

Bakha in *Untouchable* and Iman Shahida Johnson in *Tried and Tested*: The Politics and Aesthetics of Representation

Fida Lubana A.

Full-Time Research Scholar, Department of English,
Government College, Malappuram, Kerala, India

&

Dr A. I. Vilayathullah

Associate Professor, Department of English,
Government Arts & Science College, Kondotty, Malappuram, Kerala, India

Abstract: Representation has often played a crucial role in moulding a general perception. The way something is represented either in media or in literature results in identity construction and stereotypes, along with the creation of public consciousness. The representation of the 'other' is a serious discourse in the postcolonial scenario. Postcolonial literature operates in different avenues such as subaltern literature, writing back literature, resistance literature etc. Casteism in the East and anti-Muslim racism in the West are both forms of marginalization. This paper is a close reading analysis and comparison of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) set in India and Umm Juwayriyah's *Tried and Tested* (2017) which takes place in America. Both the novels have been analysed in terms of representation of the 'other' giving emphasis to the dichotomy of representation. The protagonist in *Untouchable* is submissive, docile and passive who does not undergo any transformation, whereas the subaltern portrayal in *Tried and Tested* seems to be different where the protagonist undergoes a radical change and becomes bold and empowered. A deconstructive reading of the novel *Untouchable* reveals the upper caste consciousness of domination which communicates a wrong notion that subalterns should remain in their forced bondage. On the other hand, Juwayriyah delineates the importance of faith, family bonding and equality for the liberation of black Muslims. Novels being one of the powerful mass media, have the power to influence the public consciousness. Subsequently, these novels are further relevant when exploring and comparing how representations are made.

Keywords: Representation, Other, Mulk Raj Anand, Umm Juwayriyah, Writing back, Comparison, Dichotomy, Public consciousness

The word subaltern was first used by Antonio Gramsci to refer to socially subordinated groups who lacked unity and organisation of those in power. Later, it was popularised by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak through her phenomenal essay of 1985 “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. Gradually the term was adapted to refer to all those of inferior rank. Thus, subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups who are marginalised from the main stream community in a way or other. Subalternity can be expressed in terms of class, caste, race or gender.

Literature of the subaltern has carved out a distinct niche in the last few decades and has become a leading discourse. Subsequently the way the subalterns are portrayed in the media has often played a crucial role in moulding a general perception. It results in the formation of stereotypes. Stereotypes are the recurring images that are formulated in the minds of masses. The representation of the ‘other’ is a serious discourse in the postcolonial criticism. Edward Said, the acclaimed postcolonial theoretician in his book *Orientalism* has established how stereotyping engages in constructing a public perception. Accordingly, the subaltern representation in the mainstream media has a lot to do with their status in the society.

Casteism in East and racism in West are both forms of marginalisation. Throughout history we have literatures focused on the themes of caste and race which project characters representing marginalised sections. *Untouchable* (1935) by Mulk Raj Anand and *Tried and Tested* (2017) by Umm Juwayriyah are noteworthy in this regard. Analysing in terms of representation of the ‘other’, one can view a dichotomy in the portrayal of subaltern characters in the two respective novels. Novels being one of the powerful mass media, have the power to influence the public consciousness and it can also dismantle previously held knowledge about the ‘other’. Politically profound representations intentionally or unintentionally wield great influence on society. Michael Ray Fitzgerald observes that, “the media representations have long been a matter of crucial concern for minorities as well as those interested in creating a more responsible media” (3). Continuous and repeated misrepresentation of minorities communicates a wrong notion about them to the society. Likewise, a positive representation can create wonders too.

Untouchable, a brilliant example of social realism is undoubtedly a document that throws light on the predicament and sufferings of the downtrodden. The novel gives expression to the angst of an eighteen-year-old scavenger boy named Bakha who is a representative of all downtrodden communities in India. *Untouchable* narrates a day in the life of Bakha, and terrible things happen to him on this one day. As the story unfolds, wherever he goes it is humiliation, embarrassment, shame, persecution and torture that awaits him. He had a number of dreams and aspirations to realise, but all are in vain just because he is an untouchable. He suffers every minute in his life because he is an untouchable. Through the portrayal of Bakha's father, brother, sister, friends and other minor characters, Anand draws a full picture of the social and communal life of untouchables in the pre-independent India.

In the novel, Bakha is illustrated as an individual who has to put up with all the injustices and exploitations that he encounters. He is a silent victim who suffers everything passively. Throughout the story he seems to have no transformation and thus exhibits no sign of hope. Occasionally he is presented as rebellious in nature, but his resentment towards the exploitation is inward and he fails to openly fight against the discrimination and injustice meted out to him. His rebellion is silent and inexpressive in spite of the well-built physique he has. The power of resistance in him is shown to be suppressed when the realisation strikes him that he is an untouchable. He is presented as a soul with a "smouldering rage" (Anand 42). Yet, he has silenced his resistance by not expressing it. "In a moment he had lost all his humility and he would have lost his temper too" (42). Bakha then comes to the self-revelation that "'I am an untouchable!' He said to himself, 'an untouchable!'" (43).

The poetically alluring description of Bakha's physique and bodily strength reveals his potential for rebellion. Yet the novelist undermines it by over-emphasising the physique, indirectly suggesting that the resistance of Dalits is confined to the physical capability rather than intellectual potentials. Anand's language to describe the socially low sections and their experiences is a fine specimen of Indian English. He blends Punjabi and English and uses it in a way that suits the portrayal.

Other characters in the novel are more passive and resigned than Bakha. They do not even exhibit the silent resistance which Bakha evinces. They do not have any desire to protest. They associate their wretched plight with their low birth. This is evident in Bakha's father Lakha when he says to Bakha just when he expressed his protest against the dominant caste's attitude to his father, "No, no my son, no.

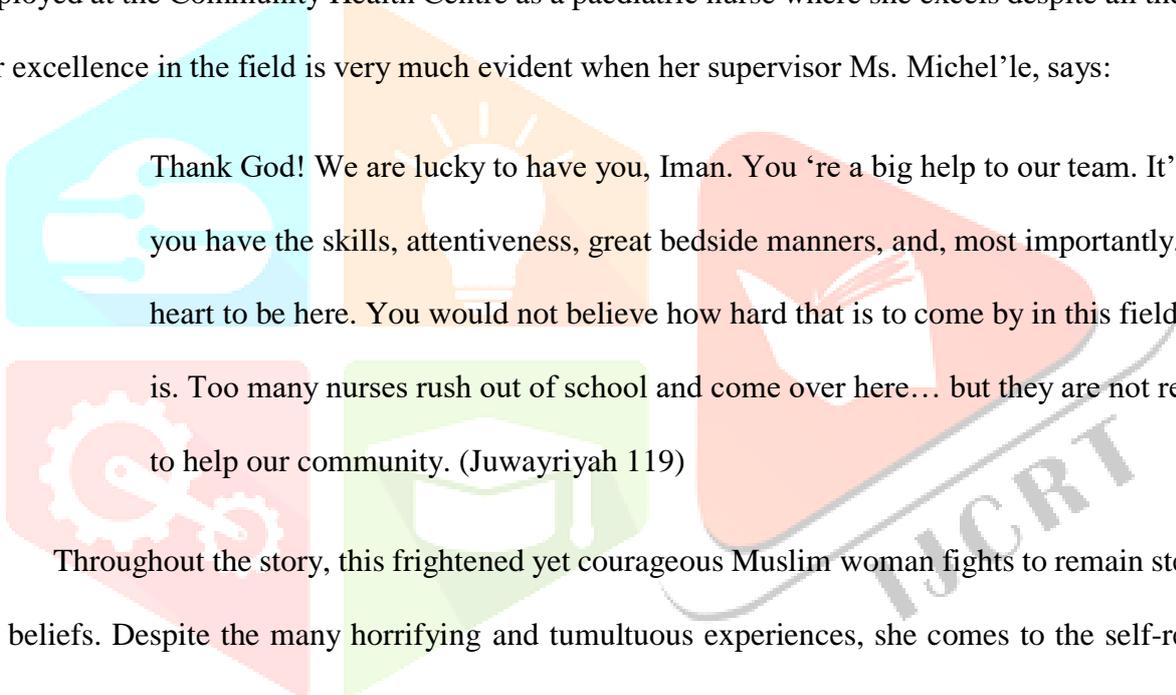
They are our superiors. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us.” (66) Further, when Bakha expressed his interest in education, Lakha discouraged him saying that, “schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweeper... The masters would not teach the outcaste, lest their fingers which guided the students across the text should touch the leaves of the outcastes’ books and they be polluted. (Anand 33) This can be contrasted with a striking similar situation in Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*. Valmiki as an outcaste was expelled from school. His father reacted courageously by declaring that “I am leaving now ... but this boy will study right here... in this school. And not just him but there will be many coming after him” (Valmiki 7).

With the introduction of Dalit literature as a distinctive discipline in the 1990’s, those texts written by upper castes which represented Dalits as weak and submissive were deconstructed and re-read as ones written from an oppressive caste-consciousness of domination. Such representations impart the wrong notion that Dalits should remain in their forced bondage. Had the author made Bakha one capable of spitting back at the oppressor and braving to disobey the so-called superior caste-lords, the impact on the posterity would have been very different. They must be represented in a way that their confidence and self-respect should enable them to conquer their threatening adversities. Fiction/literature is a means of educating the community. Educating the downtrodden caste sections their life roles as in the case of Bakha is a very deceptive way of making them tied to their predicament for many years. It is a way of keeping them subjugated for hundreds of years and indirectly it is a clever way of humiliating them as well.

Umm Juwayriyah in the novel *Tried and Tested* chronicles the life of Iman Shahida Johnson, a Black American Muslim woman, and her “journey through abuse, addiction and family discord” (Cover copy) towards self-empowerment and spiritual fulfilment by drawing on her faith. The novel delves deep in to the multifaceted experiences of many indigenous American Muslim families, their blessings and hardships that tie them together against their insecurities in an Islamophobic society. Umm Juwayriyah is a phenomenal writer and creator of Urban Islamic Fiction, a newly emerging sub-genre in Islamic Fiction which delineates the relatively unexplored space of African American Urban Muslims and American Urban Muslim families, which are often overlooked as part of the American community. The author explains, “writing, storytelling, and even performance poetry is rooted in healing and community

healing” (Juwayriyah). The novel also opens new avenues for the readers in showing them how Islam deals with the crisis in everyday life.

The plot of the novel takes place in urban Pittsburgh. Iman, a 30-year-old Black American Muslim Woman, the protagonist of the novel returns to Pittsburgh, her hometown, after 12 years, escaping an abusive relationship with her husband Mateo with whom she had eloped a decade ago. With all the anxieties and the internal conflicts, she approaches her family to be finally forgiven by her Ummi and other family members. There begins her journey towards liberation and spiritual fulfilment. A victim of post-traumatic stress disorder, Iman is presented as an undeniable raw character who has many frailties and weaknesses. Realising the importance of financial independence for a woman she manages to get employed at the Community Health Centre as a paediatric nurse where she excels despite all the hurdles. Her excellence in the field is very much evident when her supervisor Ms. Michel’le, says:



Thank God! We are lucky to have you, Iman. You ‘re a big help to our team. It’s clear you have the skills, attentiveness, great bedside manners, and, most importantly, the heart to be here. You would not believe how hard that is to come by in this field, but it is. Too many nurses rush out of school and come over here... but they are not really here to help our community. (Juwayriyah 119)

Throughout the story, this frightened yet courageous Muslim woman fights to remain steadfast in her beliefs. Despite the many horrifying and tumultuous experiences, she comes to the self-realisation that in order to reclaim her life she has to renew her faith in God and reshape her remaining life fully accorded with the meaning of her name Iman which meant ‘faith’ or ‘belief’.

They taught me Tawheed from the womb, they sacrificed and worked hard to take care of me. Ummi and Abu always reminded me to pray my five and to value my body by dressing modestly. For most part, those were the teachings that carried me during the darkest nights. (35)

Familial bonding in the novel is very powerful that each character exhibits sympathy and support towards Iman to bring her back to life which can be contrasted with the situation in *Untouchable*. There is an instance of an occasion in the novel when Iman felt so weak and vulnerable. Then her sister-in-law consoles her saying, “I did not know you back in the days, but you seem to be a really strong woman today. You left a horrible situation and you came back home and back to Islam” (36). Another occasion of strong familial bond is very much evident when Iman’s sister Ameera says to her, “You got Allah, you got your family, and you got you! That’s an US situation. So, we gonna work together, put our trust in Allah, and do what we got to keep us all safe” (69). Similar to *Color Purple* authored by another African American writer, Alice Walker, there is a sisterhood which is progressing in the plot, with which the female characters from the community get connected, share their anxieties and then feel hopeful. “Family and sisterhood are two social institutions which guard ‘other woman’ from the mainstream discriminations, hate-crimes and animosities” (K 153). Correspondingly there is an Islamic Centre in the novel which “was one of the largest centres in the city for Muslims to congregate and worship Allah” (Juwayriyah 165). It offers Islamic schooling, technical training program, free English classes for refugees and immigrants and it was open to Muslims all over the world apart from offering “dawah efforts to Indigenous Latino, White and Black American Muslims” (165). Also, Muslim women of every colour and ethnicity were present here. This infused a kind of oneness and unity among the Muslims to fight back their insecurities.

Each character has his or her own problems. But they are not waiting to be saved. They possess an internal strength which they acquire through their faith which Bakha and other characters in *Untouchable* do not possess. When Iman and her brother Masud encountered a racist middle aged White female clerk in court and she passed an abusive comment about Muslim women, Masud retaliated declaring that:

My sister and I are not foreigners. We’re Black Americans, born Muslims. This is as much as our country as it is yours! Now, it’s not our business how many other Muslim women have come down for help, but I know one thing: they all deserve respect and some professional help. If it is asking you too much to do your job, go on and go get someone else to service us! (72)

Another strategy with which the author ‘writes back’ and demonstrates vehement resistance against marginalisation and anti-Muslim racism is by glorifying and taking pride in the Islamic way of life. Hijab is frequently mentioned in the novel and the women characters are pleased to wear it realising it as a part of their religious obligation. It makes them confident, fashionable and empowered. Along with that, the characters who are dressed, “unapologetically, Afrocentric” (79), are often referred to in the novel and they all are warm, well-spoken and beautiful. Perhaps they celebrate their Muslimness over their blackness and womanliness. The pride of being a black and a Muslim is instilled in children right from an early stage by the elders and this is quite clear when Iman’s nephew, eight-year-old Hassan says, “I’m a black boy and I’m almost as tall as you. Ain’t no kidnappers kidnappin’ me!” (31). Such positive and privileging portrayals usually open up new vistas for the masses.

Throughout the ages, literature has represented the subalterns. But what matters is the way in which they are portrayed. Fiction or literature is a means of educating the community and should serve as an inspiration for downtrodden to rise up with fervour and walk towards victory. There is a dichotomy in the way Anand and Juwayriyah have portrayed the experiences of the marginalised. Passive or weak representation of the subalterns as in *Untouchable* will impart a wrong notion in the society. On the other hand, powerful portrayal in *Tried and Tested* foretells a better day for the Muslim black community. Since Juwayriyah hails from a black American Muslim community and is an insider, her experiences seem to be more authentic. Anand, on the other hand, being an outsider, is sympathetic towards Dalits. He, however, fails to suggest any solution and doesn’t invigorate them to offer resistance. Thus, the two novels offer a good study in contrast to bring to light how representation or in some cases stereotyping works in moulding social or political roles in real life.

References

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Hutchinson International Authors. 1947.

Cover copy. *Tried and Tested*, by Dominique Scott, As Sabr Publications, 2017.

Fitzgerald, Michael Ray. "Evolutionary stages of minorities in the Mass Media: An Application of Clarke's to American Indian Television Representations." *Academia*.

<https://www.academia.edu>. Accessed 2 March. 2022.

Juwayriyah, Umm. Black Muslim authors write for impact. *Facebook*, 14 Dec 2020, 4:01 a.m., www.Facebook.com. / Author Umm Juwayriyah. Accessed 5 March 2022.

Juwayriyah, Umm. *Tried and Tested*. E-book ed., As Sabr Publications, 2017. Kindle.

K, Erfan. *Negotiating the Cultural Divide: Formation of Muslim - American Spaces in If I Should Speak, The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, The Taqwacores, and The Size of a Mustard Seed*. 2019. Kannur U, PhD thesis. Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/329926>.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.1978.

Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Samya Print, 2003.

