

Uncertainty to Restitution: Representation of Dalits in Kancha Ilaiah's *Untouchable God* and Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*

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Abstract

The word Dalit in India means "oppressed" or "broken." Today, it refers to people once known as "untouchables." The veracity that untouchability was abolished by the Indian Constitution in 1949 could not stop this evil from continuing, which imposes social restrictions on persons based on castes, even in this 21st century. Kancha Ilaiah's *Untouchable God* (2011) explores the foibles and hypocrisies of the upper castes and tries to find the true connotation of egalitarianism across India. In contrast, Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010) shows the emancipation of the marginalized class, which genuinely mirrors Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's ideals for Dalit empowerment. The research scrutinizes Dalit characters and their struggle from two altered standpoints, as depicted in the select fiction. On the one hand, if it emphasizes the anguish of the so-called outcasts of our country, then on the other, it also shows the empowerment of the Dalit, albeit in a dissimilar manner! The research argues against every societal and economic exploitation and seeks to support every type of noble inventiveness to create a casteless society.

Keywords: Oppressed, Untouchable, Society, Struggle, Empowerment.

Introduction

"Dalit is not a caste, but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures from a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion, and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary."

- Arjun Dangle, a renowned writer of Dalit literature

"Dalit" (oppressed) is the name that the people belonging to those classes at the very bottom of India's caste hierarchy have given themselves. Formerly, they were known as "Untouchables," because their presence was considered so tainting that even contact with them was to be circumvented at all costs. Their official label is "Scheduled Castes" (Gurusamy 236). In a caste-bound Indian societal structure, a Dalit(44-50) is looked down upon because they are considered to be of low birth and, hence, enumerated as an "untouchable." The Dalit Panther Movement (Pawar 56) in Maharashtra first coined the term "Dalit" in their manifesto, published in 1972. The word was adopted as an act of confident assertion, rebuffing Mahatma Gandhi's lingo of "Harijan," which means "children of God." As per the Dalit

Panthers, the word “Dalit” connotes: “A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, Economically, and in the name of religion” (Thokal 21). In a nutshell, people belonging to the Dalit community are relegated to the lowest strata of societal division. The Dalits are often considered outcastes, which is a practice where some people, believed to be of lower caste, are kept in seclusion and denied social equality. Their touch is considered to be polluting or contaminating to the higher caste people.

The appellation of this marginalized class changes from one geographical region to the other. They were known as Ati-shudra, Antyaja, Ararna, or Naam-Sudhra³ in ancient India. It must be noted here that our Constitution strongly advocates the obliteration of ‘Untouchability’ forever from society. Article 17 says, “Untouchability is abolished, and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offense punishable following law”(COI). The clause under Article 17 protects a person from being bullied by someone from another community, and every state must ensure that this rule is not despoiled. The article is very particular about the irrational and unlawful practice of untouchability, which ‘had developed historically in the country (Sharma 92-95). It dissipates the societal stigma associated with the marginalized community, mainly the Dalits, because of their origin. We cannot ignore the fact that about two hundred million Dalits, who comprise almost 16% of the population of the country, are still looked down upon. It is pathetic that they are struggling hard for co-existence (45)! To evade the bedlams of caste-based bigotry, many Dalits have tried to convert themselves from Hinduism to other religions (mainly Buddhism), but to no avail! Even after the process of conversion, they are unable to escape the blasphemy of societal discernment (45).

Background of the Study

The overall experience of the distressed “untouchable communities” and their life-long struggle for justice forms the backbone of Dalit Literature in post-independent India! It must be noted here that ‘Dalit’ is both a noun and an adjective. To express the extreme oppression of the ‘untouchable community,’ the Hindi word ‘Dalit’ (which means oppressed in English) was introduced in the early epoch of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the term ‘Dalit Literature was first used in 1958 at the first-ever Dalit Conference’ organized in Bombay (Aston 2001), where academicians and social workers tried to find a platform to discuss the snags and trials associated with this marginalized community. Dalit literature is written in almost all the major languages of our country and consists of essays, verses, autobiographies, and short stories (Wiki). Over time, Dalit literature became a powerful tool in registering its protest against all forms of societal and political brutality on this vulnerable caste. Subsequently, it produced several momentous novels in English, too, based on the true hardships of the Dalits in India.

Objectives of the Study

The current research paper takes into consideration two primary texts of the recent epoch, namely, Kancha Ilaiah’s *Untouchable God* (2011), and Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men* (2010), which intend to fulfill the following aims and objectives:

- To make a comparative analysis between the vicious approach of the upper castes in sharp contrast to B.R Ambedkar’s ideals for “Dalit emancipation”;
- To study the attempts made by the select writers to establish the true connotation of egalitarianism across India;
- To study the hypocrisy of the elegant people in the novels, who in their imperativeness to establish the privileged position, underestimate both Dalit men and women;

- To undertake further research to improve an understanding of the consequences of social exclusion and discernment of the Dalit community.

Research Outcome

In *Untouchable God* (2011), Ilaiah talks about upper-caste people and their predisposed insolence towards Dalits. Here, a low-caste person named Pariah is beaten to death by the Brahminical higher order, as he had committed the “sin” of thinking about God and thereby enterprising to rear the seed of equality in the realm. Unsurprisingly, the writer exposes the brutality of the society, where the Dalit men and women are aghast at putting forward their suggestions on any issue about their progress or parity in the social order, not only because “their efforts to improve their situation have often been squashed by assault” (Gurusamy 44), but also due to the apathy of the higher-caste people in abolishing this age-old divide. The poor Pariah comprehends this vicious discernment: “Pariah grunted. His mind was restless today, running like a rat in a cage, nibbling at all these ideas. Which was the food, and which were the bars? He thought of his children. They were born as gifts of the same God, yet their future was bleak and fearful” (*Untouchable God* 6).

The Dalits, or untouchables, have been tortured through the ages and are not allowed to live and enter into defrayals of the higher caste people. They were segregated from the mainstream and, most of the time, had to find salvage in the outskirts of the villages or towns (Mukherjee 115). While depicting the life of the Dalit men and women in the village, Ilaiah shows gender discrimination, even in the Dalit household: “Men were men, whatever caste they were born in; they tilled the land and fed the cattle, but they would never cook or weed crops. The division between men’s and women’s labor was so deep that it was almost a thing of nature; it was so old that no one could have said whether it was made by gods or humans” (1).

Nonetheless, the protagonist of the novel breaks through this gender stereotyping, because “only an exceptional man like Pariah did both male and female tasks” (2). Apart from pigeonholed gender roles, Ilaiah unswervingly criticizes the crude mentality of the so-called upper-caste people in their prejudice towards the marginalized community, mainly the Dalits. The writer depicts six important Brahmins representing different geographical locations of India (Nand & Rai 25-27). If Veda Shastry of Tamil Nadu can be considered as a leader of the group, then Namboodri from Kerala is also a protuberant figure. He epitomizes an ostensive system that advocates caste discernment in all its forms. Tilak from Maharashtra propagates covetous prejudice, while Appa Rao of Andhra Pradesh and Krishnamoorthy of Karnataka have a restrained sentiment towards casteism. When it comes to Banerjee Babu from Bengal, he considers himself superior to all hierarchical divisions.

In point of fact, “as social exclusion is about domination, discrimination, and deprivation, the beneficiaries do not wish any change, while those who are discriminated against, or are ‘inferior,’ ‘incapable,’ ‘less meritorious,’ and ‘lower’ are not in a position to mobilize and organize to alter the existing social system” (Sharma 26). It incessantly torments Pariah, who cannot accept his stature of carrying the corps and doing all mucky things all through his life, but at the same time, he does not have the valor to challenge the hierarchy. He consoled himself by discerning that the “God” who has created the Brahmins must be different from the “God” who has created the ‘Dalits’ or other plants and animals. He was diffused from being untouchable. What did it look like? Of what color? How did it differ from other souls? Or was it like blood, which always looked the same? (6). While walking and thinking about the inside to think that even though he was born as a human being, he was branded as an “untouchable because he was a Dalit: “He felt that, ‘O then if he had a soul, it too was Discernment meted out to people like him” (7). He feels tormented by the existence of God. Instantaneously, the merciless upper-caste society assault him physically to disavow his dormant notions: “He cried out, ‘O God, I am dying!’ The blows rained down as he

sank to the ground. ‘You bastard, how dare you think about Soul, God, and Caste? Shouted an unknown voice. ‘That means ... Equality? You son of a bitch, you have begun to think! You too!’ (8).

In reality, any act of showing audacity by a member of the “untouchable class” in challenging the caste-based division in society engenders undulations in the minds of the so-called “higher caste people” because through ages, “Dalits were consistently denied the status of the subject and were always represented by others as submissive category parasitically attached to the paternalistic Brahmanical normality” (Gurusamy 114). The higher-caste people assaulted the poor Pariah because he thought of an egalitarian society. Ultimately, he yields to his injuries in the hospital, accompanied only by his better -half. What is more pitiable than the hegemony exulting in the death of the Dalit man?

If Iliaiah depicts the disgrace of a Dalit in the hands of the upper-caste people, then Manu Joseph, in his celebrated novel *Serious Men* (2010), tries to promote the dream of ‘Dalit empowerment,’ albeit in a distinct manner. He narrates the enthralling story of Ayyan Mani, a shrewd but skeptical Tamil Dalit, who works as a clerk in a well-known scientific institute of Bombay and has the guts in the belly to encounter the authority of the higher-caste people and proclaim his virtuoso. Mani lives in a slum area of Mumbai, which was “a hive of ten thousand one-room homes carved inside a hundred and twenty identical three-storeyed buildings” (*Serious Men* 6), with his wife and 11-year-old boy Adithya, aspiring to break away from his miserable state of being as “an untouchable” by using his astute brainpower. He feels distressed from within to see his wife Oja struggling hard with her marginalized stature. He has a grudge against the upper-caste people because he “...had been born into poverty that no human should have to endure; he absorbed the rudiments of knowledge under the municipality’s lights; he learned the guile to feed himself and his family; and he was now stranded because there is only so far that the son of a sweeper can go” (122). Ayyan spends his mornings watching the ‘tired high-caste faces’ of women exercising on the beach, imagining them all ‘in the ecstasy of being seduced by him.’ Still, in truth, ‘beautiful women depressed him. They were like Mercedes, BlackBerry phones, and sea-view homes—all out of his reach’.

Nonetheless, Ayyan Mani, like Pariah or any other Dalit character, was not ready to accept defeat so easily. “Some days, he invented quotes that insulted Indian culture, that exclusive history of the Brahmins” (24). But his wife, Oja, was not ready to accept his grudge against the Hindu deities: “I don’t care what the Brahmins did. Their gods are now mine”, Oja said. Her voice faltered. I am a Hindu. We are all Hindus. Why do we all pretend?” (51). In this tug-of-war, on the one side of the skirmish are the intellectual “Brahmin researchers” led by the Institute’s Director, Dr. Arvind Acharya, an internationally acclaimed scientist. As per the buzz, he was once nominated for the prestigious Nobel Prize. Dr. Acharya and his intellectual team members are described as: “calm men (who) spoke to themselves when they needed good company.” They were all “serious men”, searching for indications of life on the planet. Like a brave white tiger of the 21st century, Ayyan soon concludes that just waging a clandestine cold -war against the Brahmins will not fetch him any victory.

“In their long struggle for equality, India’s Dalits, or “untouchables” have often exchanged their Hinduism for Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or Buddhism, believing that they will better their lives by doing so....(but) they realize that such a change neither improves their social status nor remedies their economic problems of unemployment and poverty” (Gurusamy 103). A calculating Ayyan could easily comprehend that his rejection of the caste system and subsequent conversion to Buddhism would not solve the delinquent. Neither his denial to let his wife keep an idol of Lord Ganesha in the household will ever make any alteration in the caste-bound society because he “knew that the routine of his life would eventually suffocate him. The future, otherwise, was

all too predictable. He would type letters for the Brahmins, take their calls, and suffer their pursuit of truth” (122). Ayyan Mani resolves to follow treacherous means to brighten his son’s future. By making false propaganda about his son, who uses a hearing aid in one ear, Mani establishes him as a Dalit prodigy! In the process of making his outcast son renowned in a hierarchical society, Mani uses every kind of lie and even coercion to achieve success in his mission. Ultimately, we see the protagonist partially winning the game over the hegemonic power.

Conclusion

Even when we are trying to be a superpower, Dalits in our country are still living in a Catch-22 situation, due to the age-old rigidity of a caste-based hierarchy. Thanks to the unstinting and relentless efforts of the Govt. of India, the so-called gaps between the non-Dalits and the Dalits in education, earnings, and health are minimalizing. Further, many people from this marginalized community have recently made many advancements in the socio-economic field. The academia, as well as many NGOs, actively speak for their rights. Seminars/workshops/symposiums, which are regularly being organized in colleges and universities have greatly helped our society to think about liberty, equality, and fraternity. Three members from the ‘Dalit community’ have served as heads of our state. Still, when we listen to the news on television or read newspapers/news feeds/articles/journals, we find that even in the first quarter of the year 2025, a significant number of marginalized people are forced to earn their living through pejorative methods. What is pathetic is that even in this modern age, when India successfully sends Chandrayaan-III on its lunar mission, social discrimination in terms of “untouchability” still exists! We need to think in terms of building an equilibrium society, in the days to come.

The current research scrutinizes Dalit characters and their struggle from two altered standpoints. On the one hand, if it emphasizes the distress of the so-called untouchables of our country, then on the other, it also engenders a ray of hope by showcasing the empowerment of the Dalit, although in an isolated manner! No doubt, Ilaiah’s *Untouchable God* and Joseph’s *Serious Men* induce us to think about the caste segregation present in society and the ways to exterminate this social evil. These chronicles act as eye-openers for further research on Dalit literature, which must help us register our protest, exhibit valor, and aid in developing the distinctiveness of this marginalized community. It would strengthen the prospect of the economic and political upheaval of the Dalit individuals and communities in asserting their rights and building an archetypal society!

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