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**Unveiling Hierarchies : A study of Caste and Class Discrimination Through Indian Voices**

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**Abstract:**

The present paper delves into the intricate tapestry of caste and class discrimination in India, as depicted through the voices of Indian writers, thinkers and activists exposing the various issues like untouchability, exploitation, suffering, misery, east-west encounter and oppression of women in the society. Caste and class discrimination have long been persistent issues that affect societies worldwide. Rooted in historical inequalities, these forms of prejudice continue to shape social hierarchies, access to opportunities and overall well being. By closely analyzing the writings of authors like Mulk Raj Anand and Mahasweta Devi as well as the ideologies of reformists like B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, the research uncovers the multifaceted dimensions of discrimination. Besides Mulk Raj Anand and Mahasweta Devi, many modern writers like Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga and Meena Kandasamy continue to challenge societal norms. Their fiction unflinchingly addresses caste issues, pushing readers to confront the inequalities that persist within Indian society. Bama Faustina's "Karukku" and Omprakash Valmiki's "Joothan" are autobiographical accounts that lay bare the struggles faced by individuals from lower castes. Through this comprehensive exploration, the study underscore the significance of Indian voices in fostering empathy, awareness and critical dialogue surrounding social justice and equality while highlighting the urgency for social reform and the pursuit of a more just and egalitarian society.

**Keywords:** Untouchability, caste discrimination, suffering, plight of the marginalized, condition of women.

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The caste system in India is a historical social structure that segregated communities into numerous hereditary groups known as “jatis” or “castes”. These castes were traditionally organized into four main divisions known as Varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and certain groups, now referred to as “Dalits”, were marginalized and excluded from the varna system, labeled as untouchables. Social class, akin to class systems in societies, is a concept in the social sciences and political theory that revolves around models of social stratification, often identified as upper, middle and lower classes. Living in India makes it evident that caste and class are closely intertwined, especially in rural areas. Caste, functioning as a social stratification based on occupation, assigns certain jobs as having either higher or lower status. Occupations like washing clothes or cleaning are considered lower caste, perpetuating the belief that manual and dirty jobs are inferior. This mindset influences job choices, creating a cycle where people of a particular caste often find themselves limited to the same kinds of work cross generations. The caste system becomes a persistent cycle that is challenging to escape and attempts to break free are met with resistance from the upper caste and class.

B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy were two prominent social reformers in India who played instrumental roles in challenging caste based discrimination and advocating for the rights of marginalized communities. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian constitution centered his ideology on the empowerment and upliftment of Dalits (formerly known as “untouchables”) through education, political representation and social equality. He emphasized the need for political representation and affirmative action to provide opportunities for marginalized communities, leading to the inclusion of reservation policies in the Indian Constitution. He also championed education as a means to break the cycle of discrimination and to empower individuals to escape the confines of their caste identities.

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, a social reformer, politician and rationalist from Tamil Nadu vehemently opposed the Brahminical caste system and emphasized on rationalism and atheism that led him to criticize religious practices. He believed in questioning and rejecting beliefs that perpetuated inequality and exploitation. He was a strong advocate for the self-respect movement, which aimed to instill self-esteem among oppressed communities and encourage them to question traditional norms that perpetuated discrimination.

Thus, both B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy contributed significantly to the social and political landscape of India by challenging deeply rooted discriminatory practices, advocating for the rights of oppressed communities and envisioning a more just and equitable society.

Dalit empowerment has been a longstanding societal concern, with writers addressing it from an early period. Mulk Raj Anand, a prominent Indian Author, tackled the themes of caste discrimination and Dalit (formally known as untouchable) oppression in several of his novels. His works shed light on the social realities of Indian society, exposing the injustices faced by marginalized communities.

The Novels like “Untouchable”, “Coolie”, “Two leaves and a bud” and “The Road” by Mulk Raj Anand specifically address caste and class discrimination and question the ideological grounds of non-marginalized people while suggesting the solutions to the outmoded thinking of the society. These creative works show Anand’s concern and commitment as the writer to voice out for the marginalized section of the society who has been continually victimized by the privileged section of society. All the prominent figures and characters of his novels and short stories are trapped into vicious circle of cruelty, exploitation, repression and untouchability where they are treated worse than animal and non-living things.

The novels are widely read and appreciated by the society and are becoming tool for social change in India. His creative fiction attracts not only the readers from India but also abroad globally. Marginalized people are getting aware of their own rights, dignity, social, emotional and economic needs. Apart from them, non-marginalized section of the society is also participating in the growth of marginalized people. Anand declares, “I am conscious of the need to raise untouchables, peasants, the serfs, coolies and other suppressed members of society, to human dignity and self-awareness in view of abjectness, apathy and despair to which they have been condemned”.

The novel “Untouchability” by Mulk Raj Anand was published in 1935 and is a powerful portrayal of the caste based discrimination and social injustice prevalent in Indian society at the time. The story revolves around Bakha, a young Dalit (formerly known as untouchable) boy and explores his experiences as he grapples with the oppressive social hierarchy and the mistreatment he faces. Through vivid descriptions and powerful imagery, Anand portrays the stark realities of untouchability, highlighting the urgency for social reform. By shedding light on dehumanizing practices and biases experienced by the Dalit community such as denial of basic human rights, segregation and discrimination across various facets of life, the novel seeks to question established societal norms and promote awareness about the plight of the Dalit community. It explores themes of social justice, human dignity and the need for societal reform.

Anand has beautifully contrasted the world of outcaste with the world of high caste. He has portrayed the streets and lane of outcastes as dark, “odorous, smoky world of refuse” and where the lane of outcaste is finished, the upper caste world is portrayed as open, radiant where “the heat of the sun seemed to spread as from a bonfire”. This stark reality of darkness and light signifies the difference between the life of lower caste and upper caste, between negativity and positivity, between sadness and happiness.

In the castiest Indian society, the status of an untouchable is no less than a worm of a gutter. Just like a worm, the untouchables are treated as filthy and dirty. The high caste society themselves considered pure and believed that the touch of outcaste would make them impure. The outcastes were not allowed to enter temples, sit on the pavement of their houses or touch anything. Even the basic necessity of drawing water from the well as well as from the nearby brook was prohibited as their touch would contaminate the water. They are dependent on the favor of high caste Hindus to pour water into their pitchers.

The novel not only explores the hierarchies prevailing between different castes of Indian society but it also reveals the hierarchy among the lower castes. Instead of revolting against the caste system, lower caste maintains own hierarchies. The character of Gulabo-the washerwoman consider herself superior to every other outcaste as she claims to be at high place in the hierarchy of lower castes. She infers various fights and insults on Sohini and calls her-

“You eater of dung and drinker of Urine! You bitch of sweeper women!”

“Ari, you bitch! Do you take me for a buffoon?”

Women become an agent of humiliation and rebuke of another woman.

“Bitch, why don’t you speak! Prostitute why don’t you answer me?”

To this Sohini meekly replies, “Please don’t abuse me....I haven’t said anything to you”.

Despite being poor and Dalit, she is doubly oppressed and exploited for being a woman. She also becomes a victim of molestation. Even the members of lower caste often employ disrespectful and dehumanizing language when referring to their family members, indicating a lack of mutual respect among them.

Ex- Bakha’s father Lakhan wakes him up with a rude call to clean latrines.

“Get up, Oye Bakhya, you son of a pig!”

Besides lower caste themselves and upper caste, the white men also humiliate and ridicule by calling them “Kala Log zamin par hagne wala”.

The lower castes are discriminated and exploited to such level that they are charged with

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much bigger prices than the genuine prices. Despite paying for the goods like Jalebis and betel leaf, the lower castes are being treated no worse than animals. The goods are thrown towards them as a cricket ball or as a bone thrown towards a “dog sniffing round the corner of the shop”. Even the bread is flung down at Bakha which falls on the pavement of the lane but he quietly picks and wraps it in a duster. This passive acceptance makes Bakha internalize the inhuman treatment and the whole concept of untouchability and caste system.

In addition to depicting discrimination, Anand unveils the hypocrisy of upper-caste Hindus, exemplified in incidents like the pandit scene and the upper-caste individual’s slap. Sohini, Bakha’s sister, faces discrimination from high caste Hindus while fetching water from the communal well. Pandit Kali Nath, feigning generosity, invites her to clean his temple courtyard with ulterior motives where Sohini becomes a victim of his lecherous intentions, as he inappropriately touches her. Thus, the incident reveals the hypocrisy of upper caste men who treat women as mere objects and exploit them for sexual gratification but the same women become untouchable otherwise.

Secondly, as Bakha walks through the town, a caste Hindu gets defiled by his touch, prompting him to offer an apology. Despite humbly joining his hands and pleading for forgiveness, the man remains unresponsive. Instead of showing compassion, the defiled man hypocritically responds by giving a slap on the face and departs. However, the very same man becomes untouchable under different circumstances.

M. Berry asserts that for Anand “literature was a weapon for attacking social, political and economic institutions injurious to human freedom and equal opportunity” and certainly the novel “Untouchability” plays a crucial role in attacking the social evils and dehumanized practices that are inflicted on the outcastes, marginalized and women of the society which makes the readers question the functioning of society.

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Even after 25 years, the theme of “Untouchable” returned back in the novel “The Road” indicating that though the backdrop and characters are modified but the exploitation of lower caste by high caste is the same. Bikhu, the protagonist in “The Road” shares several similarities with Bakha, the protagonist of Anand’s previous novel “Untouchable”. The construction of road, in the novel, was intended to streamline the transportation of Govardhan’s milk to the neighbouring town of Gurgaon. However, this seemingly beneficial development ends up causing a conflict between the higher caste Hindus and the most vulnerable lower caste Hindus wherein the upper caste Hindus denied the employment of untouchables in the road construction. While the road physically shortens the distance

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between two locations, it significantly widens the social and economic gap between these two classes.

The second novel “Coolie” by Mulk Raj Anand explores the social injustice, exploitation and the harsh living conditions faced by the working class in colonial India. It tells the story of a young Indian man named Munoo, who becomes a coolie in British controlled Indian railway system and highlights the inequalities and oppression present in that era.

“Two Leaves and a Bud” is a novel that sheds light on the plight of the working class in colonial India. The story revolves around the lives of the tea plantation laborers in India during the British colonial period.

Thus the paper explores Anand’s concern and sympathy for the marginalized and lower caste people along with the women who are doubly oppressed. The above discussed stories and novels are harsh realities of men and women who are crushed by the privileged forces of our society.

Mahasweta Devi, another prominent Indian writer and social activist, known for her impactful contribution to Indian literature, passionately advocated for the well-being of tribal communities, the marginalized and the underprivileged. She made significant efforts to safeguard the rights of tribes, Dalits, rural impoverished populations and vulnerable women and extended her dedication to combating issues like untouchability, bonded labor and oppression of women. Unlike many women writers who focus on the gender oppression experienced by middle or upper class women, Devi tackles the intricacies of gender oppression within the framework of class and caste divisions. Through her activist writings, encompassing essays, short stories, plays and novels, she delves into the multifaceted nature of oppression, examining its manifestations in terms of class, caste and gender. Her works such as “Hajar Churashir Maa”, “Aranyer Adhikar”, “Rudali”, “Draupadi” and many more challenged conventional narratives and gave voice to the voiceless. Her role extended beyond just being a writer; she was a bridge between literature and social activism, advocating for change and amplifying the concerns of those often ignored.

The paper also focuses on Mahasweta Devi’s compelling literary creation, “Rudali” originally published as part of “Nairetey Megh” in 1979 in Bengali and translated into English by Anjum Katyal.

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The novella “Rudali”, set in Rajasthan, portrays the plight of Sanichari, marked by poverty and the stigma of her low caste. Born into desperate circumstances, abandoned by her mother and married into a challenging family, Sanichari faces relentless struggles. Her life unfolds as a series of tragedies, from dealing with her ailing mother in law’s death to the demise of her husband due to contaminated milk offered by the affluent. Following her husband’s death, Sanichari spends a significant amount on the ritual offering, ‘pinda-daan’. Forced to borrow Rs. 20 from landlord Ramavatar Singh to appease the village priest, Mohanlal, she pledges to repay Rs. 50 through bonded labor on Singh’s fields for the next five years. This illustrates the exploitative practice of Malik- Mahajans like Ramavatar Singh, who extract years of unpaid labor in exchange for small debts, showcasing the intertwining of religious and economic exploitation. This dynamic emphasizes how the wealthy people manipulate religion to serve their own interests. Despite these hardships, Sanichari clings to her dignity, allowing her to discover opportunities to sustain herself. Thus the narrative emphasizes the resilience and strength of women facing societal discrimination and adversity.

Further, reconnecting with a childhood friend, Sanichari and her companion seize an opportunity presented by Dulan. He suggests that Sanichari, drawing from her lifetime of misery and her inability to mourn her family’s deaths, could become a professional mourner, providing a fitting farewell for the wealthy in her society. This venture enables them to earn income, receive a bowl of rice and even introduces other women to this means of securing financial independence. Despite her reluctance and dislike for the job, economic necessity compels Rudali to embrace the role of a professional mourner which becomes a means for them to assert some form of agency and dignity in a society that otherwise treats them as invisible and disposable.

Thus “Rudali” and Sanichari’s tale contribute to the rich tradition of Indian stories, offering thought provoking material suitable for book club discussions and essential reading for those exploring Indian literature.

To conclude, Dalit empowerment is only possible when the marginalized communities come forward and help to empower themselves. There is an urgent need to uplift the status of lower class by promoting education, preventing humiliation and abuses and eliminating violence against them for the development and growth of nation as a whole. Indian Authors have keenly contributed towards the upliftment of marginalized communities through their writings which has helped the society to understand the various issues related to marginalized communities. Their writings have not only made the lower class aware of

their rights but also reflect that marginalized section is also an integral part of society.

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