a measured response, a seasoned synthesis out of both thesis and antithesis.

But anyway, Anand does not handle this theme of untouchability with great artifice power. The central theme is the age old injustice perpetuated by the traditional Hindu society upon one sect of people within its fold. This evil the practice of which results in suppression of the untouchables who are denied their fundamental right to grow into respectable citizen of society is condemned by the author forcefully.

Anand hates superstition. Compassion which he finds wanting in most men is looked at by Anand as the most desirable virtue of man capable of offering a panacea to cure many ills human society suffers from because the want of compassion naturally leads to all sorts of cruelty and insensitivity. Anand also tried to show by some characters that all upper caste people are not alike. Lakha, father of Bakha tells how, the Hakim Bhagwan Das once cured Bakha of a serious ailment in his infancy by coming to Lakha's dwelling place to administer medicine to save the dying infant.

At Hawaldar Charat Singh's quarter in the cantonment again caste is forgotten. The Hawaldar treats Bakha affectionately gives him a drink of tea, of makes a gift of a new hockey stick to the boy. Then he gets an affectionate touch from colonel Hutchinson.

Up till now I have discussed about the trauma that lowbred people suffers by upper caste people but it would be incomplete without showing the suffering of Dalit girl child and women not only by upper cast but by their own family members.

Sangati is a startling insight into the lives of Dalit women who face the double disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. Sangati flouts received notions about what a novel should be and has no plot in the normal sense. It relates the mindscape of a Dalit woman who steps out of her small town community, only to enter a caste-ridden and hierarchical society, which constantly questions her caste status. Realizing that her community is no escape, she had to come to terms with her identity as an educated, economically independent women who chooses to live alone. In relating this tale Bama turns Sangati into the story not just of one individual, but of a Pariah community. Marked by rich ethnographic detail, Sangati is a significant political and ideological contribution to Dalit writing in Tamil.

- Oxford University Press

The theme of *Sangatiis* 'Subjugation to Celebration'. It is a unique Dalit feminist narrative. Bama's grandmother tells about the incidents and stories that happened in her life in a sequential order and how they are treated as Dalits under the hand of upper caste people.

"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, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them---- about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labor. I wanted to shout out these stories." – Bama.

According to Bama- "All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity given them a different set of problems.

The experience a total leak of social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture."Google search

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 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)

The voices of many women speaking and addressing one another, sharing their everyday experience with each-other, sometimes expressed in anger or pain. Bama says that man can humiliate woman many times, he can disrespect a woman, it is very normal. But in this partial double minded society woman has no right to spoken out anything. This is acceptable to all.

The book deals with gender bias faced by dalitwomen right from birth specially if she is dark complexioned. In the novel the narrator observes, 'The fact that I was dark skinned unlike my elder siblings was a source of disappointment to everyone at home'. She further recalls that it is a norm in her neighborhood that a male infant is never allowed to even whimper while the female baby is left unattended for long hours. Even in matters of weaning, the male child enjoys breast feeding for a longer period compared to his female counterpart.

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. Boys are allowed to eat their fill and play outside. A girl child can step out of the home only when she picks up her younger sibling and takes him out for play. Maikkanni is one such girl who started to work from the day she learns to walk.(70). She has to go to work when her mother delivers a baby. When her mother becomes fit Maikkanni turn to take care of the new born baby.

The games that children play are confined on gender lines. The world of reality dictated the contours of their pretence games – e.g. when they played at being married, the husband would come home drunk and beat the wife and the police would arrive and beat him up, or when they played at working, some boys would become Naickers and humiliate the rest!

The life of a dalit girl was tormenting but the life of a grown up dalit woman was worse.

The story narrators cousin Marriamma tells a lot about the sexual assault the abuse faced by dalit woman and their inability to stand up against it. Bama shows gender discrimination meted out to them throughout the lives of dalit woman. Bama realistically portrays the physical violence, like lynching, whipping and canning that dalit woman by fathers, husbands and brothers. Bama explores the psychological stress and stairs.

In *Sangati*, Bama takes us into the elemental improvised and most often violent world of the Dalit woman- Bama's grandmother tells her aunts death,

“ I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your Periappan actually beat her to death----- He killed her so outrageously, the bastard.”

Later on, we witness the village trial of the aunt's daughter Mariamma who has been accused of being intimate with a village boy. But landowner Kumarasami makes the charge to hide his own sexually predatory actions. The entire episode is cinematic in its description, almost surreal if it were not so totally tragic. When Manacchi, a village girl, becomes '*possessed by a pey*', Bama watches the violent sequence of exorcising the demon with a skeptical eyes, analyzing why it was always a woman who was possessed.

Dalit women's work is a precondition for their daily bread. It comes as no surprise that Dalit woman continue to work even when they enter their last trimester of pregnancy. Many of them deliver their babies at the fields or while collecting firewood, often on their own without any assistance medical or human.

In *Sangati*, the narrator's grandmother recalls how a neighbor had gone to collect fodder in the forest and gone into labour. She cut the umbilical cord with her sickle. Dug up a pit to bury the placenta, picked up the bundle of fodder collected her new born baby and walked back home. Even if the women stay back home for a day, the family would have to starve, the cattle would *go without their feed*.

Bama also attracts our mind towards the education system about dalit community. She gave the example of Pecchamma, who belongs to Chakkili community, studied only up to fifth class. The girls of that community do not go to school all that much.

Bama has personally experienced the marginalized. She sums up their situation 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”.

Bama in her autobiographical novel *Karukkure* collects that even her mother used to collect firewood and that in one instance, she brought home a bundle of firewood and ‘began vomiting vasts gobs of blood’ (45).

Bama remembers an incident when a visiting white priest was pleased by her recitation of prayers – he lifted her up and kissed her and gave her five paise. What pleased her most was ‘that the priest touched me and lifted me up’ (71).

Bama found even the governmental policy of identifying and helping Harijan children as humiliating. The only time she found some pride in it was when she was marked out as the best Harijan student in the district.

When Bama become a nun to help Dalit children she realized that caste discrimination was rampant within the church. The nuns looked down on Tamilians to begin and that Tamil Parayas were lowest of the low. The very first convent that she was sent to, after acceptance into the order, was a shock. Catering to the rich, it had Dalits doing all the menial jobs and being treated as less than human. Bama feels that nuns should have taught the Dalit children more than what the curriculum called for, made them aware about their situation in the world. Instead, “everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them suggested, that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility for change” (89). This only forced the children to accept their unjust situation as their fate.

Bama reacts and calls for action to “crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission”, and bring about a ‘just society where all are equal’.

It was also not easy for Bama to write about their own community. But she shows courage.

In an interview with Suchetra Behal in *The Hindu* (March 6, 2003), Bama said that she began to write in 1992, the year she left the convent, because she felt 'a sense of total alienation from society because for seven years I was within the convent premises and the lifestyle was different' and she said that when she came out she was not 'able to fit into society'. She said that those 'were terribly painful moments for me and even for the next day it was a question of how I am going to live' and that she felt that there 'was no hope of a future'. It was then that she was filled with a great sense of nostalgia for her 'childhood days in the village'—'I wanted to lead that life again'. It was then that she took her friend's advice and began to write, for herself and for publication. She was initially hesitant to publish it because 'it was not only about me, but my people, my family, my village'. As a matter of fact her own community was outraged for a while after the publication of the book.

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