

Untouchability as a Subaltern issue: as seen in Vaidehi's Kannada novella 'Asprushyaru.'

Prasad N

Assistant Professor of English,
Govt. First Grade College, Periyapatna,
Karnataka. 571607.

Subaltern themes include the sensibilities of the marginalized people of a society. Literature is a way through which the unspoken world unravels before the empathizing minds. That is when literature holds a mirror for the social issues like untouchability. Arundhati Roy observes,

"There's no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard."

But the reliability matters because the perspectives vary every time a theme is told and re-told. More so when the same issue has two takes: an Insider's and an Outsider's. When we think from the point of subalternity, an untouchable becomes an insider and an uppercaste becomes an outsider. But it is not necessary that one outshines the other. Truth is what we perceive it to be. Untouchability is an issue which evokes strong feelings both from the sufferer and the practitioner. But when a sensitive mind views it from different angles, then it is up to the readers to arrive at a suitable conclusion about this subaltern issue.

In this regard, I stand before you to present two novelists from Kannada literatures who have given two outlooks on untouchability. Devanur Mahadev in his novella, **Odalala** and Vaidehi in her novella **Asprushyaru**.

Asprushyaru(untouchables) is a fiction work which views untouchability from the sympathetic bramhinal eyes. This bramhinal household is situated in the coastal regions of Karnataka. This is a family headed by Vasudevaraya, who has an altruistic view on untouchables, believing that only education and cleanliness differentiate a 'Bramhin' from a 'Shudra'. Bramhinism not by birth right but only by deeds. He carried radical aspirations in his youth, unfortunately he could not achieve them in his life and hence he supports his distant relative Bhaskara, who marries a Koraga- low caste girl, 'Thukri', later renamed, 'Kumudini'. Bhaskar's mother Parthakka, a widow who lives in Vasudevaraya's house. Her firm inclination towards untouchability and her belief in the divine theory of 'varnashrama' take a severe beating when her son Bhaskara marries Koraga girl Thukri. (Kumudini) She is unable to reconcile to this fact. Along with her, we see Vasudeva's wife Gowramma too practicing untouchability as she believes in social vertical hierarchy. Gowramma's daughter Saroja is a philanthropist who does not believe in 'madi', 'mailige', i.e untouchability. Both Parthakka and Gowramma become helpless when they see Vasudevaraya bring the pregnant wife of Bhaskara, to nurture her during pregnancy. It is a tradition that pregnant women go to their mothers' home to deliver first baby. This is in contrast with Vasudevaeaya and Gowramma's older daughter Rathna, who enjoys motherly care during her pregnancy of second baby. So Rathna and Kumudini

(aka Tukri) are contrasted in receiving treatments from the older ladies of the house. While Saroja revolts against male chauvinism and prefers an educated, well mannered man of any caste to an arrogant male pig from her caste. Hence Parthakka's adherence to untouchability is dwarfed by her son and daughter-in-law. Kumudini(Tukri) never disrespects elders and learns the nuances of vegetarian cooking easily. Gowramma's domineering assertion is challenged by her daughter Saroja. Rathna too is a victim of domestic violence though she seems to admire it publically. We have low caste household servants who indubitably approve bramhin superiority, while they too practice untouchability to their inferior castes. So untouchability is seen across all strata of the society and everybody is keen in maintaining their sanctity in the social ladder. For example Koraga an untouchable community itself has inferior sect called 'Soppina Koragas' among them, and Koragas cannot stand Soppina Koragas. But Vaidehi, the novelist suggests that it is with bramhins the act of taking the untouchables back into mainstream should begin, justifiably because that it was them who began it. This is made possible when Vasudevaraya argues out the objecting ladies and brings in Koraga girl into his pooja room. Secondly Vaidehi seems to suggest that untouchability has multiple layers to it. People ill-treat people from lower order. Women who themselves are treated inferior to men, vigourously practice and proclaim untouchability. Vaidehi gives a revolutionary end as bramhins allow inferiors into their innerhouse. This is quite contrasting to the mutt seers in the coastal regions of Karnataka who visit the slums but refrain from letting untouchables sit with them in sahabhojanam.

This is contrasting too to Ammu of Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" who loves her untouchable servant. Also to Devanur Mahadeva's "Kusumabale", where he observes that, earlier days the low caste men abducted high born women, hence they were made outcastes. Strangely here, women themselves vouch for societal stratification.

Also Vaidehi finds inter-caste marriage as a pragmatic tool to erase casteism in this novella.

Odalala is a famed novella by renowned Kannada Dalit writer Devanuru Mahadeva. It narrates the story of Sakavva and her children who dwell in a hut. The novel begins with Sakavva searching a missing rooster and her inability to find it. This enrages her and she breathes wrath on the stealers. Tired, she retires home and her daughter gives her water to drink and Sakavva promises that she would name her property in her name. This enrages her son Sannayya and his wife which is followed by a quarrel between them. Sakavva knows law of the land well and she argues that the property is her own and she could name it to anyone. Sakavva even dares Yama, the death god to take her to hell, which cannot equal the ordeals on this earth. The writer vividly brings out the poor family's struggle to get a decent meal. The upper castes do not have any work to offer for these poor souls and the family struggles to feed the little children of the family. In such a situation the elder son brings a bag of stolen groundnuts which is joyfully shared by the family members and they empty the whole bag. The police tumble at the stolen groundnuts and they search every nook and corner of the house to find it and in the process they break everything -vessels, earthen pots, trunks etc, before the gaping, scared family members. The police inspector even wonders whether these people consumed it all. Yet, unable to find any trace, they are about to leave, when Sakavva complains that her rooster is missing and the police laughingly, take away the other rooster in the house too, to help find it. Hence the story, which began with the search of rooster, ends on the same note.

Throughout the novella, we find the inhuman dwelling conditions where these downtrodden people live. We also find simple sentiments like harmony, understanding, liveliness and love of life in these poor souls. Devanur Mahadev being an insider narrates the little joys and sorrows of the untouchables brilliantly. Hence the local Nanjanagudu dialect and the minute details are authentic. In this novella we find most of the things in the house are destroyed by police in the name of proof- finding. The only thing that remains unharmed is the wall painting of peacocks drawn by Gouri, Sakavva s granddaughter. What Devanur suggests through this, is that the beauty of simple poor life cannot be seized by any force. The system may destroy everything from the poor slum dwellers but the invaluable liveliness, the flair to live a cursed life cannot be done away with. Thus the novella is absorbing both in its narrative language and the details of underprivileged life. As a victim of untouchability Devanur Mahadev enlightens us about the voiceless sufferers in a powerful way. As Mahatma Gandhi said,

”Untouchability is a many headed monster and forms, some of them so subtle as not to be easily detected.”

When we keep both these novels side by side we find that both are authentic notes on two different environments, untouchability being the common strain. While Vaidehi speaks of a brahminical set up which wakes to the grim reality of brutal inequality and she seems to suggest that the originators of untouchability should strive to stop it. Solution should come from upper castes. On the other hand Devanur is content in shedding light on the inhuman living conditions of untouchables. His account is sure to make the society feel guilty of its misdeeds. Devanur does not fathom solution for this issue, for he believes solution should come from within. Thus an Insider’s account of untouchability and an Outsider’s attempt to arrive at a solution, wherein both appear genuine. Both of them leave a firm impression that literature can be a canvas where society can ‘undraw’ the false lines of separation and ‘redraw’ a coherent, unified sketch of humanity.

References:

- 1.Asprushyaru,by Vaidehi 2012,Akshara Publishers.
- 2.Odalala,by Devanur Mahadev,1978, Pusthak Publishers.
3. The God of Small Things, by Arundhati Roy,1997,Penguin Publishers,