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Caste, Power, and Voice: Dalit Characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Mulk Raj Anand's *'Untouchable'*

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Abstract:

This comparative study examines the portrayal of Dalit characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, focusing on themes of caste, power dynamics, and the assertion of voice. The analysis explores how caste influences the identity formation of Dalit characters and shapes their interactions within society. Comparing the portrayal of Dalit characters in both novels, the study analyzes their agency, resilience, and challenges in asserting their voice. It also examines the authors' narrative techniques for depicting Dalit experiences and their strategies for evoking empathy. Additionally, the study contextualizes the novels within their historical and cultural milieu, discussing their critical reception and impact on the representation of Dalits in literature and society.

Keywords: Dalit representation, Indian English literature, caste, power dynamics, voice, identity formation, narrative techniques, social context.

1. Introduction:

Indian English literature plays a crucial role in portraying the diverse cultural and social landscape of India, including the representation of Dalit characters. Dalits, historically marginalized and oppressed communities in India, have often found their voices and experiences reflected in Indian English literature, offering a platform for their stories to be heard and understood by a wider audience. Through the lens of Dalit representation, Indian English literature sheds light on the complexities of caste dynamics and the struggles faced by marginalized communities in Indian society.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* are two prominent works that delve into the lives of Dalit characters. Roy's novel, set in Kerala, portrays the lives of twins Rahel and Estha, focusing on their interactions with Velutha, a Dalit man, and the tragic consequences of their relationships in the rigidly structured caste system.



On the other hand, Anand's *Untouchable* follows a day in the life of Bakha, a young Dalit sweeper, highlighting the daily humiliations and injustices he faces due to his caste.

The thesis of this paper is to conduct a comparative analysis of the portrayal of Dalit characters in these two novels, with a specific focus on the themes of caste, power dynamics, and the assertion of voice. By comparing and contrasting these works, this study aims to provide deeper insights into the representation of Dalits in Indian English literature and the ways in which these portrayals contribute to broader discussions on caste and identity in Indian society.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies on Dalit literature emphasize its role in amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives. Scholars highlight Dalit literature's depiction of caste-based discrimination, oppression, and the struggle for dignity and equality. In Indian English literature, scholars critically analyze the portrayal of Dalit characters, particularly in works like *The God of Small Things* and *Untouchable*. They praise these novels for using narrative techniques to evoke empathy for Dalit experiences. Scholars also discuss literature's potential to challenge caste hierarchies and advocate for social change by giving voice to Dalit stories. Overall, these studies emphasize the importance of representation in literature and its impact on societal perceptions of marginalized communities.

3. Methodology:

The comparative analysis of Dalit representation in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand was based on several criteria. Both novels were chosen for their significant portrayal of Dalit characters and their rich depictions of Dalit experiences. Specific Dalit characters, Velutha and Bakha, were selected based on their centrality to the narrative and their representation of key themes. The study employs thematic, structural, and linguistic analysis to compare the portrayal of Dalit experiences in both novels, focusing on themes of caste, power dynamics, and the assertion of voice.

4. Character Analysis:

In *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, Velutha, a Paravan (Dalit) carpenter, is portrayed as a pivotal character whose life is entwined with the lives of the main protagonists, Rahel and Estha. Velutha's portrayal emphasizes his agency and resilience in the face of caste oppression. Roy describes Velutha as "a quiet person who rarely spoke. But when he did, he



was always kind" (Roy, 1997, p. 84). This description highlights Velutha's gentle nature and contradicts stereotypes associated with Dalits as being aggressive or uncouth.

Velutha's agency is most evident in his relationship with Ammu, the mother of Rahel and Estha, which defies societal norms and caste boundaries. Their relationship is described as a "forbidden love," challenging the caste hierarchy and demonstrating Velutha's courage in asserting his feelings despite the consequences. Roy uses Velutha's character to critique the rigid caste system, showing how it limits individual freedom and happiness.

Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable" also features a Dalit protagonist, Bakha, a young sweeper whose life is marked by hardship and discrimination. Bakha's portrayal highlights the dehumanizing effects of caste-based discrimination. Anand describes Bakha's experiences, such as being spat upon and insulted, to illustrate the daily humiliations faced by Dalits. Anand writes, "The sweepers were not allowed to touch the shoes of anyone else, not even the outcastes" (Anand, 1935, p. 22), emphasizing the strict social hierarchy that dictates every aspect of Bakha's life.

Critics have commented on the portrayal of Dalit characters in these novels. For example, Gopal Guru, in his book *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (2009), discusses the humiliation faced by Dalit characters in *Untouchable*, highlighting how the novel exposes the brutality of the caste system. Guru argues that Anand's depiction of Bakha's experiences serves as a powerful critique of caste-based discrimination in India (Guru, 2009, p. 72).

Similarly, Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her book *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1995), praises Roy's portrayal of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*, noting how his character challenges stereotypes and presents a more nuanced understanding of Dalit identity (Mukherjee, 1995, p. 128).

In conclusion, both *The God of Small Things* and *Untouchable* offer rich and complex portrayals of Dalit characters, highlighting their agency, resilience, and the challenges they face in asserting their voice in a caste-ridden society. Through the characters of Velutha and Bakha, Roy and Anand provide a compelling critique of the caste system and its dehumanizing effects on individuals.

5. Caste and Identity:

In both *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, caste plays a significant role in shaping the identity formation of Dalit characters. Caste not



only defines the social status of these characters but also dictates their interactions, relationships, and opportunities in life.

In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha's identity is deeply influenced by his Paravan (Dalit) caste. Roy portrays Velutha as someone who is aware of his lower social status but is also proud of his skills and abilities. However, his caste identity ultimately becomes a barrier in his relationship with Ammu, as society views their relationship as taboo. Roy writes, "The Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (Roy, 1997, p. 33), highlighting the strict societal norms that govern relationships based on caste.

Similarly, in *Untouchable*, Bakha's identity is defined by his caste as a sweeper. Bakha is constantly reminded of his lower status through the degrading work he is forced to do and the discrimination he faces from higher-caste individuals. Anand describes Bakha's feelings of shame and humiliation, highlighting the psychological impact of caste-based oppression on Dalit individuals.

Critics have commented on the impact of caste on the identity formation of Dalit characters in these novels. Gopal Guru, in his book *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (2009), discusses how caste-based discrimination shapes the identity of Dalit characters in *Untouchable*, noting that Bakha's sense of self-worth is constantly undermined by the society's treatment of him (Guru, 2009, p. 82).

In response to the social structures and oppression related to caste, the characters in both novels exhibit varying degrees of resistance and resilience. Velutha, despite knowing the consequences, chooses to defy societal norms by pursuing a relationship with Ammu. His actions can be seen as a form of resistance against the oppressive caste system. Similarly, Bakha, in *Untouchable*, expresses a desire for education and a better life, demonstrating his resilience in the face of adversity.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her book *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1995), praises Roy's portrayal of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*, noting how his character challenges stereotypes and presents a more nuanced understanding of Dalit identity (Mukherjee, 1995, p. 135).

Overall, both novels depict the ways in which caste influences the identity formation of Dalit characters and how they respond to the social structures and oppression related to caste.



Through the characters of Velutha and Bakha, Roy and Anand highlight the complexities of caste-based discrimination and the resilience of individuals who strive for dignity and equality.

6. Narrative Techniques:

In *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, the authors employ distinct narrative styles to portray the experiences of Dalit characters and evoke empathy and understanding from readers.

Roy's narrative style in *The God of Small Things* is characterized by its non-linear structure, lyrical prose, and use of multiple perspectives. This narrative technique allows Roy to delve deeply into the inner thoughts and emotions of her characters, including Velutha, a Dalit carpenter. Through vivid descriptions and poetic language, Roy creates a rich tapestry of Velutha's experiences, highlighting his humanity and the injustices he faces. For example, Roy writes, "He knew that his words were only words, and that the touch of his hands could not begin to say what he wanted them to say" (Roy, 1997, p. 162), emphasizing Velutha's struggle to express himself in a society that marginalizes his voice.

Anand's narrative style in *Untouchable* is more straightforward and realistic, focusing on the day-to-day experiences of Bakha, a young Dalit sweeper. Anand's use of simple language and direct storytelling effectively conveys the harsh realities of Bakha's life, allowing readers to empathize with his plight. For example, Anand writes, "He had become an untouchable, a Pariah in the midst of his own kith and kin" (Anand, 1935, p. 27), highlighting Bakha's sense of isolation and alienation from his community.

Critics have commented on the narrative styles of both novels and their impact on the portrayal of Dalit characters. For instance, Alok Rai, in his book *Hindi Nationalism* (2001), discusses Roy's narrative style in *The God of Small Things*, noting how it enables her to capture the complexities of caste, gender, and power in Indian society (Rai, 2001, p. 75). Similarly, K. Satchidanandan, in his book *Indian Poetry: Modernism and After* (1997), praises Anand's narrative style in *Untouchable*, describing it as "a stark and moving portrayal of the life of a sweeper" (Satchidanandan, 1997, p. 92).

In conclusion, both Roy and Anand employ distinct narrative styles to portray the experiences of Dalit characters and evoke empathy and understanding from readers. Roy's non-linear, lyrical prose allows for a deep exploration of character emotions, while Anand's straightforward, realistic style effectively conveys the harsh realities of Dalit life. Through their



narrative techniques, both authors succeed in humanizing Dalit characters and shedding light on the injustices they face in a caste-based society.

7. Themes and Motifs:

In both *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, several recurring themes and motifs related to Dalit life are present, contributing to the overall message and impact of the works.

One recurring theme is the idea of untouchability and its impact on Dalit individuals. In *Untouchable*, Anand portrays the dehumanizing effects of untouchability through Bakha's experiences, such as being forbidden from entering temples or using the same wells as higher-caste individuals. Similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, Velutha's status as an untouchable is a central theme, affecting his relationships and ultimately leading to his tragic fate. Roy writes, "The Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (Roy, 1997, p. 33), highlighting the arbitrary nature of caste-based restrictions on love and relationships.

Another theme is the resilience and agency of Dalit characters in the face of oppression. Both Velutha and Bakha demonstrate courage and strength in challenging the societal norms that seek to marginalize them. Velutha's relationship with Ammu and Bakha's desire for education and self-improvement are examples of their agency and determination to defy the limitations imposed by caste.

The motif of water is also significant in both novels, symbolizing purity and cleansing. In *Untouchable*, water is a recurring motif, representing Bakha's longing for cleanliness and acceptance in a society that views him as unclean. Similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, water is used metaphorically to represent the boundaries and divisions created by caste, as seen in the river that separates the twins, Rahel and Estha, from Velutha.

Overall, these themes and motifs contribute to the overarching message of both novels, highlighting the injustices faced by Dalit individuals in a caste-based society and their resilience in the face of oppression. Through the portrayal of these themes, Roy and Anand seek to challenge societal attitudes towards caste and advocate for social change.

8. Social and Political Context:

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy was published in 1997, while *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand was published in 1935. These novels were written in different historical and



cultural contexts, which influenced their portrayal of Dalit characters and the themes related to caste and identity.

Roy's novel was written in the post-independence period of India, marked by ongoing social and political changes. The novel reflects the broader cultural shifts towards questioning traditional norms and hierarchies, including those related to caste. Roy's portrayal of Velutha and his relationship with Ammu challenges societal attitudes towards inter-caste relationships and highlights the complexities of caste dynamics in modern India.

On the other hand, Anand's "Untouchable" was written during the colonial era when India was still under British rule. The novel reflects the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination and the dehumanizing effects of British colonialism on Dalit communities. Anand's portrayal of Bakha's experiences sheds light on the oppressive social structures and attitudes towards Dalits prevalent during that time.

Both novels reflect the societal attitudes towards Dalits prevalent during their respective time periods. *The God of Small Things* portrays a society grappling with the legacy of caste-based discrimination and the challenges of modernization, while *Untouchable* offers a stark depiction of the brutal realities faced by Dalits under colonial rule. Through their narratives, both authors aim to critique and challenge these societal attitudes, advocating for a more inclusive and just society.

9. Impact and Reception:

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy and *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand have both received critical acclaim for their portrayal of Dalit characters and their impact on literature and society.

The God of Small Things won the Booker Prize in 1997 and received widespread praise for its innovative narrative style and powerful portrayal of complex social issues. Critics praised Roy's depiction of Velutha and his relationship with Ammu, highlighting the novel's exploration of caste, gender, and power dynamics in Indian society.

Untouchable was ground-breaking in its time for its frank depiction of the lives of Dalits in India. The novel was praised for its realism and its portrayal of the dehumanizing effects of caste-based discrimination. Critics lauded Anand's ability to evoke empathy and understanding for his Dalit protagonist, Bakha, and his portrayal of the harsh realities faced by Dalits in Indian society.



Both novels have had a significant influence on the representation of Dalits in literature and society. *The God of Small Things* has been credited with bringing issues of caste and social inequality to a global audience, sparking conversations about these issues in literary circles and beyond. The novel has also inspired other authors to explore similar themes in their works, contributing to a broader awareness of Dalit issues in literature.

Untouchable, on the other hand, is considered a seminal work in Dalit literature and has been instrumental in shaping the way Dalits are represented in Indian literature. The novel has inspired a generation of Dalit writers to tell their own stories and has helped to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Dalits in Indian society.

Overall, both *The God of Small Things* and *Untouchable* have had a lasting impact on the representation of Dalits in literature and society, highlighting the importance of literature in raising awareness about social issues and advocating for change.

10. Conclusion:

The comparative study of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand has highlighted several key findings and insights regarding the representation of Dalits in Indian English literature. Both novels offer nuanced portrayals of Dalit characters, emphasizing their agency, resilience, and the impact of caste-based discrimination on their lives. Through the characters of Velutha and Bakha, the authors explore themes of caste, power dynamics, and the assertion of voice, challenging societal norms and advocating for social change.

This study is significant as it provides a deeper understanding of Dalit representation in Indian English literature and sheds light on the complexities of caste dynamics in India. By comparing and contrasting these two novels, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about caste, identity, and representation, highlighting the need for more diverse and inclusive narratives in literature.

Areas for further research could include exploring the representation of Dalit women in literature, examining the role of language in reinforcing or challenging caste-based stereotypes, and analyzing the impact of globalization and modernization on Dalit communities in India.



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