

From Rejection to Resistance: Portrayal of Dalits in Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

“Rejection’ and ‘revolt’ in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalit’s pain”
— Sharan Kumar Limbale

In India, still, we have continued the age-old social evil of castes hierarchy or castes hegemony. We have caste difference that deliberately generates the sense of superiority or inferiority, primary and secondary, high castes, and low castes, touchable and untouchables, subjugator and subjugated, exploiter and exploited. We are religiously obliged to accept the castes hierarchy i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and the lowest untouchables. This paper is an attempt to expose the prevalent social and religious evil of ‘untouchability’ and Dalit’s transformations from submissive rejection to aggressive resistance through Laxman Gaikwad’s *The Branded* and the most celebrated Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things*. Gaikwad and Arundhati Roy have explicitly represented incidents and illustrations of atrocities on Dalits which sensitise Dalit castes and make them conscious about their obnoxious life of subjugation and exploitation. The consciousness of the same agony of subjugation and exploitation paves the way for aggressive Dalit resistance to counter the injustice and humiliation of human beings, who is socio-culturally oppressed and marginalised.

Keywords: Dalit, untouchables, subjugation, consciousness, rejection, resistance.

From the so-called ‘Sat-Yuga’ to ‘Treat-Yuga’, from the time of the *Ramayana* to the *Mahabharata*, from ancient India to medieval India and modern contemporary India, we have the long age-old tradition of categorising people into the different races, religions, castes, communities, and class. In our society, we have the so-called superior caste and its binary opposition that is inferior castes. The entire humanity has been divided into central communities and marginal communities, primary and secondary, high society and low society, rich and poor, touchable and untouchable. Because of these culturally created differences, one white human race is exploiting the black race, one religion is exploiting another religion, the high class is exploiting the low class, the rich exploiting the poor and so-called touchables are exploiting the untouchables. So, in this way, human is exploiting another human in the name of race, religion, caste and

class. Such kind of castes based exploitation has been addressed by the Dalit thinkers, activists and Dalit writers through their political movements, literary writings and other expressive arts like Dalit cinema. Literature always reproduced the mirror image of society and its vices for positive transformations in society. The purpose of the literature is not only entertainment but instructions also to correct society. Dalit communities are being subjugated and exploited in the name of castes and communities. Bayly also defines cast as “Caste as jati—to be seen as a concrete ethnographic fact of Indian life...” (154). Many thinkers had shown their concern for the plights of Dalits. From the time of the Bhakti movement, many saint-poets like Lord Gautam, Budha, Raidas, Namdev, Tukaram, Eknath, Chokhamela, Kabir, Gora, Karmamela, Tamil Siddhas, and Chittar were giving voice to the silent agony sufferings of untouchable Dalit castes and communities. Dalit thinkers, activists and writers and like Jayotirao Phule, Sree Narayana Guru, Dr Ram Manohar Lohiya, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, M. K. Gandhi, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Sharan Kumar Limbale Mulk RajAnand, Om Prakash Valmiki, Bama, Laxman Gaikwad, Arundhati Roy and many other were writing resistance through their self-narratives or other genres of Dalit writings. With his *Untouchables*, Mulk Raj Anand, with her *Karukku* and *Sangati* Bama resisted the painful condition of Dalit in South India and ignited the fire of Dalit resistance. Om Prakash Valmiki also ignited the fire of Dalit resistance through his *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* in North India. Sharan Kumar Limbale came with *Aakkarmashi* and *Dalit Sahityaache Sondaryashashtra*, a Marathi Dalit literary text translated as *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2004) and Laxman Gaikwad with his *Uchalya* translated as *Uchalya: The Branded* gives air to the fire of Dalit resistance in Central India. So in Namdeo Dhasal, Mahaswetha Devi, Basudev Sunani, Poomani Sivakami, Arundhati Roy with her *The God of Small Things* also gives a resisting voice for Dalits.

In her *The God of Small Things*, Roy has represented the pains and suffering of Dalits of Kerala, of rice Christianity and the plight of Dalit ‘God of Small Things’ Velutha. She represented the humiliation and injustice of human beings, who are subjugated, oppressed and exploited. we can crystal clear observe the pathetic tragedy of Dalit Velutha who doesn’t know the “love laws”, the lower castes were forbidden to eat ‘forbidden fruit’, come physically within prescribed distances of higher-caste members and could be punished by death for violating this caste-based taboo. Roy recognises this fear in Velutha when he asks himself, “What’s the worst thing that can happen? I could lose everything. My job. My family. My livelihood. Everything” (334). But Roy romanticises this motivation of love. For her, Velutha’s prominent and dominant emotion is love with a high caste woman. But common sense tells us that the dominant emotion for any individual Dalit oppressed by social hegemony would be anger and protest. The same emotion of muted anger could motivate Velutha to make love to a higher woman in defiance of all the taboos that forbid such a union, making love to such a woman would be a significant move in the caste warfare or kind of revenge of atrocities and exploitation by so-called high caste.

In his *Uchalya: The Branded*, Laxman Gaikwad the “born criminals” (Devy 21) also has the motivation and that is emotion and love for education which has been denied to him by the so-called high

Brahmanical hegemony who considered themselves the only rightful owner of education and knowledge and they strongly crushed any effort done on the part of Dalits or untouchables as Gaikwad exposes, “I started going to school...children living nearby our hut were affected by loose motions and vomiting. Our neighbours...began to quarrel with my parents...Goddess Yellamma will be furious. Look, Martand, if your son continues to go to school, we shall call the Panchayat and ostracize you” (pp.16-17). Om Prakash Valmiki was also denied of the right to education by the Brahmanical hegemony as Valmiki himself vents out that pain, “However, all the teachers stepped out, including the headmaster, who called his father names and roared back, “Take him away from here...The *Chuhra* wants him educated...Go, go...Otherwise, I will have your bones broken”. (6). is there any difference between the breaking of bones and cutting off a perfect thumb. No, so many Daronacharyas are still reincarnating and cutting the thumbs of Dalits.

Any kind of education, knowledge was denied to the Dalit people of the Uchalya community. They were denied any kind of right to live with dignity. They cannot wear good clothes if they will; they will be punished by the high caste people so that Dalits could not have any equality with them in any way. Narrating such kind of humiliating incident Gaikwad writes, “This *Pathrut*’s boy now moves about dressed like a *sahib*...He is from the *Uchalya* community, will it ever mend itself?” (115). The “*Pathrut*’s boy” (115) of the Dalit Uchalya community was insulted and humiliated as he broke the law of wearing clothes imposed by high castes social hegemony. When Dalits are expected to wear only rags or are almost naked, then how they can love to be “dressed like a *sahib*” (115). So, love for education and love to be “dressed like a *sahib*” was crushed down by the high caste society as Velutha’s love for a high caste woman was crushed down by the upper strata. Uchalyas were considered “born criminals” (Devy21) by the state and the society as Mahashweta Devi explains, “These tribes had no concept of money. They...go to the village market, place honey, leaves, roots, flowers, and silently take away whatever they needed: rice, oil, and spices. So, they were thieves!”(v). British colonial government imposed the ‘Criminal Tribes Act’ in 1871 and all the people of nomadic Uchalya communities were blessed with a tag of “born criminals” with their first breath. So, Gaikwad was considered a lawbreaker as he also took birth in such a family of nomadic tribe Uchalya. This stigma on his life and community is well explained by Gaikwad when he writes, “My grandfather...picking pockets, lifting valuables and odd things...He was...respected thief...State records mentioned him as a most notorious and dangerous thief. Nobody ever dared cross his path” (1). Any effort on the part of Uchalya people to resist or protest against discrimination by the society and state was crushed down by high caste people and state police *patil* as Gaikwad himself exposes state and society, “The police came...dragging him (Anna) with them...They thrashed the women and the children...They snatched away her (mother’s) mangalsutra...A policeman told my mother, ‘Bring two hundred rupees, then they will be released” (pp.15-16). Corruption prevailed in state police has been exposed by Gaikwad and also by Roy in her *The God of Small Things*. Corrupt practices like exploitation, extortion and corruption are important characteristics of police represented by Gaikwad and Roy. Such

kinds of corrupt practices like extortion and exploitation were being practised by the police. Consequently, these people of Uchalya communities were afraid of the law and police. Police violently beats Velutha for breaking 'love laws' laid down by high castes as he has emotion and love for a high caste woman. Velutha approached his political leader, for some help regarding the allegation of rape and abduction. Velutha entered and earnestly asked for help on the ground that he has been a loyal and devoted worker as well as a follower of the party throughout his life. Comrade Pillai in a very straight forward way, just like a corrupt and callous politician, remarks, "You should know that party was not constituted to support worker's indiscipline in their private life" (8). Velutha was kicked out with baseless clarification.

Nowadays, on the surface, we are talking about so-called social equality, caste equality, and gender equality and so on but when we crack the surface and observe minutely, we find a lot of examples who are victims of such taboos based on religion and castes. We find many Laxman Gaikwads and Veluthas who are the victims of so-called high religion and caste. They are insulted and humiliated and killed by this or that way. We talk a lot about equality and these are the sensitive and problematic issues, which create doubt about the inherent social ethics and morality of intellectuals, policymakers and authoritative personnel. Every individual human being can accept life with dignity and respect, which is worth living if he/she gets the desired self-respect, fame, dignity and identity. And it is desirable even for all to have an egalitarian social framework. We aim to establish a society, which must be free from rigidity and narrowness which spreads awareness through literary farsightedness. But Gaikwad represented the mirror image of the contemporary society in which he could not associate himself. There is no empathy with the high society and he finds himself alien in his own land without any concrete identity except 'born criminals' as he laments, "No native place. No birth date. No house or farm. No caste, either. That is how I was born...In an *Uchalya* community..." (1). Gaikwad cannot forget the obnoxious painful sufferings at the hands of so-called high caste people with low humanity. Cruel, insulting, humiliating experiences came out as his self-experienced narration, "I had to call this place my village...If I happened to touch anybody's vessel; he purged it in fire or touched a cow to wash away the taint of my touch...This village had forced me to live a slave's life. Nothing but humiliation had ever come my way..." (115). Gaikwad feels very sorry for the state of humiliation. From the days of his childhood, he had experienced the exploitation of his nomadic Uchalya community by the Brahmanical social hierarchy. Wounds of humanity were bleeding and are still oozing in this twenty-first century the modern age of science as Om Prakash Valmiki claims, "Times have changed but, there is something somewhere that continues to irk" (134).

Education can make society understand how insignificant it is to favour caste hierarchy. Even though we have glorified and inspiring Indian history and no doubt we are living in the biggest democratic country in the democratic world. In spite of glorified history and inspiring democracy some Dalit communities and some untouchables are still thirsty for egalitarian society and status. Still, some people are craving for basic human dignity, self-esteem and respect. But these secondary subhumans were denied

education also as Valmiki talks about his barriers created by high caste society on his way and that is why he laments on the obnoxious situation, “During the examinations, we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass” (16).

As per the teachings of the *Manusamriti*, Brahmin is born to learn and teach and to take the donation. Kshatriyas is born to fight for the safety of Brahmin, king and society by using arms. Vaishya is born to take part in rituals, engage in business and agriculture and give donation. In this way, the Shudra or untouchables is born to serve all as Shudra took birth from the foot of Brahma. Destiny doesn't stop here only, one of the mythological beliefs conveys that if any untouchable accidentally or deliberately, knowingly or unknowingly listen to some Sanskrit 'Shlokas' or hymns recited by the Brahmin, the melted iron must be poured in his/ her ears as a punishment for crossing the line of ignorance. Education and knowledge is 'forbidden fruit' and 'eternal sin' for them. *Manusmriti* justifies heinous cast-based rapes, “A Brahman, Kshatriya, or Vaishya man can sexually exploit any shudra woman” (IX.25). Further, if by mistake or accidentally any untouchable touches the high-caste people, it is religiously accepted if they have contaminated the so-called high people. Even Dalit's shadow cannot fall upon on high caste person. Dalit people could not stand in the direction of coming air as that air having a touch of Dalit body may pollute elite. Mahatma Gandhi had declared painfully about the social evils as 'a disgrace on Hinduism'. On 14th March of every year, Indian Dalits celebrate the birth anniversary of Dr B.R Ambedkar, who was a great leader of Dalits. But we limited only up to the celebration of birth anniversary. In really we didn't bring any positive reform through Ambedkarite revolutionary philosophy.

Arundhati Roy in her celebrated literary masterpiece *The God of Small Things* has articulated the injustice and violent oppression done to the low untouchables especially Velutha- the Dalit protagonist. In Malayalam Velutha means white, but Velutha is presented as a black Dalit having only darkness in his life. Roy again exposes the pathetic situations of Parvans who were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins and Christians wouldn't defile themselves accidentally stepping into Parvan's footprint. Dalits cannot walk on the public roads, were not allowed to cover their upper bodies and had to put their hands over their mouths to divert their polluted breath away. We can observe the same agony in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, where Bakha, the protagonist has to tolerate humiliation. Bakha as an untouchable bursts out, “Why are we always abused? The sanitary Inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us because we are sweepers, because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That is why they don't touch us-the high castes. (58) Roy's Velutha, the skilled Parvan embodies the state and plight of Dalits. Velutha has great similarities with Anand's Bakha as in spite of his inborn noble qualities and physique he is not yet empowered to strike back. Though the days of crawling 'backwards with a broom' sweeping away the footprints have become a tale of the past, the Parvan's fate has not witnessed the change. Velutha, a 'God of Small Things' “left no foot-prints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in

mirrors” (121). Roy has represented the same injustice and social discrimination. Gaikwad also represented the obnoxious and humiliating life of Dalit by confessing that they used to go on rounds of rubbish heaps and searched for some eatables. Just to save the life from starvation, Gaikwad’s elder brother, Dada sold his second wife to a man just for two hundred and fifty rupees only. Again Gaikwad feels very sorry when he painfully writes, “Dogs also crowded with us for food to lick the leftover from the thrown-out *patravali*... , ‘Oh there, throw these *Pathruts* some food.’... We collected the *patravali* and ate there right on the street” (46). Thus, we can observe both the writers Laxman Gaikwad and Arundhati Roy very pathetically gave voice to the muted sufferings and subjugation of Dalit communities. They vent out the pain of Dalit sufferings. They represented the journey of Dalit thinkers, communities, from rejection to resistance to remove social evil of ‘untouchability’ and establish an egalitarian society.

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