



Dalit Protagonists : Deconstructing Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable And Perumal Murugan's Seasons Of The Palm

ABSTRACT: Dalit community has a long history of suffering in India .They even face discrimination and untouchability is practised at present age too.Dalit literature gave dalits writer a freedom to express themselves in writing.Though today dalit writers express their disappointment through their writing ,non dalit writer in the past and as well as in the present also kept writing up about dalits struggle in society.Mulk Raj Anand and Perumal Murugan novels dealt with dalit struggles though they are writers in different languages and of different centuries to different languages.This paper tries to explore the dalit protagonists of Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' and Perumal Murugan's 'Seasons of the palm'.These dalit identities may differ from each other but they are the ones who experience through the same kind of struggle though in the respective times they belonged to.

KEY WORDS ; Dalit identity, sufferings ,untouchability ,protagonist ,dalits etc

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I. INTRODUCTION

In India the caste issue had been a predominant problem since many years. Even today in India there are worst cases of caste discrimination in spite of the laws in support of scheduled castes and equal rights the constitution of India guarantees them .Dalits are facing oppression from upper caste for centuries .They are considered untouchables and they are asked to be docile to them and to work for them .They are not allowed to enter temple and to access the well belonging to upper castes.

Movements and literature played an important role in the empowerment of Dalits . Many movements are launched in the support of dalits'cause .Gopal Baba Walangkar ,himself a dalit is a pioneer of Dalit movement to address their cause.Later,in Maharastra Jyatiroe Phule supported their cause by launching a movement named Satyasodak Samaj. .B.R.Ambedkar was to first to launch the National movement that advocates the problems faced by dalit people..The movement empowered dalits and helped them to realize the mistreatment meted out to them.

Through the Ages ,Indian literature echoed the concern for low caste people .Bhakthi Literature which comprised early Marathi mahar poets like Chokamala,Shimpi Namdeo, Kabir ,a medieval hindi poet and 17th century poet Kumbi Tukaram expressed their concern for untouchables though it was limited to religious front.In 19th century Jyotirao Phule in his work 'Gulmagiri" dealt with caste issue .In early twentieth century Kesurshaut , a Marathi poet through his poems voiced his concern for low caste

Ambedkar revolutionized his ideology thus making dalits realize their rights and they expressed their concerns and disappointments in their writing which was classified under the tag 'Dalit literature'. The tag Dalit literature came to forefront only in 1970 in Maharashtra,. Dalit literature evolved as a separate school of thought in almost all Indian regional languages.

This paper attempts to study plight of low caste protoganists in a prejudiced society where they lack awareness to fight against injustice meted out to them depicted in the novel 'Untouchable' by famous Indian English writer Mulk Raj Anand which was set in pre- independent India and the contemporary tamil writer Perumal Murugan's novel Koola Madari which is set in post independent India.translated into English as Seasons of the palm by V.Geetha.

II. MULK RAJ ANAND AND PERUMAL MURUGAN

Mulk Raj Anand is a celebrated Indian English writer who was a contemporary of renowned Indian English writers namely R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao .He is one of the earliest Indian English writers to get international recognition. He edited the anthology of Dalit writings along with Dr .Eleanor Zealot.He was the author of novels like Untouchable,Coolie,The village,The sword and sickle,The big heart .Apart from novels he is a author of autobiography which was planned to be on seven volumes but ended up with completion of four volumes. .He is a recipient of Sahitya Akademi award .he had a good friendship with English writers like

George Orwell who reviewed his novel 'The sword and sickle' and E.M.Forester who prefaced his first novel Untouchable

His novels depicted always the limits of the society bound by religion and caste. He had a big concern for people who suffered from caste discrimination in society that was reflected in his writing. When Saros Cowsajee, a critic asked in his letter to Mulk Raj Anand the reason his novel Road [1961] invoking the same issue as in the novel Untouchable [1935] he replied him by informing of his observation in Harayana where caste Hindus not touching the stones carried by untouchables and he took up the matter to Nehru who was angry and was not ready to believe the fact. He said him that he would prove it by showing it to him in 'enchanted mirror'. [George 45] Thus the writer brought out the harsh realities of then society through his novel Road. Anand's novels is not only limited to portrayal of dalits life but he also expressed his anti colonial stance in his novels.

In Tamilnadu, the concern for lower caste people finds a place in old tamil literature like Periyapuram which comes under the tag 'Tamil bakthi literature'. Rationalist leaders like EVR Periyar who fought for the cause of low caste people along with the awareness that is gained out of ideology of Ambedkar helped Dalit literature flourish in Tamilnadu. Tamil dalit writer Bama published her first work Karukku and popularised the dalit literary school in tamil and inspired many dalit writers to express their ideas through their literary works.

Perumal Murugan is a contemporary tamil writer who is a tamil professor by profession. He is an author of six novels, four collection of short stories, poems and a good number of scholarly essays. He edited a dialect dictionary which won the state award for excellence. He is a recipient of Katha award for short stories. The writer who had an interest for writing at the age of eight had authored novels like Eru veyil [Rising Sun], Nizhal muttram [Current show], koolamadari [Seasons of the palm]

He is an admirer of writings of Shanmugasundaram, a tamil sub regional writer of 20th century that he did his research studies in the works of the writer. His writing inspired him to the core that Perumal Murugan says "I follow in his footsteps, I now write what he has left unwritten, he left out writing about caste system of his times" ["The return of Perumal Murugan"]. The ideologies of Periyar and Marxism shaped his thinking and made him to take up to writing. His novels dealt with realities of past society and caste atrocities. The writer came to limelight when caste based groups protested against his novel Mathorubugan [One part woman] which made him to give up writing for quite sometime.

III. WRITERS' CONCERN FOR DALITS

Mulk Raj Anand and Perumal Murugan both are non dalits yet they are concerned about dalits struggle and sufferings which is because of their personal encounter to caste realities in the society. Though they belong to different centuries, different languages, their writings exposed the barriers that are obstructing equality in the society

Mulk Raj Anand's protest against caste driven society was first fuelled by the suicide of his aunt Devaki as she was excommunicated by an orthodox Hindu society for her friendship with a Muslim woman. Perumal Murugan had his first instance of exploring caste differences when he went working at his father's soda shop as he says it in his novel current show:

"It was the movie theatre which helped me acquire an outlook that transcended caste during my schooldays, when I had no theoretical understanding of casteism. There were many boys from the movie theatre who came to our house to run errands and work on our fields. They would do any work so long as they received a good meal. But if they faced discrimination or interference in their freedom, they would run away" [qtd in Kalyan Raman].

Mulk Raj Anand's The untouchable is published in 1935. It was translated into many languages. In this story he exposes the unfair treatment meted out to low caste people and the practice of untouchability that was common everywhere in pre-independent India. The story deals with a day's account of Bakha, a sweeper who faces humiliation one after the other in the order of a day. Though the story is a day's account in life of Bakha it was the same humiliation he used to face in day to day life thus making him to think, realize the very existence of the unfair practice. Finally Mahatma's speech gives him the hope that he didn't have before.

Seasons of the palm is V. Geetha's English translation of Perumal Murugan's novel Koolamadari. V. Geetha is an Indian feminist activist, translator and writer on range of subjects including caste and gender. She has translated two novels of Perumal Murugan. This novel is shortlisted for Kiriyama award in 2005. Seasons of the palm is a story set in 1960 that presents the sorry state of dalit people in post independent India. The story deals with the life of Shorty belonging to chakli caste who works as a bonded labourer to herd the goats and to look after the cow pen. He is submissive and faces oppression and is considered untouchable. He finds solace in nature and the company of his friends. The novel depicts the never changing mindset of upper caste people in rural area and the ignorance of low caste people.

IV. BHAKA AND SHORTY –VICTIMS OF UNTOUCHABILITY

E.M Forster is right when he justifies the aptness of Anand writing the novel in his preface to the novel 'Untouchable' "Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian, who observed from outside" [Anand 9] Bhaka is not a character that is created merely out of Anand's imagination but it was out of his observation in his life playing with children of sweepers and his personal experiences which made him to take stand against orthodox Hindu society which has finally resulted in construction of a novel . The novel begins by describing the outcastes colony where lived Bhaka who is an eighteen year old son of Lakha ,Jemadaar of all sweepers in the town and how bhaka spends a day and how the particular day ends up giving him hope .Bhaka's job is considered dirty as he cleans the latrines. Though 'he remained comparatively clean'[Anand 18],he was still considered untouchable. Similarly ,Murugan has witnessed the caste atrocities in rural area where it was so intense and his stories always dealt with the past.Through the character Shorty he depicts the role of caste realities of the then rural society which still continues to happen somewhere.Shorty is a bonded labour who works since five years staying at his master's house .He is not allowed to visit home and he has to herd goats and has to look after the cow pen cleaning the shits and he has to sleep at the same cow pen.Anand's Bhaka and Murugan's Shorty both confronts the same kind of mistreatment though both represents the condition prevailed in respective periods they belonged to.

In India, low caste people are considered inferior by high caste people and they treat them as untouchables. Bhaka and Shorty both are victims of practice of untouchability though their cases are different.Bhaka has to announce his approach whenever he sees a higher caste people pass by the side .At one instance Bhaka earned the wrath and abuse of a higher caste man and ending up in very humiliating incident to him when he failed to announce his approach. "Keep to the side of the road, he low-caste vermin!" he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. "Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!"[Anand 53] The crowd gathered also abused him.Finally a tonga wallah who is a muhammadan came to his rescue.

Similarly Shorty also gets to experience such instances where he was illtreated. Shorty has to go to the place where Nadar community people live to supply milk to the people who are regular buyers of milk of his master's cows and he has to take the milk can which is open with rough cloth tied to its mouth as a lid so as to ensure that he didn't touch the lid "This is not easy ,for he has to hold the heavy can by the cloth. On no account must he touch the can directly .Once he gets to the houses in the Nadar neighbourhood that buy milks he sets the can down and stands away."[Seasons of the palm 12] The irony is same Shorty is looking after the cow pen.

Even today in some parts of India, low caste people are still not allowed inside temple and are not allowed to attend temple festivals.Both Bakha and Shorty too experience instances where they are denied permission to enter temple.Bhaka entered into temple to explore what is inside out of curiosity .At that time he didn't know that at the same temple his sister sohina who was called for cleaning the lavatory of priest's house was molested by the priest. On seeing him entering the temple ,the worshipper started shouting at him to leave the place by saying 'The distance ,the distance' [Anand70].Similarly Shorty who lives in an independent India faces the same situation.Being a low caste boy,He is not allowed to attend the temple festival.His master also insisted him to leave the place and stay at cow pen.Even if he dare to go inside ,he would be chased away by saying "Bloody untouchable what does an untouchable want with a temple festival ? get out get out."[Seasons of the palm 229]They could only see from far the performances taking place in temple festivals

V. DUTIFUL WORKERS

Bhaka and Shorty both are duty bound and did their work perfectly .Bhaka was a dexterous worker [Anand 18]He did his job properly and he won't stop without completing the work despite his bodily discomforts even after a long hour of hectic work. The end of one job meant to him only the beginning of another[Anand 21] .Once bhaka was called by his friends to play hockey but he refused saying that he has to go for work .'Bhaka had principles. To him duty comes first....[Anand 42] Shorty did his work efficiently and he worked from the morning till night cleaning cow shed ,herding goats .Shorty slips into each task effortlessly yet the mistress lists each of his labours out for him.[Seasons of the palm 13]When his master's son Selvan calls him to come with him to the cinema ,Shorty refuses saying that he doesn't want to leave the pen unguarded and he was afraid that had to face his master if something wrong happens.

VI. BHAKA AND SHORTY AT OPPOSITE POLES

Bhaka and Shorty also did have some striking differences .Bhaka has a great interest for studying which he thinks will ensure him a comfortable life in future .Bhaka wanted to study and speak English like a sahib .He even asked the babu's son to teach him that he would pay an anna per lesson .He thinks it would be nice if he will be able to read and write that he could read the papers and could talk to the sahibs and he doesn't have to run after scribes to read or write a letter.[Anand 44]However Shorty who lives in a rural area doesn't

show any interest for studying .It may be because there is no inspiration left for him to motivate him to study .He only thinks of his job for which his parents sent him .A conversation between him and Selvan proves it "What s up ,Master? something bothering you What do you think ...I hate school... Dont want to go to school.you dont know how lucky you are "[Seasons of the palm 137]

Selvan's remark could only create a negative image of schooling in the mind of Shorty.

Bhaka is forward looking though he is submissive and he has to change the nature of life that he lives at present .There is a rebel found inside him which he tries to hide in order to avoid facing consequences that his father fear he would face .When he comes to know from Sohini that she was molested by the priest,he wanted to retaliate against the priest.but he understood that 'he could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody especially by a low caste man.[Anand 73]In his conversation with his father he says that he is not happy with the job and he didn't want to go to the town again.When his father narrated about how he was saved by a high caste doctor when he was a child.Bhaka was not pleased and he expressed anger and hatred against upper caste people in a few words 'He might have killed me.[Anand 93] To the end of the novel Bhaka gets a ray of hope when he comes to know about the flush machine that will put an end to manual scavenging in future. In contrast Shorty didn't think of his future .He is the boy who has not yet enjoyed the freedom living in an independent nation because of the unchanging mentality of high caste people .He is so submissive .He didn't speak a word or he never tries to flee even when he was beaten by his master for stealing coconut shells from Vayakattu master's field or when he was blamed for the loss of a sheep. He is so innocent that he didn't complain or express his dissatisfaction to his parents .He didn't understand how he was exploited by his master. Finally in the novel even when Selvan pushes shorty into water he doesn't react against him immediately .Later when he continues to hurt him he gets angry and pushes him into the water.He was shocked When there is no sign of his head seen anywhere in the water.Yet he is so kind that he doesn't want to leave the place even when his friends insist him .He dives into well in search of selvan by crying out 'Master selvan'. Theodore Roethke says in his poem 'The meadow mouse 'all things innocent hapless,forsaken .Similarly The story ends with a pessimistic note

"He can't stop no he must go deeper further and further than anyone has ever gone to the end where there is only thick darkness .where he can't see any more ,where he cannot know how deeper it is."[Seasons of the palm 331]

Martin Luther King Jr says "Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity." But Shorty is so ignorant and so innocent that it had made him suffer, made him lose his freedom and dignity ,made him silent when he was physically and mentally abused. Shorty no longer has to suffer from all the humiliation he faced

VII. CONCLUSION

Subramaniya Bharatiyar says "we are of the same caste and race" .But in both these novels the high caste people considers low caste people as inferiors and thus both the main character in these novels face discrimination . Bhaka is optimistic of his future though caste discrimination is common everywhere at his times but in the case of Shorty,he doesnt find any drive force to help him out to escape the injustice meted out to him at the time where there are laws to support his cause and thus finally it leads to his tragic end.There are still people like Shorty who remains unnoticed ,live somewhere in India in rural society where caste roots are still present.Finally,the mindset of People has to change to make the way smooth for an egalitarian and unprejudiced society

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