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# Gender-Caste Hegemony and Victimhood: A Study on Untouchable and The God of Small Things

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### **ABSTRACT**

India is distinctive for its varied cultures, enticing landscapes, and rich heritage. Intriguingly, caste and gender inequities are still pervasive in Indian society, and the recent financial crisis has given some millionaires a pretext to abuse their power by denying minority groups access to basic freedoms. Gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in cultural and societal expectations, frequently harming people who don't fit the strict binary gender norms imposed by these institutions. People are classified into castes based on their social standing, class, and place of birth, and their caste status is determined by their largely unchanging familial origins. Both the Indian novels, *Untouchable* of Mulk Raj Anand, published in 1935, and The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy, published 62 years after the first one, display the interconnected and hegemonic nature of Caste and Gender. This paper analyses the interconnected and hegemonic nature of Caste and Gender and interrogates how the hegemony leads to victimhood as narrated by the novels *Untouchable* and *The God of Small Things*.

Keywords: Gender, Caste, Hegemony, Victimhood, Culture, Untouchability

## INTRODUCTION

India is rich in heritage and unique for its diverse cultures and alluring landscapes. Poignantly, deeply ingrained gender and caste injustices persist within Indian culture, and a recent financial crash has afforded certain millionaires an excuse to indulge in a position of authority by limiting minority recourse to vital liberties. All of our great preachers have attempted to dismantle caste as a social norm. Every religion down through Buddhism has preached against caste, yet each time it has just served to fasten the chains (Vivekananda, 1983). Gender is what, individuals are evaluated and categorized on their expressions, behaviours and gestures based on masculine, feminine or neutral. Gender stereotypes are ingrained in societal and cultural expectations about the acceptable ways to express one's gender, often causing harm to individuals who do not conform to the rigid binary gender norms often upheld by these institutions. Politics and family traditions are important factors for impoverished women. Social pressures are so strong that they justify the mistreatment of women. This is due to the largely patriarchal social systems found in the majority of cultures (Hariharasudan & Gnanamony, 2017). The caste system has greatly harmed the citizens of our nation. Even if untouchability was outlawed by legislation in India, people's mental, social, and traditional outlooks remained unchanged. India is not exempt from the class system either (Dar, 2018). Caste is what, individuals are identified and grouped on their birth, classes and social status, in which people are assessed through the lens of unchanged family backgrounds. Srinivas defines caste as, "Caste is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localised group having traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed among other things by the concept of purity and pollution and generally maximum commensality occurs within the castes" (Srinivas, 1978). Untouchability is a repulsive practice of class and caste-based discrimination against a group of people. High-class individuals avoid making contact with these outcasts because even their slightest touch can contaminate the Savarnas. Additionally, there is a notion that persons from higher castes might become impure even if the shadow of an untouchable person touches them. In order to restore his cleanliness, he must bathe in the Ganga's sacred waters (Gopika Unni, 2020).

Both the Indian novels, *Untouchable* of Mulk Raj Anand, published in 1935, and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, published 62 years after the first one, display the interconnected and hegemonic nature of Caste and Gender. Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Untouchable* narrates the struggles faced by the people under the Gender-caste Hegemony

through the protagonist Bakha, a Dalit boy who is a latrine cleaner and Sohini. The novel, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy exposes the struggles and oppression faced by the characters under the gender-caste hegemony through Velutha's life, a Paravan who works as an employee in the pickle factory of the Ipe family. These novels expose society's worst face in which people are evaluated on gender and caste which leads to violence and death making the life of each character victimhood. Arundhati Roy's masterpiece *The God of Small Things* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* are among the most renowned works of Indian literature that assess themes of vulnerability as caste, and gender hegemony. They do have a handful of prevalent subjects, yet owing to their narrative tactics and their historical contexts being distinct, in which they ought to tackle these themes in unique manners. This paper analyses the interconnected and hegemonic nature of Caste and Gender and interrogates how the hegemony leads to victimhood as narrative by the novels *Untouchable* and *The God of Small Things*.

## **Gender-Caste Hegemony and Victimhood**

The interrelation of the hegemonic nature of gender and caste in both novels is often deeply nuanced, outlining complexities of power relationships, racial prejudice and the human experience in a particular cultural and historical setting. Mulk Raj Anand's novels unveil an honest and harsh description of caste-based presumptions and their detrimental impact on individuals, and Arundhati Roy's novel employs an intricate story are and analyses comparable subject matters within the context of a family tale. Both authors shed a glimpse into the complexities and iniquities of Indian society. Anand's novel *Untouchable*, depict struggles faced by Indians under the caste, with religious touches of sarcasm on a blunt. The grief and despair of the downtrodden and marginalized, along with their quest for better lives, are concerns covered throughout his initial pieces. Considering their wickedness, apathy and despair he was always conscious of his obligation to assist with bringing a sense of humanity and consciousness to the intangibles, villagers, slaves, the coolies, and other persecuted sections of culture. He was hailed as India's foremost author, known for his politically astute and compassionate portrayals of India's impoverished population. Through his fiction, he vividly exposes the harsh realities of the downtrodden (Joshi, 2013).

Through the novel *Untouchable*, he displays a tremendous comprehension of sentimentality and tragedy through the character Bakha, a sweeper and latrine cleaner, an 18-year-old untouchable child who gets treated as marginalized by humanity. The protagonist of the novel is labelled as an outcast by society solely because his father is a scavenger and his family has

been living in a ghetto since he was born. He is viewed as filthy, impolite, and underprivileged. Therefore, his low rank inevitably results in his status as an untouchable. The caste system marginalizes the untouchables outside the social ladder since scavenger work is considered to be very filthy (Ilhaam, 2021). The sweeper has a worse situation than a slave because, unlike the slave, who can change masters, and tasks, and even gain freedom, the sweeper is born into a state from which he cannot flee and is isolated from both social interactions and the consolation of his faith (Forster, 1935). The novel starts with describing the outcastes' colony. This outcaste colony is for the lower caste people, "There lived the scavengers, the leatherworkers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcasts from Hindu Society" (Anand, 1970, p. 9). The 1930s era of Hindu Culture was the subject of the novel's captivating focus on contemporary cultural ideals, manners, and issues of society, notably the calamities of social distinctions and social hierarchies. In true form, it is an anthropologically cognizant fictive fiction. It sheds light on the agony and miseries that Hindus of lower socioeconomic strata enacted on marginalized people and the destitute, including predators, cowhide employees, washermen, hairdressers, water bearers, and grass cutters, amongst others. It expresses a fierce objection to racial bias toward untouchables (Joshi, 2013).

Anand describes a single day in the life of Bakha, that is marked with realism. The novel highlights the harsh realities of untouchability and the specific hardships endured by women in a caste-based society that lacks democracy (Reddy, 2015). He denounces and disapproves of the Hindu caste system's callousness. Bakha's day starts with a mix of his father's kind requests and harsh insults, along with an encounter with the upper-caste people who disdain him. His father, Lakha, who serves as the head of the sweeper community, initially mistreats him by sending him outside to clean latrines during the cold early morning hours. "Get up, when you Bakhiya, ohe son of a pig!'... Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoys will be angry" (Anand, 1970, p. 15). Everywhere he goes, he receives harsh treatment. He is treated like a dog when he is provided with food. Chapatti is thrown down from the third floor, Jilebis are also provided in an analogous way to the way a dog is given a piece of meat, an Indian a packet of cigarettes is thrown at him by the store owner. He has been going through numerous instances of terrible beginnings with early encounters. Whenever a social class guy slaps him, he is immensely disgusted for corrupting him, Hindus of the upper caste persist in mistreatment. "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 bowlegged 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, 1970,

p. 53). The high caste Hindu's behaviour is typical when they are touched by the untouchable Bakha. It merely emphasizes the awful predicament of the oppressed (Joshi, 2013).

Anand highlights the entire socioeconomic framework in which members of lower castes feel hopeless about obtaining all opportunities while also exposing the misery and stress of being the underdogs. In the meantime, the centrality of religion, ingrained dogma, poverty, and an imperial mindset are highlighted to show how the low caste in Hindu culture is dominated. He also controls the possibility of dripping the untouchability curse (Dar, 2018). Instead of encompassing the Indian roots at the outset of the novel, Bakha showcases a greater connection with the British, assuming roles and putting oneself like them. He possesses an insatiable need to replicate British culture and he is unwilling to relate his mother's demise to the truth of what he sees. Despite his family's long tenure as untouchables, he can disregard his social strata identity unless he endures a day of harassment for being untouchable. Even though Bakha is acutely aware of his status as an untouchable in both the outcaste's colony and the army barracks, he does not experience social exclusion as intensely there as he does in this town, primarily because he is the sole representative of his caste in the entire area. Anand deliberately takes Bakha into the town to directly confront his untouchability, which demonstrates Anand's adept management of the situation (Dulai, 1992). Anand leads the readers to witness an instance in the life of Bakha, a young sanitation worker who is a Dalit and faces the consequences of discrimination and torture as being a lower caste person. Social status and labour define his relationship with caste Hindus and serve him to identify himself. "All of them abused, abused 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 am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an untouchable!" (Anand, 1970, p. 59). He eloquently reveals the detrimental impacts of the caste system through Bakha's experiences, shedding light on the inhumane aspects of invincibility. "Ohe, Bakhya! Ohe, Bakhya! Ohe, scoundrel of sweeper's son! Come and clean a latrine for me!" (Anand, 1970, p. 15). Bakha's suffering and pain are not a result of his mistakes, but rather of his birth into a lower social level. Everywhere he goes in his daily life, he encounters a lot of humiliation and abuse. And he is always greeted with the phrases 'defiled' and 'polluted' wherever he goes. Because Bakha is inferior to everyone and everything according to society, people avoid him wherever he goes, calling him unclean and dirty. Bakha had to endure conflict both inside and outside of society (Bartwal & Bijalwan, 2013). The novel describes the lives of Dalit women, like Bakha's sister Sohini, highlighting the complex interplay of Gender-caste hegemony. These women endure a dual form of discrimination, facing exclusion based on both their gender

and social class. Sohini's struggle to maintain her dignity and independence in a society marked by a caste-based patriarchal society provides an inescapable loop of Gender-caste Hegemony in which a lower-caste woman is trapped.

Anand is highly conscious of the devastating impact of millennia of tyranny and servitude on the underclasses. Bakha has an essential grandeur of belief and sensibilities. Despite the misery he endures on the occasion of the narrative's events rendering him despairing, he is innately hopeful and sociable. He quietly handles individuals for whomever he purifies the washrooms with politeness and good laughter. He adores and fiercely guards his sister, and he recollects his mother with fondness (Dulai, 1992). Through the novel, readers gain insight into the everyday hardships faced by the untouchables and the constant threat of violence they encounter. Bakha's interactions with people from various Hindu castes, especially an incident where he inadvertently touched a woman from a higher caste, serve as stark reminders of the deeply ingrained prejudices of that era. The caste system seeks solace in religion to maintain its dominance over those with lower socioeconomic status and to rationalize their privileged position. This religious faith serves to reinforce their self-justification. Bakha's humiliation stems not only from his poverty or the menial labour itself but also from the complete denial of his humanity, which reduces him to a subhuman capable of contaminating those of higher caste. The Hindu social structure hinges on the ideas of cleanliness and contamination, wherein any interaction with dirt, whether through occupation or otherwise, diminishes one's social status (Reddy, 2015). Greater social status corresponds to greater distance from dirt, whereas lower social standing is associated with closer proximity to it.

If Mulk Raj Anand writes in the pre-independent Indian context, Arundhati Roy writes in the independent Indian context. However, the Gender-caste Hegemony is unchanged even after sixty years. Arundhati Roy is widely recognized for her writings that portray the socio-political issues and realities of sarcasm faced by the Indians under the intersectional disciplines in a poignant manner. In her novel, The *God of Small Things*, the female characters undergo perpetual assault, abuse, and coercion to comply with the stipulations of the patriarchal norms in their families. Stereotypes regarding gender and expectations have an enormous effect on the daily existence of each character in *God of Small Things*. Ammu, the titular protagonist, is a victim of the coercive effects of gender bias and social conventions. She is socially and economically marginalized challenges the authority of the colonial overlords. She rebels against the basic social conventions that make up the Syrian Christian community in Kerala because she feels oppressed by social injustice. The basic underpinnings of this society are

being challenged by this insurrection. The most crucial act she committed—having a sexual relationship with lower-class Velutha, an untouchable—cannot be interpreted solely as a sexual trespass (Al-Quaderi & Islam, 2011). The novel portrays the unseen despairs and unjustified sorrows of the women who silently and docilely carry the weight of male dominance throughout their lives. Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Rahel, among other female characters in the novel, had a number of difficulties in their day-to-day existence. Their inner selves are impacted by cultural boundaries and family pressure. Their lives were made wretched by the abuse they all endured at home at the hands of their own (Suleman & Mohamed, 2018; Suleman & Rahman, 2020; Suleman et al., 2023). These societal norms are jeopardized by her illicit affair with an untouchable man named Velutha, with disastrous implications. The historical narrative explores how caste discrimination affects women as a whole and the way cultural norms are impacted by it. Although her female characters flee from the norm in society, Roy expertly utilizes them to point out Butler's idea that identity is a rhetorical fabrication. Velutha's life from struggles to the brutality of death as being an untouchable, the 'Paravan' is a clear example of victimhood of Gender-caste hegemony. The novel explains how Paravans were treated:

They were not allowed to touch anything that touches touched. ... Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravans footprint (Roy, 2002, p. 71).

The situation was even worse in the case of women since they had to suffer also from gender disparity. Novels speak about the policemen's status as touchable men, men who are playing "touchable games with touchable cunning" (Roy, 2002, p. 291).

As the narrative unfolds, it unveils a rigid bureaucracy and concealed power dynamics. This connection challenges the established caste hierarchy, and the tragic demise of Velutha at the hands of law enforcement illustrates the extremes to which the caste dominance is willing to go to preserve its authority (Felman & Laub, 1992). According to Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, the novel depicts history as a suffocating force that permeates almost every aspect of social and cultural life, including close, personal, and affective interactions (2005). Society decides and lays down the laws about who should be loved, how should be loved and how much should be loved. In the context of the relationship between Velutha, an untouchable and Ammu, a Syrian Christian, the novel questions this. They were not worried about their caste as they valued more their unconditional love. They have sex and it shows that they care foreach

other and to make sure their satisfaction is mutual. When Velutha is brutally beaten and killed in the Police station, the Novel portrays the pain inside Ammu caused by her forbidden love with Velutha symbolically through the roses. She dreams of them together as skin to skin. The roses pressing against her skin are not real, real roses wilt and rot eventually further representing how the love in this novel does not last. Velutha becomes the victim of the caste system. The novel constructs a scenario in which it becomes evident that Velutha's presence in the factory becomes a problem for Comrade Pillai, because, "according to them, Paravans were not meant to be carpenters" (Roy, 2002, p. 74). This factory problem is complicated by Velutha's active Party member status. "He cannot be recognized and usefully for Pillai because he is an (unpopular) Untouchable worker; yet, he cannot be ignored because he is also the only card-holding member at the factory" (Roy, 2002, p. 115). The novel transcends social strata to tackle the most atrocious kind of confinement and dwells on the periphery of Indian society (Fox, 2002).

The fraternal twins in the novel, Estha and Rahel also break the rule and love laws of having sexual relations at the end as they eventually start with the healing process, nevertheless, they comprehend how much they care for one another, "They both lost their innocence at a young age. By then Estha and Rahel had learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break laws. They heard it's sickening and thud. Like old roses on a breeze" (Roy, 2002, p. 55). The quote reflects on the fraternal twin's loss of innocence. Another female character in the novel, Baby Kochamma represents Pappachi's sister, who is another victim of the caste disparities. Her affection towards Father Mulligan and her attempt to turn into a Roman Catholic for the sake of her love exposes a woman's struggle for Love and she fails in that attempt to stay in Ayemenem forever. In contrast, Baby Kochamma says that she "lived her life backwards, now she hugged it and it hugged her back" (Roy, 2002, p. 22). Thus, her affection or the longing for her love comes to an end. This novel shows as the characters break the boundaries of love, of who should be loved and how much. As the narrator says, "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how and how much. The laws that made the grandmothers' grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers cousins cousins, jam jam and jelly jelly" (Roy, 2002, p. 73).

Women who fall short of the standard mould of conforming to marital bliss and blending into relatives are not given numerous gratifying options by Indian society. As a consequence, patriarchal panoramas trespass as being in an inadequate ability to upset the natural order, even while specific individual actions do have a small impact on societal reactions remain

the sole truly severe penalties. The multifaceted roots in the novel, which possess an embarking in India, provide an unconventional viewpoint on Indian women which draws attention to Western-influenced perceptions while at the same time barely capturing Indian women's efforts to comprehend themselves, a process that wouldn't have been determined by the specific cultural and socioeconomic scenario. In the novel, Indian women who fought against caste traditions are specifically accused of breaching the rigorous patriarchal customs of Indian families and are thus doomed to social exclusion or death in extreme cases (Birgani & Moosavinia, 2019). Throughout Indian history, the caste system segregated the people cruelly and different sections of the division led the people that depicted people's interactions based on their religious status. The narrative subtly promotes an alternative perspective on societal structure, highlighting its inherent unfairness to certain individuals. What captivates readers in this story is its ability to elevate the ordinary into something sacred, revealing the appalling aspects of society in a manner reminiscent of religious revelations (Felman & Laub, 1992).

#### **CONCLUSION**

Caste-gender hegemony is portrayed in the two novels as interconnected structures of power that treat vulnerable individuals like slaves. These novels act as potent critiques of the inequality and biases that are pervasive in Indian society, illuminating the intricate ways that hegemonic forces interact and subjugate people who oppose established standards and structures. Both novels reflect the victimhood of individuals under gender-caste hegemony through the lens of Bakha in *Untouchable* and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Sohini in Untouchable becomes the representative of all the victims who face oppression as a Dalit woman to uphold her dignity and independence in a society characterised by caste prejudice and patriarchal standards. Readers are rendered conscious of the enormous exclusion and deplorability the underprivileged go through in Bakha's experiences (Dulai, 1992). The novel explores how the caste system governs culture and how people from lower castes are often discriminated against. The victimhood of all the untouchables is symbolized by Bakha and Velutha. Due to his caste identity, he suffers daily disgrace, brutal treatment, and mental anguish. His experiences serve as a demonstration of the relentless distress those who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy must suffer. Velutha, being lower caste, is unfairly branded as a criminal and ultimately meets his demise at the hands of the police. His tragic fate serves as a powerful reminder of Caste hegemony even after independence. Ammu's character shows women's bondage in a patriarchal society.

The novels foreshadow the present world's day-to-day life situations which analyse the relationship of individuals. Both novels emphasize the lasting impact of caste-based discrimination and the limitations imposed by conventional gender expectations. They draw attention to the interconnectedness of these problems, revealing how people, particularly women, contend with the compounding effects of various forms of oppression. The novels also make substantial contributions to the fields of gender-caste studies. They do so by presenting intricate narratives that encourage readers to thoughtfully explore the intricacies of these societal frameworks. With their compelling storytelling and rich characterizations, these novels effectively serve as valuable resources for comprehending the persistent struggles experienced by marginalized groups in India and the pressing call for social change and fairness and interpreting the nuances of Gender-Caste hegemony.

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