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### A Critical Study of Dalit Conversion to Christianity in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

#### Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate into Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* through the glasses of Dalit Christian ideology. Dalits suffer extreme marginalization, identity crisis and multiple disabilities that is a matter of great concern. The social structural inequality and socio-cultural discrimination experienced by Dalits echo the cruelty of Indian social order. Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar interprets that Dalit ancestry is rooted in 'Broken Men'. The barbaric treatment of the Hindu society towards Outcastes makes them seek alternatives to restore their identity and dignity. Does the caste Hindus' unethical, inhumane treatment towards the untouchables compel them to adopt Christianity? Can the figures like Colonel Hutchinson help them gain their social dignity and status? What if they become Christian? Will it help them to raise their status in the Indian social hierarchy? Does their ignorance save them from conversion or Do the experiences of their society members? - are the certain questions that will be investigated in this paper to fill the existing gaps.

Key Words: Christianity, Messiah, Dalit theology, Conversion, Liberation

Indian social system has been divided on the basis of caste system for ages. Caste communities consists of four castes in hierarchical order. They are - Brahmins (Priests) who

are considered as protectors and preservers of the eternal laws of the universe i.e. 'Dharma', the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) who are the defenders and guarantors of safety and security of the community, then come Vaishyas (merchants) who are the conservers and distributors of wealth, Shudras (the labourers) are the working majority involved in the production of essential commodities. Outside this four-fold Indian caste system exists the outcaste communities which are named as 'atishudra' by Jyotiba Phule. According to Jyotiba Phule, "Shudras are schuta pichari jatian (touchable backward classes) and atishudra means achuta pichari jatian (Untouchable backward classes). Shudras are last in varna system, but atishudras are outside the varna system."

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* highlights the plights in lives of these Untouchables through the passive and mute representative Bakha, a born sweeper. He experiences inhumane treatment from the morning till evening at the hand of the Hindu society. He is highly influenced by the Sahibs of 38 Dogra regiment and imitates them in all possible manners. The whole-day's bone-breaking work of cleaning latrines for the Caste Hindus and for other superiors, the humiliating treatment in the streets by the upper castes, incessant showering of abuses by his father and the Hindus, the trauma of his sister Sohni are enough for Bakha to bring him in despair and seclusion. He goes in a plain which is surrounded by rubbish heaps, filled with broken bottles, old tins, dead cats, rags and bones; where he bemoans on his fate feeling desolate and dejected. This is the long-awaited moment for the Colonel Hutchinson, a Chief of Salvation Army, who tries to be sympathetic to him and tempts him to gain a better life.

Rajkumar's Indian Dalit theology helps to associate Anand's characters in his novel *Untouchable* with liberation theory for poor, weak and down-trodden. Indian Dalit theology has often, and with some justice, been compared with the Liberation Theology that came from Latin America, mainly in the 1960s to the 1990s. Both were emphatically concerned for

the poor, the weak and the dispossessed. Both sought not just to analyze social situations but to transform situations of injustice and oppression in the light of the gospel, stressing that the true Church of Jesus Christ should be an agency of liberation, and a place where the poor find at least small harbingers of a just and loving society, and the proper relations among human beings. Since the social and economic context of India is vastly different from that of Latin America for a variety of reasons, particularly the Indian social order dominated by the caste system. Unprivileged Dalit people are the central figure of the theology who are still in vast number and face inhumane treatment, discrimination, despise, pain, suffering, sorrow and grief in the Hindu society. Colonel Hutchinson through the biblical references of Jesus Christ's scarification tries to influence Bakha. Bakha also relates His scarification with the scarification of animals to appease the goddess Kali.

The Colonel sings:

“He died that we might be forgiven  
He died to make us good,  
That we mind go at last to heaven,  
Saved by His precious blood.” (p. 103)

Then Bakha also gives his assent to his beliefs by the statement:

“Han,han, Sahib I understand,... Yessuh Messih makes no  
difference between the Brahmin and myself” (p.105)

Colonel Hutchinson strives to persuade Bakha to take shelter in his religion though he (Bakha) is ignorant to his mission. Sometimes, it seems as if both the Colonel and Bakha are complementary to each other in order to get rid of the burden of humiliation and suffering at the hand of the Hindus. He tries to convince him by paraphrasing the following promises made by Jesus to his subject into broken Hindustani :

“If you are in trouble, come to Jesus in the girja ghar”

“Come all ye that labour and I shall give thee rest” (p.101)

He tries to clear his mind and makes him to choose alternative to live a dignified life, which according to him, is only possible in the conversion to Christianity. Bakha is baffled with the arrival of the Colonel and also surprised with his knowledge of his troubles. Colonel Hutchinson makes himself familiar with Bakha and tries to speak in native language in an awful manner which Bakha was aware of.

He introduces himself as a padre of the Salvation Army. Here the Colonel is trying to adopt a policy of conversion for the untouchables who are easy target. They are coaxed to take refuge in Christianity at the pretext of the promises of a dignified life. They are also given hope to attain a better life - a life of a human being which they are deprived of in the Hindu society.

It is evident with historical sources provided by James Messy in his work that Francis Xavier the first Roman Catholic Jesuit in 1542 came India and translated Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Supper and Ten Commandments in Tamil. In order to emancipate it among the population he took a bell and went around ringing first in the streets of Goa and then village to village on the Western Coast among the fishermen which succeeded him in baptizing seven lakh people in which majority was lower castes. The Christian missionaries were on mission to get converts as many in numbers as possible. For the purpose the missionaries had their own religious representatives who strived for getting more and more conversions. As in the novel Colonel Hutchinson's wife comments :

“the proselytizing mission of Christianity had, in his hands, been a complete failure, the number of conversions to his credit for the last twenty years being not more than five, and those five mainly from among the dirty black Untouchables” (p.98)

Here in the lines, explicitly one can find the notion that Colonel Hutchinson is considered as failure padre because in last twenty years he could get only five conversions

and that too from Outcastes, who are dirty and inferior according to his wife. Colonel Hutchinson every day goes in hills at the pretext of walk. He remains on hunting of finding an oppressed and broken Outcastes among the rubbish heap to complete his true mission. In his age of sixty-five years, near the heap of dung and filth, he waits for some troubled, tired, hungry Outcaste, who in his despair would listen the gospel of Christ which ultimately would take him to the gate of a Church in search of their lost human identity. When Colonel touches Bakha, in reality he touches his broken and struggling soul against the so-called Hindus. He condescendingly comes closer and tries to impart him the knowledge of Jesus Christ. On Bakha's indication of his ignorance of the existence of Yessuh Messih Colonel dragges him by arms to take him to the Church with the singing Christ's compassionate acceptance of even poor and Outcastes. He sings:

“Life is found in Jesus  
Only there ‘tis offered thee;  
Offered without price or money  
‘tis the gift of God sent free” (p. 102)

Though Bakha has no knowledge of English language nor he knows about Jesus, yet Colonel puts effort to convert people to Christianity like Bakha. Bakha is confused yet filled with pride at the thought of Sahib's gratitude and condescend nature. For him it's a great achievement to be in a Sahib's company, it's a dream come true for him. James Messy's work of Dalit theology reveals that for centuries the missionaries have been working at the ground level in a well-planned manner with the motive to control the minds of the people and create religious hegemony on them so that they could emancipate their religion in the locals. Through the strategic layers of the plan, they had created a mass of converted Outcaste Christians.

Francis Xavier's seedings brought in a new change in the religious arena, when in AD 1606 Roberto de Nobili in Madurai observed that the Outcastes adopt Christian religion more successfully because of the Portuguese. These Portuguese were known as 'Paranghis', who remained unclean and ate beef and consumed liquor and were in contact of low castes. In order to gain converts Roberto de Nobili declared himself an Upper caste and later on along with his colleagues Brahmins. He declared himself a royal person from Rome not Paranghis. He made use of a current belief of that time that the original Veda was lost in his favour and pronounced of its finding. He made them believe that his teachings are from the very sources of the lost Veda. Subsequently, he began following Hindu religion and customs and even he practiced untouchability. His teachings brought him conversion from upper caste Brahmins. He created a system of separate priests for upper caste Christians and lower caste Christians (by conversion). The chasm was broadened instead of filling. The practice brought no change in the lives of the Outcaste Christians by conversion. In fact, he (Roberto de Nobili) camouflaged himself in the Hindu society and accomplished his mission of conversion.

Anand's Colonel Hutchinson follows the similar way to credit himself with the gaining of adequate numbers of converts from the lower castes but success brought him only five in twenty years. He stays near the colony of the Outcastes talking to some Untouchables. He follows the same route of to get absorbed among the natives by learning their language though in broken manner and lives among them. He always keeps with him translated copies of the Bible under his arms and gospel of St. Luke in the pockets of his jacket and overcoat to thrust in the hands of the passer-by whether he be willing or not.

The narrator writes:

“... he freely mixed with the natives and had thus lost some of the glamour attaching to the superior.” (p.99)

At the advent of the missionaries, the caste system had already been practiced among the natives in Indian Southern states. It had created a class of subjugated and oppressed natives in binary opposition against the upper castes. People internalized the teachings of missionaries as the teachings of their lost Veda and became prey of these missionaries. Here, Bakha also, is in the process of victimization at the hand of the chief of Salvation Army who promises him of liberation in Jesus' refuge. But, Mrs Hutchinson's unintentional intervention saves him from it. She manifests the harsh reality of hypocrisy when she shouts on her husband giving Bakha a nasty look with the words:

“Oh, is that what you've been doing, going to these blackies again!”

“I can't go on waiting for you all day, while you go messing about  
with all those dirty bhangis and chamars” (p.107)

In this condition of repercussion Bakha is unable to understand the true cause of her anger. But the words 'bhangis' and 'chamar' makes him realize to associate himself with her getting on her nerves and his social status of being an Outcaste. He extricates his hand from the grasp of the Colonel and runs away, which saves him from the impending influence of a Padre.

Sometimes, the Outcastes like Bakha ignorantly manage to escape from the clutches of conversion to Christianity on being alarmed timely. And sometimes, the indirect experiences of the elders of the society keep them away from the new treatment at the hand of the so-called representatives of Salvation Army, like Hutchinson. Bakha's first encounter with the Colonel reminds him his father, Lakha's past experiential words when the Colonel introduces himself. He had seen him often visiting to his father in his childhood but never talked to him. He had heard his father telling about the Colonel that he wanted to convert them to the religion of Yessuh Messih and to make them Sahibs like himself.

To conclude, it can be stated that novel delineates an inconspicuous agenda of the missionaries' who have been striving for centuries increasing the number of conversion cases giving them hollow promises of good dignified lives of human being. But, the characters like Lakha, who have staunch faith in their own religion maintain an appropriate distance from them. They respect these Sahibs but they don't get lost in day dreaming like Bakha to be a Sahib one day and behave like them. They remain passive followers of the footprints of their ancestors and keep intact themselves with their own roots. As Anand's Lakha refuses to leave to Hindu fold saying:

“the religion which was good enough for his forefathers was good enough for him”

Although they are subjected to constant humiliation, pain, suffering, oppression in their own Hindu society, yet they lose no faith in their own religion. They have naturalized their untouchability in their lives and impart the same lesson to their succeeding generations. The close observation into the converted 'Dalit Christians' reveals an eye-opening reality of the hypocrisy of the Christianity as stated in James Messy and Peniel Rajkumar's work. Even in Christian religion they face socio- cultural and economic discrimination on the basis of grouped caste conversion. Dalit children remain deprived of equal educational opportunities. Dalits even after the conversion to Christianity remain poor and neglected at social front. The upper-caste Hindus converted to Christianity again enjoy the privileged status and remain dominant in new adopted religion.

In a research article, a researcher, Prakash Louis writes that many studies have revealed that conversion to Christianity does not change the social condition of the Dalits. According to John Webster the Punjabi Dalit Christians provide an instructive case study of an oppressed group converting in order to gain an 'emancipatory identity' but ultimately being subjected to atrocities on all fronts. For most Punjabi Christians the context in which

they converted did not change; they continue to be poor, landless rural labour under the thumb of landlords and moneylenders.

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