

**The Subaltern Speaks: A Comparative Study of
Anand's Untouchable and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small
Things**

**Dr Pranabananda Patusi,
Sr. Lecturer –in – English
Hill-Top Degree College, Mohana,
Gajapati, Odisha
India**

In every society, there are some sections of people deprived of socio-economic opportunities for their sustenance and they are victims of social, cultural, and political exclusion. They are the marginalized and the marginalized communities are the rural poor, the downtrodden, and those who belong to the scheduled castes, commonly known as subaltern.

Subaltern, meaning 'of inferior rank', is a term adopted by Antonion Gramsci¹, refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic' power. The term has been adapted to post—colonial studies from the work of the Subaltern Studies group of historians, who aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies. It is used in *Subaltern Studies* 'as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way'.²

One of the important objectives of Indian English writers of fiction has been the creative interpretation of Indian society and its culture and the 'formulation and projection of the Indian image'.³ The Indian society is broadly classified into three main communities, namely, the upper-caste, the non-upper-caste and the depressed classes. Among them, there existed many castes and sub-castes, which followed numerous practices and usages; surprisingly each of them is unique. The influence of upper-castes is greatly felt in the socio-religious and cultural lives of the marginalized sections over the years.

The people, who work the hardest to produce riches, suffer the most and fare the worst. This is the irony of our civilization. The society looks down upon them and treats them shabbily

and cruelly. They are the 'marginalized' or 'working classes' throughout the world. They are all included, in the terms of Arundhati Roy as 'small things' but generally, known as 'untouchable' or 'pariah'. As it sounds bitter, Mahatma Gandhi named them as 'Harijans' (children of God) while the Census authorities during the British rule referred to them as 'exterior classes' and now the 'depressed' or 'dalits'.⁴ The reasons that gave birth to the institution of untouchability and the date of its appearance have been researched by many scholars, social workers, religious teachers, politicians, and many other categories of people. Creative Writers form an important group that interprets and re-interprets reasons for and practices of untouchability.

The novels of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchabl* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, have been taken up for study with a view to bringing out an analytical study of the place of subalterns and their social conditions. Before discussing the novels of the selected writers it is desirable to have a look into the caste system in India, which is responsible to make one sections on the society as untouchables.

Caste System

Caste system is one of the world's longest surviving forms of social stratification. People are divided by birth according to one of the four main groups. Although originally caste depended upon a person's work, it soon became hereditary. Each person was born into an unalterable social status.

The four primary castes are: *Brahmin*, the priests; *Kshatriya*, warriors and nobility; *Vaisya*, farmers, traders and artisans; and *Shudra*, tenant farmers and servants. Some people were born outside of (and below) the caste system. They were called 'untouchables'. Untouchables were considered so impure that any contact with them by a caste member would contaminate the other person. The caste-person would have to bathe and wash his or her clothing immediately. Untouchables could not even eat in the same room as caste members.

The untouchables did work that no-one else would do, like scavenging animal carcasses, leather-work, or killing rats and other pests. They could not be cremated when they died. It is this caste that impedes the growth of the protagonists in the novels and as a result, they suffer.

The main objective of this paper is to bring out how the protagonists of these writers represent the downtrodden in the society. It also deals with the analysis of how they are dehumanized at the hands of the upper-caste people time and again to show their diminished status in the society.

Protagonists in the Selected Novels

The novel *Untouchable* is the story of Bakha who belongs to the subaltern society. Though he belongs to the downtrodden society, he is portrayed different from those who belong to the same society. The struggle in his mind about the behaviour of other high castes towards him and his family bring to us the theme of the novel.

The novel *The God of Small Things* deals with many characters but the protagonist 'Velutha' is the one who belonged to the downtrodden class the 'paravan'. His relationship with Ammu is responsible for his final doom. The way he was treated towards the end of the novel is a graphic presentation of the plight of the downtrodden in the society.

The Novelists:

Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand started writing against the class and caste systems of our country during the 1930s. He was the Grand Old Man of Indo-Anglican fiction, born on 12 December 1905 in Peshawar, the capital city of North West Frontier Province of India before the country's partition. Mulk Raj Anand became an advocate of the subalterns when the country needed moral help and support to eradicate untouchability and superstition. He rose to the occasion with his debut novel *Untouchable* in 1935. It was hailed as a minor classic and he could establish his name as an immortal crusader against the evil practice of untouchability. Mulk Raj Anand's portrayal of Bakha, the central character in the novel *Untouchable*, created ripples in the minds of the people. Naik says, "It is highly significant that Anand's very first novel, *Untouchable*, is a triumphant assertion of his humanitarianism. To choose an untouchable as hero in the year 1935 was, in a sense, a revolutionary gesture in Indian fiction in general".⁵

Mulk Raj Anand was the true champion of the underdogs. He was the first person to realize in the literary circle the victimization of the subalterns in the society. Mulk Raj Anand's novels vindicate the injustice and the inequality that are rampant in the society. The greatest contribution of Mulk Raj Anand to the Indian fiction is his realism which has paved way for social change. *Untouchable* gives a vivid picture of the caste system that exists in our country. India is known for its rich culture and heritage but the social evil of untouchability has destroyed the unity among the people.

Mulk Raj Anand had clear visions behind the creations of all his novels. His aim was to correct the evil ways of the society. He was conscious of the fact that the illiterate masses were

being exploited by the upper class in the name of caste and creed. His sympathy was always with the underdogs and contributed his might to raise their standard of living. The wretched condition of the oppressed section of the community has been vividly described in *Untouchable*. Almost all his heroes are powerless to fight against the social order as they are overpowered by the organized evils in the society.

Mulk Raj Anand *Untouchable* was an eye-opener to the rigid observers of untouchability. In the preface to *Untouchable*, E. M. Forster says, “The Sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to arrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disquieting as well as a disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming. No wonder that the dirt enters into his soul and that he feels himself at moments to be what he is supposed to be”.⁶

Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy is awarded the Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* depicts the caste and gender subalternity from a historical perspective. In Kerala, untouchability was observed by the Brahmins in the pre-independent India. The lower caste people were discriminated on the basis of caste but at the same time the paddy fields were given to them on lease. They were asked to present the major portion of the yield to the landlord. The lower class people didn’t get anything out of the contract as it was fixed on high terms and conditions. In order to escape the scourge of untouchability, the lower class people were readily converted to Christianity. They realized that it was a historic blunder when they were denied all the privileges of reservation by the Government. The newly converted Christians are still ill-treated by the society. The after-effects of conversion and the approach of the society towards the downtrodden are clearly manifested in Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things*. *The God of Small Things* was published in April, 1997. After six months the novel achieved a great success as it was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize.

Bakha of Mulk Raj Anand

Bakha, in *Untouchable*, is a man of eighteen years. He has a fascination for the western dress. His job was that of cleaning the latrines of the upper-caste colony. Contrary to his work he

loves to live in a clean and decent manner. Anand's *Untouchable* has created waves as protest against social injustice.

The degradation and humiliation inflicted on the unfortunate sections of society is highlighted through the repeated refrain of Bakha 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming'. The crowd feels absolutely no sympathy for Bakha. Only the Mohammedan *tonga-wallah* shows sympathy towards him. Bakha is slapped and for the only reason that, he belongs to a low caste and he feels

I should have seen the high-caste people in the street. That man! That he should have hit me! (58)... For them I am a sweeper, sweeper untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (58-59).

Bakha's powers and place in society are not determined by his ability but his birth in a subaltern or 'dalit' family.

Bakha is made to feel that he is a sweeper's son and hence untouchable. When he hears that loud cry "polluted, polluted, polluted", he is perplexed. He knows what is meant. Pandit Kalinath was a little man - a priest of the temple, stumbling, falling and crying, "polluted, polluted, polluted". Bakha also sees the figure of a woman Sohini, behind the shouting priest. The little priest, angrily shrieking, 'You people have only been polluted from a distance. In this connection, Ravi Jauhari and Kiran Kamboj in *A Social Evil in Untouchable* point out that Religious diplomacy and hypocrisy were real instruments to exploit the Untouchable. The priest (Brahmin), the so-called custodian of religion is on one hand ready to have physical relation with a beautiful untouchable girl, Sohini, and on the other hand, Bakha, Sohini's brother is not allowed even to touch the steps of the temple. Anand tries to reveal such religious bigotry in his novel.⁷

Bakha realizes how Hindu society is a society of hypocrites. Emotionally tortured soul and heart of Bakha make him realize his own existence in this sadistic society.

In connection with this most significant incident P.K. Rajan in *A Dialogue with Mulk Raj Anand*, quotes Anand's creation of Bakha as:

... I meant to recreate the lives of the millions of untouchables through one single person. In only one incident. The slap on the face of the hero. Now the slap on the face evoked all the human relations ... of the sixty-five millions of people whom the hero represents, against the millions of caste Hindus.⁸

Velutha of *The God of Small Things*

The title *The God of Small Things* is ironic and presents the predicament of untouchables as Velutha is compared to God. He has a magical power to carve intricate things but he is not able to carve a better future for himself.

Velutha, son of an untouchable, Vellya Pappen, returns to Ayemenem, after spending years away from home. Velutha has been to school for a couple of years and also has been trained to become a skilful carpenter. He is hired as the Paradise factory carpenter and he has a way with machines which makes him indispensable at the factory. Appreciating his skill, Mammachi remarks, —... if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. (75) Ammu's first clandestine meeting with Velutha has been triggered off by a song in her transistor. This forces her to go in search of Velutha, to the Meenachal river in the darkness of the night. With the same instinctive belief that she would come searching for him that night, Velutha also goes there.

Velutha's father is a mute witness to whatever has gone on near his house and he rushes to Mammachi's house to give full factual report. He is in a drunken state and also being loyal and superstitious, discloses to her Ammu's secret nocturnal rendezvous with Velutha. He is angry with his son and profusely apologizes to Mammachi for his son's misconduct.

Mammachi cannot accept Ammu having an affair with Velutha, an untouchable. So along with Baby Kochamma, she plans for the physical removal of Velutha. Baby Kochamma gets Velutha dismissed from the factory. Roused to irrepressible fury, she gets all distorted facts recorded in the F.I.R. She lodges a complaint against Velutha for having forced himself on her niece — —A divorcee with two children. (259)

The Police Inspector, Thomas Mathew, belonging to the same caste, too responds to her ire at the same wavelength. Hence, excessive, unnecessary police force is applied to secure the total decimation of Velutha. Six touchable policemen find him lying asleep in the back veranda of the History House. All of them in one go start kicking and trampling upon his flat body with heavy boots. His badly bruised shattered body, in a state of unconsciousness, is brought to the police station as a trophy won valiantly in a fiercely fought war.

Velutha is charged falsely with the rape of Ammu. When Ammu goes to the police station with her children Rahel and Estha, to set the records straight the police officer's behaviour is very brutal and callous. He behaves in the most unabashed manner with Ammu and

her children. He stares at Ammu's breasts as he speaks. He says that Kottayam police don't take statements from 'Veshyas' or their illegitimate children. He even taps at her breasts with his baton. The rudeness and obscene behaviour of the police officer shock little Rahel very much. Ammu feels helpless and utterly humiliated. Her anguish is expressed when she mutters to herself —He's dead ... I've killed him. (8) She knows that she is responsible for the death of her lover. The plight of Velutha in the police custody indicates social injustice and cruelty of the police.

The police have gone to Velutha's house and wake him up with their boots. There is a heart-rending description of what they have done to Velutha. Boot on bone. One teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib (308). Velutha appeared on the scrummy slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp. He was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone. Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head look liked a pumpkin too large and heavy. (319-20)

An innocent, untouchable man dies in police custody because he has none to protect him. Velutha's death signifies that police are there not to protect a helpless, guilt free low caste-man, but to punish him precisely for his helplessness.

Velutha represents that section of untouchables who bears the stigma of untouchability and envisions the redressal from the Marxist Government. Vellya Paapen, father of Velutha belongs to that section of untouchables which has witnessed the "Crawling Backward Days"(They were asked to erase their own footsteps by walking backwards and sweeping). He is well aware of the ethos of a caste ridden society and knows how deeply embedded untouchability is. For him, the obligations, Ipe family has bestowed, are like the boon upon the untouchables, which they do not deserve. Velutha's qualities put Vellya Paapen in trepidation. He takes Velutha's qualities as a menace for his future.

The vision of leading a life free from the mortification of untouchability, prompts Velutha to join the Communist Party. But he is hardly aware that the same bourgeoisie that dominate society also dominate the Party. Velutha's nexus with the Communist Party becomes a tragic flaw for Velutha as Baby Kochamma holds him responsible for her insult during Marxist demonstration.

In Ammu's dream Velutha appears as a one-armed man, who is incapable of performing two things simultaneously: "He could do only one thing at a time. If he held her, he couldn't kiss her. If he kissed her, he couldn't see her. If he saw her, he couldn't feel her." (p. 215)

The description of the dream is highly symbolic, as Velutha's physical deformity indicates his inferior status due to his untouchable caste. His incapability to do two things at a time shows his incapability to invert the oppressive system. The new blue bottles that are brought and shattered by the sea are the dreams of Ammu and Velutha. The blackness of the sea symbolizes the hostile atmosphere. The darkness of night is akin to the blackness of the sea. Velutha's elimination is also foreshadowed as, "He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirror." (216)

The narrator gives the attribute of "The God of Loss", "The God of Small Things" to Velutha. He is the God of Loss as in his efforts to give happiness to Ammu and her twins; he has lost his right to live. The narrator's description of Ammu, "Like Polishing firewood"(44) in her wedding photograph and Velutha as "polished with high wax body polish" (215) has a proximity as it indicates the tragic fate, Ammu and Velutha meet for their offences of crossing the Rubicon, laid down by the patriarchy.

Thus through Ammu-Velutha relationship, Arundhati highlights the intransigent social hatred, targeted at the individuals who challenge the established orthodoxies of the society, and flails the taboos which do not allow people to rise beyond their narrow circumference.⁹

Comparison

Both Anand and Roy show a complete understanding of the human situation and a sensitive discrimination of moral values and we hear the deep cry of these human beings who are considered untouchable sub-human beings. Bakha and Velutha are essentially a tragic creation of the individual caught in the net of the age-old caste system crying for an escape.

In *Untouchable*, Bakha is humiliated for sitting on the doorstep of a caste-Hindu and the lady of the house shouts and curses him for defiling her house. Roy presents a similar attitude in *The God of Small Things*, Velutha, like Bakha is not allowed to enter the house of the upper castes. They are not allowed to touch anything that touchables touched.

Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy both portrayed their characters with the knowledge of their own understanding and personal experience in reality they faced in life. To some extent,

they bring out their real-life experiences and the India they witnessed before and after the independence era.

Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy, portrayed the marginalized section of society in a more effective manner than any other author because of their involvement and their interests in the reformation they expect in their respective societies in which they live. They picture the very condition of the lives of the protagonists and the miseries imposed by the so-called upper caste people.

The novelists' protagonists are children and through them they want to create a new generation by breaking all the taboos and restrictions laid down by their ancestors. The chief characters of the writers are from the marginalized section of society. Anand's Bakha in *Untouchable* is of *Bhangi*, the untouchable. Roy's Velutha in *The God of Small Things* belongs to an untouchable caste called the *Paravan*. Throughout the novel the good nature of these protagonists, creates a hope of change in the dehumanized society for the betterment of the generations to come. By presenting the children as the victims of reckless society, they highlight the social evils to deduce pity and sympathy for the poor and the innocent.

In these novels, the characters show their thirst for learning, which, in turn, was denied to them by the upper class people for many generations. Centuries of caste stigma and segregation have benumbed the intellectual life of the marginalized.

Knowledge and power are concentrated in the hands of the upper caste Hindus. Denial of knowledge is denial of power. For centuries, caste system in the Indian subcontinent has controlled and regulated the knowledge hierarchies. As a result, the upper-caste people have sought to legitimize the servitude.

The Indian caste system is such that there is no chance for any upward movement for a low-caste person. If there is any effort or attempt by the lower caste people to challenge this idea, they are faced with dire consequences. Though these low-caste people try to re-shape their destinies, a series of tragedies awaits them. Hence, for the readers, subaltern characters in Mulk Raj Anand's or Arundhati Roy's bring the plight of the downtrodden in the Indian society in stark reality. The characters are different, the time setting is different, the way both character presented is different but the problems dealt with in both these novels is very clear and a reader can easily identify the problems faced by Velutha similar to that of Bakha in *Untouchable* bringing both of them in the same stream- the Subaltern stream.

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