

Fourfold Caste System and Ostracization: An analysis of K.A. Gunasekaran's *Touch*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the struggles and sufferings of the Dalits which they face under the headline "Untouchability" in the light of English version of K.A.Gunasekaran's Tamil play *Touch*. The play ridicules the unjust practices of untouchability which prevails in the society under the name of caste system. It also emphasizes on the fact that Nation's peace suffers because of such divisions of Caste system. It depicts the nature of caste-based violence exposed in the play. In addition it shows how the play attempts to make the audience understand in detail about the inhuman aspects of untouchability and caste-discrimination.

KEYWORDS: Dalits, Untouchability, Caste-discrimination, outcastes

Drama in ancient Tamil society was not a distinct literary genre as it intertwined the tradition of song, dance and ritualistic performances. Modern theatre movements in Tamil Nadu invoked this history of Tamil Culture and thus Dalit theatre emerged as a response to such developments, incorporating the unrecognized folk performance traditions, and fused them with aspects of the 'invisible theatre', 'theatre of violence', 'native theatre' and 'feminist and black theatre'. K.A.Gunasekaran is the first Dalit Tamil playwright and folklorist who artistically presents the atrocities committed against Dalits in his plays. He considers the oppression faced by Dalits as something which is equal to the oppression faced by Blacks. He, with the help of his plays, creates awareness on other social issues and women issues as well.

While Dalit theatre draws upon innumerable influences, the play *Touch* written by K.A.Gunasekaran is not imitative of any of them. Its distinctiveness lies in weaving in the angle of human rights with a view to exposing the nature of the caste-based violence faced by Dalits. For Dalit literature, low caste man and their sufferings are of prime importance. The play *Touch* also gives importance to the sufferings faced by the dalit people under the pretext of Untouchability.

When the play starts, the playwright gives a wonderful description about the settings, mood and posture of the actors on stage which helps the readers to picture it in minds, reflecting anguish-the mood of the play- into their minds. The play starts with the lamentation of Bharat Mata, being pictured as 'Woman' in the play. The lamentation of the Woman projects the mental suffering of Bharat Mata in seeing the conflict between dalits and non-dalits. She laments for her peace of mind which she lost because of the disunity of her children. She declares that she will regain her happiness only on the day they unite. Thus, through the exploded feelings of the character called Woman,

Gunasekaran projects how India suffers more in the hands of its real owner than the colonizers because of caste divisions.

Gunasekaran, when introduces the four actors on stage, uses them to represent the four divisions in the caste system thereby criticizing the caste divisions. The four classes in caste system are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. According to this system, Brahmin's were born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaisyas from his thighs and Sudras from his feet. Sudras are the most inferior in the hierarchy. Because of the rigidity of the class system, Sudras are considered outcasts, downtrodden, polluted, marginals and are exploited by the higher castes since centuries. The woman character in the play wishes for the alliance of the four actors who represent four castes and she laments as they have parted in different directions.

People swank to others stating that they are against the sin of untouchability. But in depth they still stick on to the clutches of untouchability. Human nature of this futile bragging is also criticized by Gunasekaran through the four actors when they brag about their ancestry and about their skills. But in contrary to their bragging they are not ready to show their valour in action as they are not ready to touch the mud pot.

Gunasekaran brings in the technique of play within the play in *Touch*. He enacts this out with the help of very same actors but renaming them according to his dramatic purpose. He includes this in order to give a realistic touch to the play as it stands as an example to show the cruelty of untouchability. In the play within the play, the farmer gives more importance to the caste system than his own life. When the Farmer fell unconscious because of fit, the Man helps him to come back to his conscious self by making him hold the plough and giving water to quench the thirst. The Farmer who receives help fails to recognize it. Instead he accuses the Man for touching him which has made him to feel impure. The farmer is ready to face death but he is not ready to be touched by the Man as he belongs to the lower caste. He says, "So what if I died? Why did you touch me?" (166). He also cries saying, "A low-caste fellow touched me..." (167). Moreover, the Farmer caresses his bullocks calling them as "beloveds" and "precious ones" but he doesn't have any appealing words for the Man who helped him in his need.

The playwright thus highly comments on a society which is ready to love animals but not the fellow human beings. The Farmer is one such example for this. People treat humans worse than how they treat animals in the name of caste system, denying their rights of livelihood. People from low-caste are treated like outcasts. They are made to roam like refugees in their own country with no basic necessities to live their life. They are forbidden to study, to lie on mat and even to live their life. Because of the fourfold system of caste, anyone can touch anything but not another human. Such is the cruelty of untouchability which people follows under the pretext of caste system. Dalits are not given any importance and unaccepted even like animals. The playwright beautifully poses a question to his audience which shows the intensity of his emotions as well as the meanness of untouchability. He asks:

Touch a goat.

Touch a cow.

Touch a dog.

Why, touch even a pig.

But can you touch another human? (168)

As how Darshana Trivedi says “Dalit writers express their experiences in the most realistic way by using their native speech. Their language as well as images come from their own experiences instead of from their observation of nature”(5), Gunasekaran has used Dalit’s own culture, dalit actors and language to embody the realistic view of life. He attacks the mainstream culture, bringing in the fourfold caste system. The story that he presents is not a fictional one but a story that is repeated in remote villages day after day.

As how Arjun Dangle, the editor of *Poisoned Bread* writes, “Dali Literature is not simply literature, it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people” (266). The play *Touch* like all other Dalit literary works intends to bring change among its audience. So, towards the end of the play, the actors step forward, mingling with the audience to touch their fellow humans intending unity among them. Thus not only the concept but also the directing technique of the play helps to bring awareness among the audience of the play. Because, lack of education and awareness are the main reasons of the exploitation and oppression of Dalits.

Thus the play *Touch*, like how the title signifies, talks about the themes of touch, unfolding the bitter and harrowing experiences of untouchability and caste-discrimination. Furthermore, the play sensitizes the readers with the inhuman aspects of untouchability and caste-discrimination. The dalit play *Touch* therefore creates awareness not only among the dalits but also to break the boundaries of caste discrimination.

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