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## **Growing Dalit Resistance: A Study in Time of Fictional Dalit Characters by Non-Dalit Writers**

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### **Abstract**

Being rooted in the consciousness of the time a work of art is also a significant social document of the age in which it is written. Although Dalit Movement has raised serious doubts about the motive and authenticity of the non-Dalit representation of the Dalit experience, it would be interesting to see how a sharp transformation of the Dalit character has taken place in course of time – from the 1930s or 40s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Without going into the theoretical aspects of the Dalit question this paper seeks to make a comparative study of some Dalit characters in Indian fiction in Hindi/Urdu & English – Dukhi, Bakha, Velutha, Narayan and Om. Dukhi is the resigned-to-fate protagonist in Prem Chand's masterpiece *Sadgati (Deliverance)* and Bakha is the angry but subdued hero in Anand's 1935 classic *Untouchable*, who is damned to remain an outcaste despite stirrings deep inside his soul. Narayan and Om in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* give up their traditional occupation and train themselves as tailors which stands as an attempt to challenge the economic

order. Moreover, the kind of language these two characters use against the upper class shows the growing intensity of anger. Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a paravan who cherishes a desire to 'relive' as a touchable. He dares to have physical relation with an upper-class woman (unthinkable to Bakha and even Om) which ultimately costs him his life. Therefore, one notices a sea change in their attitude, psychology, behavior, intellectual growth and consciousness as demonstrated in the growing intensity of anger and protest in these characters belonging to the same class. At one level they are the same and perhaps it would not be wrong to say that these characters from Indian fictions written by non-Dalit writers faithfully portray the growing Dalit resistance in course of time on account of the social and political transformation which has taken place in India (even if they are not regarded as the original voices of Dalit protest).

**Keywords**

Dalit Resistance; Dalit Characters; Prem Chand; Mulk Raj Anand; Rohinton Mistry; Arundhati Roy.

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A novel cannot survive the passage of time if it is devoid of a serious view of life. Thus there are some writers who in their enthusiasm for innovation and experimentation lose sight of the social significance of a work of art. Nonetheless one cannot deny the value of the technical and artistic aspects of fiction writing and a personal style through which a writer wishes to be recognized. However, for a writer to achieve universality he must have nobility of thought, a deep understanding of human nature, a keen insight into motives and passions of men and women and his work must be an invaluable social document of the time. The characters I propose to study belong to fictions which have arisen from 'the compulsions of life of the lower depths where the rejected in our country have been condemned to live' (Anand, *The Indian Novel with a Social Purpose* 19). The novels from where these characters have been taken are not merely literary

exercises but also artistic articulations of the political and socio-economic conditions of the age in which they have been written. As a matter of fact, they are significant social documents of their time.

Dukhi (*Sadgati*), Bakha (*Untouchable*), Narayan and Om (*A Fine Balance*) and Velutha (*The God of Small Things*) all belong to the lowest section of Indian society – exploited, ostracized and socially excluded. Dukhi in Prem Chand's *Sadgati* belongs to the untouchable chamar (cobbler) caste. His meager life is made difficult by social forces he does not understand. Bakha is an untouchable, a scavenger, the son of the jemadar of the sweepers of the town. His job is to clean three rows of latrines several times in the whole course of the day single-handedly and he is subjected to the most inhuman treatment and called with derogatory terms like "Dirty dog! Son of bitch! Offspring of pig!" (*Untouchable* 18). Narayan and Om in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* belong to the caste of chamaars (cobblers) whom the prevailing caste system denies the right to live a simple frugal life or to earn the bread. The slur of untouchability, which stuck to them by birth, never leaves them. Their suffering is poignantly described by the novelist:

The news was of the same type that Dukhi had heard evening after evening during his childhood; only the names were different. For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death – the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within the hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged. (*A Fine Balance* 108-09)

Velutha, a 'paravan' in *The God of Small Things* is also an embodiment of extreme social discrimination, humiliation and poverty. "The treatment meted out to Velutha reflects the curse of untouchability ingrained not only in the Hindu society but also in the Christian society (Jha 52)." As Arundhati Roy herself describes Velutha in the novel:

As a young boy, Velutha would come with Vellya Peppen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians (*The God of Small Things* 73).

All these characters except perhaps Dukhi in *Sadgati* have qualities which make them heroic and lend a tragic dignity to them. Firstly they are all physically and mentally strong, hardworking and intelligent individuals. Bakha is a steady and efficient worker. The hard toil has made him strong and sturdy as described by Mulk Raj Anand:

Each muscle of his body, as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass. He must have had immense pent-up resources lying deep in his body, for he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one doorless latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenol. 'What a dexterous workman!' the onlookers said. And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean. He didn't even soil his sleeves handing over the commodes, sweeping and scrubbing them. 'A bit superior to his job', one would have said, 'not the kind of man who ought to be doing this'. (*Untouchable* 18)

Moreover, he is in no way satisfied with the life he is leading. His anguish is powerfully described by the author when talking to his father he says that they think that "we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt" (*Untouchable* 89), and

the dream of a better life –“that machine which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it” (*Untouchable* 174).

In *A Fine Balance* there are four major characters from a family of cobbler community – Dukhi, Ishwar, Narayan and Om. Dukhi is the father of Ishwar and Narayan. Om is the son of Narayan. Ishwar prefers to remain a bache lor. Narayan and Om are rebels. Narayan wants to exercise his right to vote. ‘More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like’ (*A Fine Balance* 142), utters Narayan. Om spat when he saw the Thakur, who burned his parents and grandparents alive. Dukhi and Ishwar mutely suffer humiliation. Although the kind of language these characters speak may not be very real, it allows the readers to experience with compassion for and insight into the characters. Readers are driven into the emotional world of the Dalits, some of whom weep silently, venting their shame and humiliation in tears, while the rebels express their anger in profuse use of foul words directed at the upper castes: “Aray bhaiya, you are confusing his head with his arse-hole. That’s where he applies the polish – that’s where the sun shines from, according to his caste brothers. That’s why the shit-eaters all try to lick their way into it” (*A Fine Balance* 114).

While Ishwar thinks that “something cannot be changed, you just have to accept them” (*A Fine Balance* 83), Om cannot bear the insult meekly when Dina Dalal tells Ibrahim, the rent collector that they did cooking and cleaning work, “I am a tailor, not her maaderchod servant who sweeps and mops’, he said after they left work that evening” (*A Fine Balance* 91).

The anger and rage in Narayan and Om may be taken as a representation of the growing consciousness in Dalits during the 70s as the novel is set in India during the period of the State of Emergency. As a critic points out, “The power of *A Fine Balance* comes from its ability to weave together the varied histories of its characters, and in its creation of almost five decades of Indian history” (Rao).

Velutha portrayed as the ‘God’ of small things, is considered by some critics as ‘the hero of the novel.’ His physical features are described beautifully by the author and we see how Ammu gets sexually attracted to her lover Velutha. “In the dappled sunlight filtering through the dark green trees, Ammu watched Velutha lift her daughter effortlessly as though she was an inflatable child, made of air”(*The God of Small Things* 175). Ammu’s eyes were fixed on the ridges of Velutha’s muscles. She wondered at how his body had changed so quietly, from a flat muscled boy’s body into a man’s body – contoured and hard. Moreover, even since his childhood he impressed people with his skill of doing wonderful things like making tiny windmills and minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds. He had a way with machines and even Mammachi thought that “if he hadn’t been a paravan, he might have been an engineer” (*The God of Small Things* 75).

Therefore, all the characters are possessed with more than common spirits. They are all dreamers, discontented individuals and seek to change the society in accordance with their ideals and their beliefs. They are all social rebels, not ready to resign themselves to the circumstances. Therefore, Bakha sees hope in Christianity, in Gandhi’s movement against untouchability and the modern sanitary system. Narayan and Om dare to pursue a career in tailoring forbidden by traditional rules. As a matter of fact, when the father of Ishwar and Narayan sent them to be apprenticed as tailors many eyebrows were raised. As the novelist puts it,

Their father’s friends feared for the family. ‘Dukhi Mochi has gone mad,’ they lamented. ‘With wide-open eyes he is bringing destruction upon his household.’ And consternation was general throughout the village: someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste, retribution was bound to be swift. (*A Fine Balance* 95)

They also nurture a desire to assert their political rights by casting their votes. Velutha too stands out as a very tall character. Despite his desire to relive as a

‘touchable’ which costs him his life, he could never be a coward and dared to speak out even when he knew his life was in danger. As for Dukhi, the protagonist in *Sadgati*, he represents the time in which Prem Chand does not “posit any faith either in the individual or the community to bring about change; ...the community (Indian society) has degenerated into ossified caste and class relationships” (Rubin). No wonder Dukhi resigned to fate. When Pandit Ghansi Ram’s wife reacts sharply to Dukhi’s entry in the house, he considers himself guilty of a crime (which was never there):

He repented: it was a mistake to come. She was speaking the truth – how could a tanner ever come into a Brahman’s house? These people were clean and holy, that was why the whole world worshipped and respected them. A mere tanner was absolutely nothing. He had lived all his life in the village without understanding this before...Panditayin, mother, it was wrong of me to come inside your house. Tanners don’t have much sense – if we weren’t fools why would we get kicked so much? (Rubin)

Even a glimpse into these characters would bring out the truth that as we move from Dukhi and Bakha to Narayan, Om and Velutha in-between the degree of protest is gradually rising and none of them except Dukhi is ready to meekly surrender to the injustices and discrimination against the downtrodden. Bakha realizes that though he possesses like any human being, head and heart, flesh and blood, he is in the eyes of the world an untouchable (34). Immediately after the slap scene, Bakha observes an old Hindu touching a bull and reflects critically on it. Then he learns how the priest Kalinath had attempted to molest his sister Sohini which enrages him but his clenched fists soon relax and fall loosely by his side. He knows that he cannot retaliate. Lakha, his father who has accepted untouchability in a fatalistic manner is alarmed by the incident and enquires whether Bakha reacted violently, which he feared, would have serious consequences – “you didn’t abuse or hit back, did you?” to which he replies, “I was sorry afterwards that I didn’t” (*Untouchable* 18). Bakha, therefore, is a heroic

figure in the sense that he dreams to fight the caste system and nurtures a desire to destroy it but he does not know how. He indulges too much in self-pity, and as Forster says, the next day once again will be the same. Therefore, he only ends with the hope he sees in the three options before him – Christianity, Gandhi's movement against untouchability and the modern sanitary system which would replace this age-old practice of cleaning the dirt manually.

Rohinton Mistry's novel has mixed characters. Dukhi and Ishwar belong to Lakha's type and resigned to fate, silently suffer humiliation. Thus in the night, when Dukhi's wife was raped he "pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew, from her smell, what had happened to her...He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night" (*A Fine Balance* 99). However, Narayan and Om are the fighters. Their effort to pursue tailoring work stands as a symbol of their struggle.

Dukhi defies prevailing caste restrictions by sending his sons off to the city to become tailors. One of them, Narayan, returns to the village and is able for a while to better the lives of his family. At election time, he insists on registering his vote, against the interests of the local leader, Thakur Dharamsi, whose rigging of the ballot goes unquestioned by everyone else. (Rao)

And he has to pay a heavy price. Thakur Dharamsi, the arch villain of the novel gets his son Narayan brutally killed for venturing to exercise his adult franchise and sending his sons to learn tailoring, and justifies his act by invoking Dharma.

'His arrogance went against everything we hold sacred', what the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society's timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity..." (*A Fine Balance* 147).

Velutha is a true rebel. His father Vellya Paapen, an old world paravan had his own fears when his son grew into a young man. Velutha did not like his



father's continuous warnings regarding his rebellious temperament. So, one day he left home and for full four years nobody knew where he went. Several rumours were spread about him including the one that he had joined the Naxals. When he returned to Ayamenem after his mother's death, he had grown dangerously by the time. "As a rebel he had within him a volcano ready to burst any time. His father, more than anyone else was fully aware of this and he feared for him more than ever" (Manavar 127). And very soon he was terrified to find 'what his untouchable son had touched. More than touched (Manavar 78). He had established sexual relation with a lady belonging to the upper caste. This was an action, Bakha couldn't even have imagined in the wildest of his dreams. Moreover, Velutha "could never be a coward and dared to speak even when he knew that his life was in danger" (Manavar 78). His loyalty to the party was unquestionable and as a trade unionist he was a daring young man who succeeded in shedding his identity as a Dalit by being in his 'white shirt' and 'mundu' and fighting for the rights of the oppressed. Thus, Velutha not only dreams but also performs the dare-devil acts, little worried about the consequences. So, he is a step ahead of Bakha in his reactionary attitude.

There is a clear impact of the emergence of Dalit narratives which has furthered the debate started by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the past.

In short, the story and the novels in discussion (from which the characters have been taken for comparison) give graphic pictures of the 1930s, 1970s, 1990s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century respectively. Naturally, the characters Dukhi, Bakha, Om, Narayan and Velutha stand for the Dalit psyche in their respective decades, and a close study of these characters reveals a pattern of growing resistance as is reflected in their dreams, their hopes, their frustrations and their conduct. Dukhi is of the silent sufferer type and Bakha only nurtures dream but Narayan and Om act in utter violation of the timeless chain of caste imposed by the caste-ridden society and maintain fine balance between hope and despair. Their attempt to "learn tailoring rather than become leather workers"... suggests "a significant move in the direction of breaking the

stranglehold of the caste-imposed economic order” (Mittapalli). Indeed the novel stands as a symbol of Dalit resistance, the examples of which are everywhere to be seen. Velutha goes a step ahead and he not only becomes a unionist and a Naxal (according to some) but also dares his society by establishing sexual relation with an upper-caste woman. It may, therefore, be said that the non-Dalit writers have also been honest in their portrayal of the changing mindset of Dalits in course of time. They have also faithfully portrayed not only the trials and tribulations, the pains and sufferings of Dalits but also their growing consciousness, their aspirations and the seething rage within.

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