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Treatment of the Marginalized in Select Novels in Indian Writing in English

N. Sowmia Kumar, M.A., M.Phil.

Marginalization and Literature

Literature represents life and life is a social reality. A writer, who is a member of a society, is possessed of specific social status and he receives some degree of social recognition and reward. De Bonald considers 'literature is an expression of society' (95).

In every society, there are some sections of people deprived of socio-economic opportunities for their sustenance and they are victims of social, cultural, and political exclusion. They are the marginalized and the marginalized communities are the rural poor, the downtrodden, and those who belong to the scheduled castes.

Mullay describes marginalization as

'the need for recognizing that social problems are indeed connected with larger structures in society, causing various forms of oppression amongst individuals resulting in marginalization' (262).

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Projection of Indian Image

One of the important objectives of Indian English writers of fiction has been the creative interpretation of Indian society and its culture and the 'formulation and projection of the Indian image' (Shahane 11). The Indian society is broadly classified into three main communities, namely, the upper-caste, the non-upper-caste and the depressed classes. Among them, there existed many castes and sub-castes, which followed numerous practices and usages; surprisingly each of them is unique. The influence of upper-castes is greatly felt in the socio-religious and cultural lives of the marginalized sections over the years.

The tradition-bound, Indian society is submerged, in numerous religious practices and in the worship of many gods and goddesses, evident by the existence of numerous temples, big and small, all over India.

Poverty among Various Groups

The depressed classes all over India are either segregated or ignored and treated as a separate community by both upper-caste and non-upper-caste people. They have their own social practices and usages, which speak of their seemingly separate cultural identity but they are also broadly treated as Hindus.

When compared to other two sections of society, the marginalized people are economically very poor. When the non-upper-castes feel that they are being exploited by the upper-castes, the depressed class people are the worst hit at the hands of both upper-castes and the non-upper-castes in their day-to-day lives.

Suffer Most and Fare Worst

The people, who work the hardest to produce riches, suffer the most and fare the worst. This is the irony of our civilization. The society looks down upon them and treats them shabbily and cruelly. They are the 'marginalized' or 'working classes' throughout the world. They are all included, in the terms of Arundhati Roy as 'small things' but generally, known as 'untouchable' or 'pariah'. As it sounds bitter, Mahatma Gandhi named them as 'Harijans' (children of God) while the Census authorities during the British rule referred to them as 'exterior classes' and now the 'depressed' or 'dalits' (Amitabh 103). The reasons that gave birth to the institution of untouchability and the date of its appearance have been researched by many scholars, social workers, religious teachers, politicians, and many other categories of people. Creative Writers form an important group that interprets and re-interprets reasons for and practices of untouchability.

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The novels of Mulk Raj Anand's **Untouchable**, Arundhati Roy's **The God of Small Things**, and Perumal Murugan's **Seasons of the Palm**, have been taken up for study with a view to bringing out an analytical study of the place of marginalized and their social conditions.

Protagonists in Some Select Novels

The main objective of this paper is to bring out how the protagonists of these writers are influenced positively and negatively by society. It also deals with the analysis of how they are dehumanized at the hands of the upper-caste people at various levels.

The Communities of Protagonists

It would be appropriate to have a look at the untouchables and their conditions in various societies the protagonists live in, and the miseries and the inhuman treatment imposed on them by the upper caste people.

The novelists have artistically depicted the very sensitive issue of untouchables and marginalized sections of both pre- and post-independent India.

Indian society, since time immemorial is a caste-based group where the upper caste people exploit the lower caste people. Caste plays a very significant role in every aspect of Indian life. It has powerfully implanted in Indian society.

In this caste hierarchy, untouchable castes are at the lowest level. Earlier Hindu society has condemned untouchables as the dirt of society. Hindu society did not consider untouchables as human beings at all. This inhuman discrimination is the shameful drawback of Indian society.

Caste System

Stemming from its three thousand-year-old origin, the caste system is one of the world's longest surviving forms of social stratification. People are divided by birth according to one of the four main groups, with which yet another fifth category is added, with millions of people, almost 20% of the Hindu population.

In spite of India's industrialization and globalization, Indian society is heavily dependent on the maintenance of caste duties. It is this caste that impedes the growth of the protagonists in the novels and as a result, they suffer.

Understanding and Personal Experience

Novelists like Mulk Raj Anand or Anita Desai or Arundhati Roy or Neela Padmanaban or Perumal Murugan or Yuma Vasuki, portray their characters with the knowledge of their own understanding and personal experience in reality they faced in life. To some extent, they bring out their real-life experiences and the India they witnessed before and after the independence era.

It is hope, which alone raises man to a higher level and it alone can kindle in him the creative qualities essential for the progress of society. The novelists show their deep-rooted social consciousness. They discern the evolution of society necessitating a change in the present set-up and it is through their protagonists, they try to impose that change and the first step they pay their attention to is the positive attitudes present in their respective characters.

Authors like Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, Perumal Murugan and Neela Padmanaban portray the marginalized section of society in a more effective manner than any other author because of their involvement and their interests in the reformation they expect in their respective societies in which they live. They picture the very condition of the lives of the protagonists and the miseries imposed by the so-called upper caste people.

The novelists' protagonists are children and through them they want to create a new generation by breaking all the taboos and restrictions laid down by their ancestors. The chief characters of the writers are from the marginalized section of society. Anand's Bakha in **Untouchable** is of *Bhangi*, the untouchable. Roy's Velutha in **The God of Small Things** belongs to an untouchable caste called the *Paravan*. Perumal Murugan's Shortie from the *Chakkilis*, the lowest rung of the hierarchal untouchable order in **Seasons of the Palm** and Neela Padmanaban's Kuttalam of **The Generations** and *Thambi* of Yuma Vasuki's **Blood Ties** are from lower castes. Throughout the novel the good nature of these protagonists, creates a hope of change in the dehumanized society for the betterment of the generations to come. By presenting the children as the victims of reckless society, they highlight the social evils to deduce pity and sympathy for the poor and the innocent.

Protagonists

Bakha, in **Untouchable**, is a strong male of eighteen years, has a fascination for the western dress. He does the job of cleaning the latrines of the upper-caste colony but loves to live in a clean and decent manner. Anand's *Untouchable* has created waves as protest against social injustice.

Portraying two children as the responder to the social 'Laws' which are still operative in large parts of India, Roy brings a fresh perspective to bear on an age-old

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subject. Perumal Murugan's **Seasons of the Palm** focuses on the arduous lives of a group of children as lovingly drawn characters with colourful names like 'Shortie', 'Tallfellow', 'Matchbox', and 'Stumpleg'. The main character Shortie grazes the goats of his Gounder master in open field. . In the cowshed, he has to do all cleaning works and look after the cows and goats. Further, he has to gather carefully the dung. After gathering this dung,

He has to feed the animals. He fetches hay and dried stalks of the kambu to the shed, huge piles that exhaust his thin hands.

The animals immediately set up a chewing rhythm that follows Shortie as he sets about his next task. There is not a minute to be lost between his various duties (17).

In spite of his hectic schedule, Shortie is very good to show off his face towards anyone else. He loves his job and he treats the animals in a very kind manner. Shortie's kindness to animals reveals his good nature throughout the novel. Tallfellow, another character in the novel, who is also a bonded labourer, works for his Gounder Master. Perumal Murugan depicts the character of Shortie in such a way that he is very close even to his masters' sons and they play together. There is no class, caste, or colour difference among these children. It is all there, only in the minds of the grown-ups and elders. It is they who create discrimination among the young minds as we see in every novel, the so-called lower caste children are very friendly and playful.

They have lived in a natural state. Except for the untouchable, Velutha, there is no one to take delight in their play. No one participates in their games. No family dotes over them. They only have Velutha and in turn Velutha has both of them. They ride on Velutha's back, play with the toys he whittled for them and rocked on a boat he mended for them to strange and fantastic lands. Since they are still children, they cannot be defiled by his touch. It is only through this positive aspect of these characters that the society evolves in the right manner and the authors build their plot of their respective novels.

Thirst for Learning

In the novels, the characters show their thirst for learning, which, in turn, was denied to them by the upper class people for many generations. Centuries of caste stigma and segregation have benumbed the intellectual life of the marginalized.

Knowledge and power are concentrated in the hands of the upper caste Hindus. Denial of knowledge is denial of power. For centuries, caste system in the Indian subcontinent has controlled and regulated the knowledge hierarchies. As a result, the upper-caste people have sought to legitimize the servitude.

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Segregation

The untouchables live in ghettos and the novelists depict their living conditions as they lead a subhuman life. The Hindu society insists on segregation of the Untouchables. The Hindu will not live in the quarters of the Untouchables and will not allow the Untouchables to live inside Hindu quarters.

In **The God of Small Things**, the locale is Ayemenem near Kottayam in Kerala and Roy pictures the house of Velutha, the Paravan as it

‘... was dark and clean. It smelled of fish curry and woodsmoke. Heat cleaved to things like a low fever... Velutha and Vellya Paapen’s bedding was rolled up and propped against the wall. ... A grown man could stand up straight in the centre of the room, but not along its sides’ (208).

In **Seasons of the Palm**, Perumal Murugan portrays the cattle shed not as an asylum for Shortie but a torture cell for poor children like him. Social backwardness, lack of access to food, education and health care keep them in bondage of the upper castes. In **Seasons of the Palm**, the marginalized characters that are under bondage to Gounder community are economically exploited by the upper-caste people. Further, as this bondage varies, their wages too vary accordingly. The pitiable condition is that not only the children of these marginalized sections are bonded to the Gounder families, but their parents too work for generations. Belly’s father is a leather worker in the farm of the other landlord and her mother works for Belly’s Gounder Mistress, doing her household duties throughout the day. It is an indictment against the inhuman treatment given to the poor, against the denial of the right to happiness to a simple landless orphan, and against the exploitations of the underprivileged and unjust social system.

The rich and the greedy moneylenders exploit the poor marginalized. The exploitation is so cruel that the poor are cheated and their strips of lands are illegally taken away. The utter poverty of the family of Shortie makes them bonded labourers. It is the responsibility of society to take care of the people, the marginalized section of society.

In **The God of Small Things**, “old world *paravan*” (76), Vellyan Paapen, the father of Velutha has to crawl backwards and he takes the social disabilities that is imposed on the marginalized section by the worn-out tradition. Here Arundhati Roy says,

By the time he understood his part in History’s Plans, it was too late to retrace his steps. He had swept his footprints away himself. Crawling backwards with a broom (200).

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In this context, M.K.Naik brings out the significance of colour consciousness:

The dark complexion is specially significant in the Indian context, where the colour of the skin is often regarded as an index to one's caste-status. Velutha is a Paravan by caste, the lowest in the Caste hierarchy and actually an untouchable (68).

Use of Irony

The authors make use of irony in order to exemplify the nature of the society in which their protagonists live. In **Seasons of the Palm**, Shortie literally means 'a small boy'; ironically, the author has not given any name to him but he is called only Shortie.

Moreover, these marginalized characters are called either by their caste or by vulgar words like "Chakkili! ... (145). Caste is also the dominant factor on party lines. Even Pillai in **The God of Small Things**, refer to Velutha not by his name but by his caste, a 'paravan' (278). Lack of reasoning, resulting from being uneducated, the marginalized sections of the society are forced to accept the beliefs imposed on them. As a result, the upper castes people take advantage of their ignorance and suppress them for generations. Further, the upper-caste people are opportunists and they take chances to exploit the environment of the marginalized sections by various means.

Class Distinctions

Mulk Raj Anand in **Untouchable** and Arundhati Roy in **The God of Small Things**, have effectively handled this theme in order to bring out the ignorance of the marginalized sections of society. Their novels focus on the class distinctions between the rich and the poor, between the high caste Hindus and the dregs of humanity, known as untouchables hamper the growth of individuals, which ultimately results in social evils.

Religious Conversion

In **The God of Small Things**, Roy describes how the British converted the people of lower castes to Christianity and Velutha's grandfather Kelan is a victim of this. Roy, ironically holds: 'It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all' (74). By embracing Christianity, they had only received the status of 'untouchable Christians' with separate church and priest. In this context, M.K.Naik says 'the irony is that Velutha and his father are both Christians, like their masters but that does not annul their age-old Paravan identity, which is the albatross round their untouchable necks' (68). The marginalized sections are unaware of their environment and they easily become victims of the Machiavellianism of the upper caste people.

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Mulk Raj Anand in **Untouchable** portrays this type of exploitation, where Colonel Hutchinson, the chief of the local Salvation Army tries to exploit the condition of Bakha as a solution to Bakha's series of humiliations. The Colonel provides the suggestion of conversion to Christianity and says there is no difference among the rich and the poor, the upper-caste and the lower-caste in Christianity.

Defilement

Untouchability is the notion of defilement, pollution, contamination and the ways and means of getting rid of that defilement. The next kind of subjugation imposed by the upper-caste people upon the lower-caste is that the suppressed are not allowed to enter or touch things, people, or house of the upper-castes, which is characterized by all authors in their respective novels.

Untouchables cannot enter into the house of upper-castes and they should not touch anything that is used by upper-caste people. In **Seasons of the Palm**, Perumal Murugan explains how Shortie and his companions are treated by the Gounder community. One of the duties of his protagonist, Shortie is to provide milk from his Masters' house to other houses and he has

‘... to take the can to where the nadar caste people live. This is not easy, for he has to hold the heavy can by the cloth. On no account must he touch the can directly. Once he gets to the houses in the Nadar neighborhood that buys milk, he sets the can down and stands away. The lady of the house opens the cloth lid, pours her share of the milk into a vessel and ties up the can's mouth once more. This happens in all the houses to which Shortie goes’ (17-18).

It is an act of defilement if the lower caste people touch anything that the upper-caste use and it is a pollution to use those things that are used by the lower caste people. Roy in **The God of Small Things**, brings out the condition of the untouchables through Mammachi when she narrates how the untouchables are treated during her days to Rahel:

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. 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 Paravan's footprint (73-74).

When there is a need, the upper-caste people forget the caste barriers and they extract work from the downtrodden.

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In Hindu society, the untouchables are restricted to enter or go around the place that the upper-caste uses frequently.

A strong believer in the dignity of man and equality of all men, Mulk Raj Anand is naturally shocked by the inhuman treatment meted out by those that belong to superior castes. The degradation and humiliation inflicted on the unfortunate sections of society is highlighted through the repeated refrain of Bakha 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming' (57). The crowd feels absolutely no sympathy for Bakha. Only the Mohammedan *tonga-wallah* shows sympathy towards him. Bakha is slapped and for the only reason that, he belongs to a low caste and he feels

I should have seen the high-caste people in the street. That man! That he should have hit me! (58)... For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (58-59).

Bakha's powers and place in society are not determined by his ability but his birth in a subaltern or 'dalit' family. (10).

Temple Entry

The other kind of oppression that is imposed upon the lower-castes is that the untouchables are not allowed to enter the temple by the caste Hindus as they consider it as an act of defiling the temple yard. Mulk Raj Anand, Perumal Murugan, and Arundathi Roy effectively bring out this theme in their novels. In a series of humiliations, Bakha faces in the novel *Untouchable*, the temple incident is the most striking and important. Bakha goes to the temple where he is to sweep the courtyard.

This incident creates the spark in Bakha to realize his self and feels that he is a victim of the caste - conscious society. Bakha is made to feel that he is a sweeper's son and hence untouchable. When he hears that loud cry "polluted, polluted, polluted", he is perplexed. He knows what is meant. Pandit Kalinath was a little man – a priest of the temple, stumbling, falling and crying, "polluted, polluted, polluted." Bakha also sees the figure of a woman Sohini, behind the shouting priest. The little priest, angrily shrieking, 'You people have only been polluted from a distance. In this connection, Ravi Jauhari and Kiran Kamboj in *A Social Evil in Untouchable* point out that

Religious diplomacy and hypocrisy were real instruments to exploit the Untouchable. The priest (Brahmin), the so-called custodian of religion is on one hand ready to have physical relation with a beautiful untouchable girl, Sohini, and on the other hand, Bakha, Sohini's brother is not allowed

even to touch the steps of the temple. Anand tries to reveal such religious bigotry in his novel (83).

Bakha realizes how Hindu society is a society of hypocrites. Emotionally tortured soul and heart of Bakha make him realize his own existence in this sadistic society.

In connection with this most significant incident P.K. Rajan in *A Dialogue with Mulk Raj Anand*, quotes Anand's creation of Bakha as

... I meant to recreate the lives of the millions of untouchables through one single person. In only one incident. The slap on the face of the hero. Now the slap on the face evoked all the human relations ... of the sixty-five millions of people whom the hero represents, against the millions of caste Hindus (102).

Anand shows a complete understanding of the human situation and a sensitive discrimination of moral values and we hear the deep cry of these human beings who are considered untouchable sub-human beings, thus, **Untouchable** is essentially a tragic creation of the individual caught in the net of the age-old caste system crying for an escape.

Again in **Untouchable**, Bakha is humiliated for sitting on the doorstep of a caste-Hindu and the lady of the house shouts and curses him for defiling her house. This piteous plight of the untouchable reminds us of Roy, who presents a similar attitude in **The God of Small Things**. Velutha, like Bakha in **Untouchable** is not allowed to enter the house of the upper castes. They are not allowed to touch anything that touchables touched.

Rahel and Estha in **The God of Small Things**, Diravi in **The Generations** and Shortie in **Seasons of the Palm** and Bakha in **Untouchable** find themselves in a very new environment. All the characters realize that life has more to offer if only the individuals take effort to go beyond the barriers established by the conventions of society.

Neela Padmanaban, who has lived up to the ideals of great art in his novel, has shown the naked truth of society. Neela Padmanaban, through his protagonist, tries to present a new generation with modern outlook incorporating a rational attitude to the social problems. So also Bakha in **Untouchable** – when he is slapped, he faces a crisis of identity. Bakha attains the level of consciousness, as in the temple scene, through rebellion. So also Bakha in **Untouchable** – when he is slapped, he faces a crisis of identity. Bakha attains the level of consciousness, as in the temple scene, through rebellion. Yet, he does not rebel aimless but for the freedom, dignity and love. Bakha strikes a positive note, for the rebel in him succeeds to a small yet significant extent. One should keep in mind that Anand's caste Hindus are not all bullies and tyrants; nor are all

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his untouchables admirable; nor yet is the life of his untouchable hero a saga of unrelieved misery.

The Novelists

The novelists selected for the study are from different social backgrounds and their novels reflect the changing trends in society and the life of their respective periods.

The theme of suffering and exploitation are the major areas in which the novelists excel. It is this aspect of the writers' mind and writing which calls for similarities in the novels. All of them are deeply interested in the lot of the marginalized, under-privileged; poverty, social discrimination, injustice, exploitation, and the cruelty of man-to-man being the principal concerns.

All novels reveal the same problem-solving pattern. Every novelist pursues his own way and offers different solutions to the problems through their protagonists. Their protagonists are the personifications of all the qualities known to man and while at times they may be over simplified versions of one particular quality or exaggeration of one monstrous trait at other times, they are characters of great depth and complexity containing in them diverse and opposite qualities that makes for a paradoxical patterns.

Again, they are characters who represent a whole society caught in the midst of certain socio-economical forces working at a given point of time. With all their individuality, they represent the national character and therefore they become typical of a race, a nation or a community and more than anything else, they are memorable to the point of immortality.

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