

## A Comparative Study of Social Problems in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Ponneelan's *Pudhiya Dharisanangal*

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### Abstract

The present paper focuses on the analysis of how the low-caste people are oppressed by the governing upper class people through a comparative study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Ponneelan's *Pudhiya Dharisanangal*. This research illustrates the problems and issues of caste and class differences through their novels in order to invigorate catharsis in the hearts and minds of the reader and to make them to eradicate caste and class differences in the demoralized society. It rejuvenates the readers' mind and endeavours to create a healthy society where all the people are treated equally without any disparities in caste and class hierarchy.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Problems, Class Hierarchy, Oppression.

Literature is the reflection of society. It epitomizes the life of human beings. It is the gizmo used by the writer to venture his own views, ideas and imagination that comes out of his own experiences from the society and the age in which the writer belongs to. It is the platform, in which the writer can project the real image of the society that he experienced in his age. It replicates the historical, cultural, political, economical and social conditions of the society in which the literary works are created.

The writer speculates what he has experienced in his age and society through his work of art. The writer brings the darker side of the society into light through his literary writings. Such writings echo the cries of the suppressed people who are subjugated and marginalized in the name of caste and class hierarchy by the dominant aristocrats of the demoralized society.

The present paper focuses on the analysis of how the low-caste people are oppressed by the governing upper class people through a comparative study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Ponneelan's *Pudhiya Dharisanangal*. Though Mulk Raj Anand is an Indian English writer and Ponneelan is a Tamil writer, both are comparable on their common grounds of theme that concerns about the social problems and issues in the society. They depict the sufferings of the underdogs in the society through their novels. The present paper aims to uplift the downtrodden people in the depressed society by breaking and crossing over the margins created by the dominant aristocrats through hegemony.

Mulk Raj Anand is a prolific writer of Indian English Fiction, born in 1905 and died in 2004. He has written sixteen novels and twelve anthologies of short stories. He has received many prestigious awards such as Padma Bhushan, the International Peace Prize and Sahitya Academy Award. Some of his most astonishing works are *Coolie*, *Two leaves and a Bud*, *The Village*, *across the Black Waters*, *The Sword and the Sickle*, *The Big Heart*, *Seven Summers*, *The Road*, *Death of a Hero*, *Morning Face*, *Confession of a Lover*, and *Nine Moods of Bharatha*. Most of his novels reflect the life of the downtrodden people. The characters in his novels are the

manifestations of those people who were around him in his life and society. He admits,

All these heroes as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me because they were the reflections of real people I had known during my childhood and youth. They were flesh of my flesh and blood and obsessed me in the way in which certain human beings obsess an artist's soul. And I was doing no more than what a writer does when he seeks to interpret the truth from the realities of life. (Sinha 28)

The description of the characters, incidents, landmarks such as the houses, markets, roads and streets of the villages and cities in the novels reveal Anand's close and keen observation of life in his own society and age. His novels project the real image of the society and the age in which he lives. As a social realist, Anand attacks the injustice that happens to the downtrodden people in the deflated society. He subjects the socio, economic, political exploitation in his novels in order to equip the subjugated people to get their own respect and equal rights in the society.

Ponneelan was born in 1940 at Manikatti Pottal, Kanyakumari district and he is a Tamil writer from Tamil Nadu, India. 'Ponneelan' is the pen name of Kandeswara Bhaktavatsalan. He has received the 1994 Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *Pudhiya Dharisanangal* in Tamil. He is the State President of the Tamil literary organization. *Tamil Nadu Kalai Ilakkiya Perumandram* (1978) is his first novel. His other prominent novels are *Karisal* and *Kollaikarargal*, some of his short story anthologies are *Atthaani Makkal*, *Pottal Kadhaigal*, *The dal*, *Ooril malarndadhu*, *Pudhiya mottugal*, *Idam Maari Vantha Vaergal*, *Pullin Kuzhanthaigal*, *Uravugal*, *Anbulla*, *Nithyamanadhu*, and *Thirumanangal Sorgathil Nichayikka Padukindrana*, his famous non-fictional biographies are *Jeeva Enra Manudan*, *Thamilagathin Aanmeega Vazhikaati*, *Ragunathanin Ilakkiya Thadam*, *Therkilirundhu*, and *Vaikunthar Kaattum Vaazhkai Neri*.

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the distinguished Indian English novelists and Ponneelan is an eminent Tamil writer. Both depict the lives of the downtrodden people in their novels. They articulate the feelings and emotions of the suppressed beings in their novels. They courageously represent the voiceless by giving voice to the silenced subalterns who are subjugated and marginalized under the pressure of outdated customs and oppressive traditions. The people in the society are discriminated on the basis of caste and class system and the low-caste people are marginalized by the upper-caste people in the demoralized society. The sufferings and pathetic conditions of the low-caste people are presented realistically in both Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Ponneelan's *Pudhiya Dharisanangal*.

*Untouchable* is the powerful novel of Mulk Raj Anand which highlights the social problems and issues of Indian society. It projects the caste and class discrimination in the society. The novel begins with a description of the sweepers' colony:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows. . . . There lived scavengers, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grasscutters and other outcastes from Hindu society . . . the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in. (U 1-2)

It shows how the people are discriminated according to their work and how the low-caste people are made to live in the margin whereas the high-caste aristocrats live in the centre of the society.

The novel ventures the events of a single day in the life of Bakha, the central character of the novel. In the novel, Bakha has been projected as a victim of caste-conscious society. As he is the son of a sweeper, he is subjugated as untouchable in the society. His physique has been well described in the novel as follows:

Each muscle of his body, hard as rock when it came to play, seemed to shine forth like glass. What a dexterous workman! The onlooker would have said. And though his job was dirty, he remained comparatively clean” (7-8)

Though he is well built with distinctive physique and broad intelligent face, he is marginalized as untouchable because of his job of cleaning the latrines. He has been disparaged with words as “defiled and polluted” and the society oppressed him and marginalized him to the margins as untouchables because of the work he does. It is their level of work which creates disparities among the people in the society and it makes the low class people to feel themselves as suppressed beings in the deflated society. Each person in the society is not inferior. Instead, they are suppressed in the name of class and caste by the aristocrats through certain stereotypes. They are not subalterns by birth. They are subalternized by the dominant groups.

As Bakha belongs to low-caste, he undergoes lots of insults and sufferings at the hands of high-caste Hindus. He is not even allowed to touch the hands of the high-caste people and when he goes to a shop to buy a packet of cigarettes, he has to place the coin at a particular spot shown by the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper sprinkles some water over the coin in order to purify it. After accepting the coin, he throws a packet of cigarettes at Bakha, “. . . as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop” (46). It shows how the low-caste people are ill-treated by the aristocrats. The high-caste people not even touch the coin that has been touched by the low-caste people. Bakha is enforced to endure the disgraces similarly when he goes to buy jelabis: “He caught the jelabis which the confectioner threw at him like a cricket ball, placed four nickel coins on the show-board for the confectioner’s assistant who stood ready to splash some water on them” (50). Bakha feels distressed when, “. . . a woman of the big house in the silversmith’s gully, threw the bread at me from the fourth storey” (87). All these incidents show how the low caste people are treated as untouchables by the aristocrats in the dehumanized society.

C.D Narasimhiah acknowledges that “Bakha seems to be a typical representative untouchable exemplifying the plight of not only the so called Hindu untouchable but also of dispossessed people everywhere” (110).

Once Bakha accidentally touches a high-caste Hindu and the latter slapped Bakha and shouted: “Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bowlegged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself” (U 51). Even though Bakha touches the high caste Hindu man accidentally, Bakha was very much humiliated, as he belongs to the low-caste, he should not touch the aristocrats in the dehumanized society. It illustrates how people of low caste are ill-treated as untouchables and disregarded in the demoralized society.

As in Anand’s *Untouchable*, Ponneelan’s *Pudhiya Dharisanangal* also reflects the plight of the low castes. It incarnates the sufferings of the low caste people living in the colony in Ananthanoor, the margins, under the hegemony of high caste Hindus of Big Street (Periya Theru).

The novel begins with a conversation of two low caste girls, Shembagam and Laxmi, who are carrying drinking water in pots on their heads: “Yes sister, definitely a time will come when there will be no distinction between the rich and the poor, the high caste and the low caste” (PD 14). Laxmi retorts: “Even if such a thing comes true throughout the world, our Big Street well never change . . . Even yesterday my landlady tweaked my ears and chased me off just because I sat on a bench” (1). It describes how the low caste people are subjugated by the aristocrats in the society. The low-caste people are enforced to move to the margins and are not allowed to come to the place where the high-caste people live. They are considered as untouchables and are not even allowed to draw water from the public well: “Even in 1975, the people of the colony are not allowed the freedom to draw water directly from the well . . . they have to wait with their empty pots for a long time, for the mercy of the high castes” (2).

The novel projects how the low-caste people are ill-treated, exploited and marginalized by the high caste Hindus in the dehumanized society. It presents how the aristocratic landlords and factory owners oppress the low caste labourers. It depicts how the people in the Big Street (Centre) perpetrate atrocities on the peoples in the colony (margin). Sethuraman, the high caste Hindu remarks, “It is the Big Street which is ‘the centre’ that matters. Big Street is a place where the goddess of justice has been enthroned for generations” (440). It shows how the aristocratic landlords oppress and marginalize the low castes through hegemony in order to dominate and suppress them and to show their authority over the low caste people.

The novel typically ventures the social oppression through the character Perumal who inflicts the sufferings on Manthiram, the barber. While Manthiram is busy in cutting the hair of Thiraviam, Perumal obstructs Manthiram and orders him in an audacious manner to shave his beard immediately even before completing Thiraviam’s hair cut. As Manthiram couldn’t placate Perumal, he starts shaving Perumal’s beard. Perumal taunts Manthiram by enquiring him whether he is using “. . . a shaving razor or a long blade meant for scuttling fish” (76). By mocking, Perumal grabs the knife and throws it away by breaking it into two pieces. By seeing this, Ponnappan teasingly remarks, “How lucky Manthiram is! He brought only one knife and now has got two to take home” (77). Manthiram felt humiliated and stands muted. It shows how the low-caste people are humiliated and ill-treated by the aristocrats in the dehumanized society.

Both Anand and Ponneelan, illustrate the problems and issues of caste and class differences through their novels in order to invigorate catharsis in the hearts and minds of the reader and to make them to eradicate caste and class differences in the demoralized society. It rejuvenates the readers’ mind and endeavours to create a healthy society where all the people are treated equally without any disparities in caste and class hierarchy.

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