



## Problems of Being Dalit in Untouchable and The God of Small Things

**Anant Kumar, Ph.D.**

Department of English,  
Patna University, Patna

The present paper aspires to present the problems of being 'Dalit' in Indian rural society, that is strictly and staunchly governed by the age-old traditions, customs and conventions, through the comparative study of Mulk Raj Anand's classic *Untouchable* and Arundhati Roy's booker prize winner *The God of Small Things*. Bakha in *Untouchable* and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*-both representing the underdogs in the age of exploitation and moral injustice, suffer more or less, in similar circumstances. The latter, of course, undergoes, the aggravated form of suppression and sheer inhuman treatment at the hands of society so called 'Touchable'. Bakha, the sweeper, resents the upper caste society which unjustly puts the downtrodden like Bakha on the margin. He says out of sheer exasperation: "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt" Velutha, on the other hand, is the untouchable carpenter who transgresses the upper caste hegemony by mingling physically and spiritually with Amu, the upper-caste woman, a member of touchable society.

Mulk Raj Anand enjoys the reputation of being a pioneer novelist not only because of a corpus of creative fiction of sufficient bulk and quality but also realism, humanism and social protest. He is no doubt a social reformer, but he himself has not taken up the cudgels in his hands, nor has he personally worked as a social reformer like Shaftesbury. His role as a social reformer was simply to arouse the public conscience to the evils of caste system and induce practical social reforms to introduce healthy reforms in the contaminated stream of India social life.

*Untouchable* is a realistic novel, a slice from life without any modification. Bakha's estrangement, which is typical of the sufferings of his lot, is portrayed realistically. The Sohini episode that takes place in the temple is a replica of realism. Anand shows very realistically how Sohini was held by her breasts and when she did not yield to the lustful urge of Pt. Kali Nath, he shouted levelling the charge of pollution against her.

*Untouchable* is the first novel which pictures untouchability as a social malady corroding the souls of millions of untouchables like Bakha. Anand shows the pathetic condition of social outcasts by a sensitive portrayal of Bakha and his humiliation which shatters the moments of happiness such as the hockey match, the country walk and a wedding.

Bakha is an eighteen years old son of Lakha, the Jamedar of all the sweepers in north Indian cantonment town. He is bullied everyday by his ageing father to clean the latrines. Sohini, Bakha's sister, also confronts a humiliation at the well, where she goes to fetch water. Only upper caste-people are allowed to draw water from it. Outcasts' touch would pollute it.

Thus, what we find here is that the outcasts are at the mercy of the caste Hindus not only for food but even for water. They are allowed to draw water from the community well, the only source of their water supply, by themselves. They must wait near the well for an upper caste person to come by and draw water to give it to them. Outcaste women, whose job it is customarily to fetch water for their homes, bring their pitchers to the well and patiently wait looking for someone to show up and provide them with water. Sometimes they squabble, the aggressive ones, such as Gulabo, the other woman of an upper caste man, browbeat and try to push aside those who are gently and mild-mannered like Sohini. Thus, no matter how hard they work, the untouchables have no rights even to the most basic necessities of life.

Bakha, the untouchable, undergoes harrowing experiences. Humiliation after humiliation shocks him into recognition of his plight. His consciousness glows from an unfailing inner impulse to a purposeful act of defiance against the oppressive forces of traditional authority symbolised by the temple. Bakhanis, in the beginning, only a helpless sacrificial animal but towards the end he emerges a thinking articulate individual.

Walking along and watching the shops, Bakha is attracted to a sweet-shop. “Standing in a corner, he stole glance at the shop to see which the cheapest thing he could buy was.” Having made up his mind, he orders Jalebis. “He was vaguely ashamed and self-conscious at being seen buying sweets” (Anand 45). Moving along and enjoying the jalebis, he happens to become absorbed in looking at a woman in a window. For once he is unself-conscious. In his distraction, he accidentally brushes against another man. The man yells and swears at him in the foulest manner for touching him, thereby polluting him and his fresh clothes. He castigates Bakha for not having stayed to a side of the street and not announcing his approach. He returns to the vicious attack again and again. Bakha utterly stunned by the sudden and venomous outpouring of abuse. The man continues to sputter with rage and Bakha remains paralyzed: Bakha’s mouth was open. But he could not utter a single word. He was about to apologise (Anand 47).

Bakha feels totally helpless, his helplessness literally a case of humanity born free but held down by social chains, as observed by Rousseau and later Marx.

Bakha finally finds his tongue to apologise. He says, I have erred ... I forgot to call; I beg your forgiveness. It won’t happen again! (Anand 49). But the crowd stands around him unmoved, “taking a sort of sadistic delight in watching him cower”. And feeling a sense of its power, why Bakha suffers in mental anguish: To Bakha every second seemed an endless age of woe and suffering. His whole demeanour was concentrated in humility... (Anand 49).

The crowd disperses at the approach of a Muslim cab-driver. But the little angry man is not yet satisfied. This is an opportunity for him to display his strength. And he slaps Bakha hard. Bakha’s turban falls off and his jalebis scatter in the dust.

In anger, Bakha loses all his humility. He would have hit the man, but the tyrant had made a cowardly exit. The Muslim cabby soothes Bakha. Subdued as he starts walking quite automatically, he began to shout: “Posh, keep away, posh, sweeper coming...” (Anand 51). But within him is a smoldering rage. As he tries in his pain to fathom the reasons why his people are treated so cruelly, it suddenly dawns on him that they are so treated “Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung” (Anand 52). The justice of it should be that the sweepers should be respected because they do very essential work. But caste Hindus hate dung and those who clean it.

Bakha is perturbed to find the Lalla slap him for accidental touch. He is not able to find any reason behind the shopkeeper's instructions to keep the money on the wooden frame instead of accepting it directly. This makes him think how a man could be defiled by the man who keeps him clean and healthy. In the temple he faces the charge defilement for vainly trying to have a look at the deity. So, these are the problems that Bakha, being a Dalit, faces in Anand's *Untouchable*.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of small Things* depicts rather horrid problems of being Dalit through the heart-rending portrayal of Velutha's custodial murder.

Velutha, Vellya Paapen's son could be taken as the representative of the untouchables in the novel. The untouchables were made to suffer humiliations at the hands of the caste Hindus and Christian. Velutha, the young rebel in the novel was a carpenter who was a master craftsman man with German sensibility. He was a committed party worker who actively took part in the activities of the party. He was also rebel and within him there was a volcano ready to burst any time.

After returning to Ayemenem Ammu slowly got drawn to Velutha, the bare-bodied paravan. She could not control her sexual desires and being a young man Velutha positively responded to her advance completely oblivious of the fact that she was a forbidden fruit for a person like him who was an untouchable. But the daring Velutha saw Ammu only as a woman and their affair marked turning point in the novel. When his life was in danger the Marxist Party never stood by him. The spokesman of the party even told the police that he was not an active member. The Ayemenem family also was in the forefront to destroy him completely. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma plotted against him and the latter misrepresented the facts to the Kottayam police. The drowning of Sophie Mol added fuel to the fire. The police got hold of him and tortured him in all possible ways. Once he died in the police custody, Estha was made to tell a lie to ensure that the real culprits went scot-free. Thus, ended a life dedicated to a cause and which was a symbol of life meant for what is just, right and humanitarian. Though Velutha was almost innocent in the affair that he had with Ammu, everybody-the touchable-made that he was a true villain who should be stoned to death. The members of the Ayemenem family, comrade Pillai and to crown it all, the Police played their respective roles wonderfully well to finish off Velutha, the untouchable.

The ways he was tortured to death would perhaps be one of the breathtaking descriptions in any fiction. It would also certainly remind one of the concentration camps where mostly innocent people were tortured to death. One must not forget that Velutha is compared to a god, “God of Small Things (Roy 330), and that when he is murdered, toenails are painted red bringing him closer to the figure of Jesus, son of God. Velutha is an untouchable or “Harijan”, ‘children of God as Gandhi called them, a name rejected by the community for the name ‘Dalit’, ‘The oppressed’ thus showing their situation to be a socio-political one, and not a religious one. So just as Jesus died for man’s redemption after being punished for preaching a new religion, Velutha died for preaching and practicing equality.

Velutha’s father was a toddy tapper by profession. While shaping a block of granite with hammer a chip had flown into his left eye sling through it. So, one of his identification marks was his left eye. He was an old world Paravan and had seen the Paravans crawling backwards with a broom sweeping away their footprints. This is somewhat akin to Bakha’s agonised and anguished shout: Posh, keep away, Posh, Sweeper coming...

To sum up, Bakha and Velutha are the neglected and unwanted members of the society, who question the orthodox society for its inhuman conduct and unreasonable customs and register their protest against the unjust society and system. The former lives in hope to get rid of stigma of being called untouchable one day or the other with the arrival of Gandhi on the scene and flush system: while the latter dies in his unconscious war waged against hypocritical, prudish and snobbish society of the upper caste people.

#### References:

Surendran, K. V. *The God of small Things: A Saga of Lost Dreams*. Atlantic, 2007.

Prasad, Murari. *Arundhati Roy: Critical Perspectives*. Pencraft International, 2011.

Rajeshwar, M. Bhatnagar, Manmohan K. *The novels of Mulk Raj Anand*; Atlantic, 2001.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. India Ink, 1997.

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Penguin Classic, 2011.