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History and the South Asian Novel Written in English

**Subaltern Subjectivity and Resistance:  
Dalit Social History in Postcolonial Indian Fiction in English**

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“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.” – Narayan, a dalit character in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, p. 142.

Official history has always ignored the dalits<sup>1</sup> like it did all other losers. It narrated success, not failure, and so the dalit subalterns did not merit a place in it. During the colonial times, after the shock inflicted by the 1857 mutiny, the British rulers were no longer keenly interested in the cultural life of India, nor in transforming Indian society.<sup>2</sup> For instance, although they were aware of the inhumanity inherent in untouchability they did not outlaw the practice. They seem to have instinctively realized that the caste system, of which untouchability is an ugly offshoot, served their strategic interests by preempting armed revolutions since the divisive nature of the caste culture does not encourage people to unite on social or political grounds. The colonial rule thus made no difference to the cultural life of

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<sup>1</sup>Dalit is the word chosen by the castes at the bottom of Indian social hierarchy to describe themselves. It does not figure in the Indian constitution at all. In the constitutional parlance the dalits are called “Scheduled Castes” (SCs).

<sup>2</sup>It is significant to note here that in 1850, just seven years before the mutiny, the colonial government put in place the Caste Disabilities Removal Act which abolished laws and usages inflicting forfeiture of rights or property, impairing or affecting any right of inheritance of any Indian by reason of his or her renouncing, or having been excluded from the communion of any religion, or being deprived of caste.

the Indians, except in a superficial way. Untouchability being primarily a cultural construct, and the unhealthy cultural practices of the Indians having been expediently left untouched by the British rulers, the ritual subordination of the dalits continued all through the colonial era.

Untouchability was finally abolished only in 1950 by the Indian constitution which recognized the Right to Equality as a fundamental right. Not that the constitution and Independence have made a great difference to the dalit social life in the postcolonial period since the age-old prejudices, deeply ingrained in the upper caste<sup>3</sup> consciousness, continued to prevail. Independence marked only the political liberation from the colonial yoke, and not the attainment of social freedom. Political dictators were gone but social dictatorship persisted and the dalits are the worst victims of this social dictatorship, otherwise known as the cruel and unhealthy social practices that single out large sections of the Indian populace for harassment of various kinds on the basis of castes into which they are born by a biological accident.

Decades of anti-disability legislation, poverty alleviation programmes and other official measures aimed at empowering the dalits and erasing the stigma of untouchability, and dalit activism of the recent decades have not exactly succeeded in mainstreaming them.<sup>4</sup> Although most dalit organizations have noble aims at heart their focus has been primarily on reservation quotas and related privileges rather than integration of the dalits with the rest of the Indian society or their economic advancement. The large majority of the dalits – working mostly as wage workers, farm hands, bonded labourers, cobblers, leather workers, street sweepers, and manual scavengers – who live mostly in the villages and have very limited or no access to education, do not hope to benefit from reservations all that much. It is this class of dalits who suffer the worst social ostracism and economic exploitation. They continue to

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<sup>3</sup>For the purpose of this paper ‘upper castes’ include all *savarnas* or caste Hindus. The major castes among the OBCs had gone into the Hindudva fold in cultural matters long ago.

<sup>4</sup>Laws aimed at eliminating the exploitation of the dalits such as the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1976, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, the SCs/STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1992 have proved to be largely ineffective.

live on the margins of the Indian society, in sub-human conditions – exploited, ostracized, and socially excluded.<sup>5</sup>

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In the postcolonial era, not many Indian English novels have treated dalit social life but those that have, namely Mulk Raj Anand's *The Road* (1961), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) authentically represented dalit social life without sentimentalizing or projecting false heroism for ideological reasons. The aim of these fictional works in constructing dalit social history 'from below' could only be to sensitize the Indian society to the suffering of the dalits, and to project the issue on the world stage. This latter point acquires added significance in the context of the Indian government's inexplicable opposition to the global discussion of caste discrimination, and violation of the dalit human rights.<sup>6</sup> These novels seem to do precisely what the government has failed to do – initiate an international discussion on the caste question.

But I will first briefly sketch the stories of the dalits in these novels whose fictional time spans the first three decades of the postcolonial era, then account for the dalit subjectivity by discussing the various discourses that construct it and how the dalit protagonists resist the subordination in their own way, and finally assess the achievement of these novels in social terms.

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<sup>5</sup>Even when the discrimination is not as obvious as in the past it by no means suggests that the caste system is on the wane. It is just that it has metamorphosed and adjusted to the modern times. As Ambedkar rightly explained in his Note to The Indian Franchise Committee in 1932, "untouchability in its notional sense persists even where untouchability in its literal sense has ceased to obtain." In the introductory part of the same Note Ambedkar spells out the reason for the persistence of untouchability: "whether the test is causing pollution by touch or refusal to use common well, the notion underlying both is one and the same. Both are outward registers of the same inward feeling of defilement, odium, aversion and contempt" on the part of the caste Hindus. This is equally true even today. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, "STATEMENT 'E' – Note by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to the Indian Franchise Committee (Lothian Committee) on the Depressed Classes Submitted on 1st May 1932, 5 June 2008, <<http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/14E.%20Dr.%20Ambedkar%20with%20the%20Simon%20Commission%20E.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup>For example, the Indian government opposed the inclusion of caste based discrimination in the agenda of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, held from August 27 - September 1, 2001.

Anand's *The Road* was written during the idealistic immediate post-Independence years when the government was widely expected to deliver the dalits from their wretchedness through affirmative economic policies and administrative measures. That this would prove unrealistic, in the absence of social reinforcement, is underscored by the novel, as the upper caste forces – the 'landlord and priest' combine – use a variety of tactics to thwart the dalit social advancement. At the centre of Anand's novel is the young man Bhikhu, and his fellow dalits who are offered equal pay as the upper caste young men of the village Govardhan by the idealistic upper caste Lambardar Dhooli Singh while laying an approach road connecting the village with the highway. This is resented by the upper caste young men of the village and when efforts to persuade Dhooli Singh to differentiate in terms of pay between the dalits and upper caste workers fail, the Sarpanch Thakur Singh's son Sanju burns down the dalit hutments. Bhikhu is finally forced to abandon the village itself and seek the safety of Delhi where, he thinks, "no one knew who he was and where there would be no caste or outcaste" (Anand 96).

Come the 1970s, which is the fictional time of Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the Nehruvian idealism was replaced by cynicism and despair. Independence had not delivered on the promises it made – the dalits remained as backward as they had always been. *A Fine Balance* therefore recounts the travails of a Chamar family, living at a remote north Indian village. This family is ostracized and harassed in various ways by the upper caste villagers led by the wily Thakur Dharamsi. For daring to teach the children a trade rather than make them leather workers, for venturing to cast vote during the election and various other such transgressions of tradition, the family is burnt alive. The two members of the family, Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash, who escape this brutality pay a terrible price at a later date for being dalits – one loses both his legs and the other his manhood – and both finally end up as beggars on the streets of Bombay.

"The god of small things" of Roy's novel is the untouchable paravan, Velutha, a gifted young man who thoughtlessly enters into a clandestine love affair with a Syrian Christian divorcee and mother of two children, called Ammu. When the love affair comes to light he is falsely charged with kidnapping the children and murdering their cousin and is

done to death by the police. The love affair he has with an upper caste woman is a mere pretext; his real mistake is to want to rise above the station his caste permitted. His success activates ancient prejudices and poses a challenge to the upper caste social forces who involuntarily form themselves into a punishing force and finally eliminate him.

The appalling plight of the dalits in all these novels is easily explained by the Indian society's unwillingness to change – Independence or no Independence. Appearances have changed, political setup has changed but attitudes and mindsets have remained unaltered. The upper caste social groups nonchalantly practice untouchability and feel none the worse for it. Several discourses are invoked to legitimize this inhuman practice. Being institutionalized ways of thinking discourses affect our views in unimaginable ways. The discourses the Indian upper castes are governed by take on a sinister shape vis-à-vis their treatment of the dalits. The upper castes are often aware of the social, economic and other advantages accruing to them by the prevalence of these discourses. These three novels present the social history of the dalits mainly in the form of their response to these discourses. Their response often takes the form of resistance to the subjectivity the discourses seek to put them to.

The most important of them is the religious-dharmic-karmic discourse. The priestly class which originated the caste system, consolidated its position and safeguarded its class interests by imposing religious dogmas as the basis of the caste system. In course of time castes came to be viewed as divinely ordained institutions and people stopped questioning their relevance or legitimacy. This system assigned the lowest position to the dalits – they are at the bottom of the social pyramid and are utterly unprivileged. For thousands of years they lived and died as menials, in conditions worse than that of slaves. *Manu Samhita*, for instance, lays down that “the dwellings of *Candalas* and *Svapakas* shall be outside the village, they must be made *apapatras*, and their wealth (shall be) dogs and donkeys” (Manu).

Religion, dharma and karma are frequently invoked in these novels to deter the dalits from making progress in life. The upper caste characters seem to believe in this hierarchical social order as sanctified by religion and rendered acceptable by tradition. Their minds are conditioned to automatically object to any deviation on the part of the dalits from the ways of

life prescribed for them by the shastras. Incensed by Bhikhu and other dalits breaking the stones of Shiva's sacred hill for laying the approach road, the village priest in *The Road* Pandit Suraj Mani declares that "the end of our religion has come" (Anand 3) and then offers to perform a *yagna* so that Indra can send down a storm to wash off the road. In similar circumstances the pandits in the ancestral village of Ishvar and Om, invoke the dharmic order, and rule that –

There was a proper place for everyone in the world, and as long as each one minded his place, they would endure and emerge unharmed through the Darkness of Kaliyug. But if there were transgressions – if the order was polluted – then there was no telling what calamities might befall the universe. (Mistry 101)

– meaning primarily that the dalits should be cheked in their tracks and that they should forever live like slaves. On reaching this consensus the Thakurs and pandits try to "whip the world into shape" by frequently flogging the untouchables. Ishvar's father Dukhi mochi gets his share of thrashing from an upper caste man for inadvertently allowing his goats to stray into a neighbour's property. Later in the novel Thakur Dharamsi, the arch villain of the novel, gets Ishvar's brother Narayan brutally killed for venturing to excercise his adult franchise, 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.... (Mistry 147)

Although the Hindu upper castes are frequently held responsible for the continued practice of untouchability, the religious affiliation of neither the oppressors nor the dalits seems to make a difference. In Kerala the Syrian Christian community practices untouchability more zealously than the Hindu upper castes themselves. Velutha, a Christian by birth but a paravan dalit all the same, receives the harshest treatment possible from his co-religionists for breaking the unwritten laws, including the love laws, governing the dalit lives.

Religious conversion has not socially elevated the dalits, nor improved their material conditions. They have continued to be dalits whatever religion they professed.<sup>7</sup>

In the post-Independence period the upper caste power, granted by tradition, is sought to be reinforced by the political power which has been readily appropriated by the upper castes. The second most important discourse that ensures dalit subjectivity therefore is political power which is most often misused to oppress the dalits and to protect upper caste interests. The transfer of political power at the stroke of the midnight hour on August 15, 1947 did not ring in true democracy. Although there are the outward trappings of democracy for all to see in practice it is the medieval form of feudalism that obtains in India, especially in the rural areas. It is the feudal lords such as Thakur Dharamsi who grab power in the new political order and continue with their medieval social and political practices. Not completely satisfied by killing Dukhi mochi, and several others of his family, in *A Fine Balance*, Thakur Dharamsi bides his time and during the Emergency of 1975-77 which presents him with an ideal opportunity for arbitrary exercise of power, he gets Om castrated and his uncle Ishvar sterilized in unhygienic conditions which leads to the loss of both his legs. In *The God of Small Things* Comrade K.N.M. Pillai represents the Communist Party that fights for workers' rights everywhere in the world but in Kerala it "never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community" (Roy 66). Velutha's being a card-holding member of the Communist Party, his participation in political demonstrations, and his desperate appeal to Comrade Pillai on the eve of his arrest do not help him. In Comrade Pillai's opinion Velutha is a paravan first and foremost, and therefore he deserves to be treated as paravans have always been treated. And so he assures Inspector Thomas Mathews that Velutha does not enjoy "the patronage or protection of the Communist Party. That he

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<sup>7</sup>However in the recent couple of years, at least among the government circles, there seems to be a realization of this unfortunate fact. It is evidenced by the May 2007 recommendation to the government by the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) headed by Justice Rangnath Mishra to bring the dalit converts to other faiths into the SC fold. And now the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) too has favoured quotas for the dalit converts to other religions. Mahendra Boddha, a member of NCSC, explains the rationale for such a course of action: "SCs do not get socially, economically and educationally uplifted when they switch over to other faiths. There is no justification in denying quotas to them. Which is why we have re-recommended separate quotas for them as discussed and approved by the commission in the last meeting in December 2007." "Fresh bid for non-Hindu Dalit quotas," *The Hindustan Times*, 3/2/2008, <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/storypage/storypage.aspx?id=5601134a-6291-4940-ac5d-b256dd53c5e4&&Headline=Fresh+bid+for+non-Hindu+Dalit+quotas>>.

was on his own” (Roy 262-63). Comrade Pillai could have saved Velutha’s life but he chooses not to primarily because Velutha is a dalit.

If mature political democracy remains still a mirage, social democracy has never even been seriously contemplated in India. Indian society frequently doubles as a dictator and victimizes individuals guilty of the slightest deviation from the established ways of thinking. Even a faint sign of defying social codes, or a feeble protest against an unfair social practice is sure to result in harassment and ostracism. Since the social codes are loaded heavily in favour of the upper castes, and against the dalits, the upper caste members of society turn into unofficial enforcers of the dictatorial social norms. In *The Road* Bhikhu and his mother’s approaching the village temple to offer worship is promptly interpreted by the upper caste young men as an attempted act of defilement and Bhikhu is soundly beaten for his perceived defiance of an age-old social code. Later in the novel Bhikhu sacrifices his love for Rukmani, Thakur Singh’s daughter, for fear of social censure and the attendant risks. During their childhood, curiosity gets the better of Narayan and Ishvar and they enter a classroom in the village school. The teacher considers it an act of polluting the instruments of learning and savagely beats them. When their father Dukhi mochi appeals to Pandit Lalluram, who is known to be kind, he is told: “Punishing your sons for their misdeeds was part of the teacher’s duty. He had no choice. Do you understand?” (Mistry 113). For falling in love with a ‘touchable’ woman and thus breaking the ancient laws that forbade relations between the upper castes and the dalits, the touchable policemen in *The God of Small Things* swoop on the sleeping Velutha, and inflict fatal injuries on his body. The policemen look upon their savagery as a social responsibility, as “inoculating a community against an outbreak” (Roy 309).

In all the above instances of cruelty towards the dalits the upper caste members of society act out of an unacknowledged sense of duty towards the established order which the dalits seem to disturb. There is thus a lot to explain here in psychological terms.

The last but perhaps the most important factor that contributes to the ritual subordination of the dalits is the caste-based economic discourse. This discourse is important

considering the fact that most Hindu practices and taboos have an economic basis. Ambedkar has theorized that –

Untouchability is more than a religious system. It is also an economic system which is worse than slavery. ... As an economic system it permits exploitation without obligation. Untouchability is not only a system of unmitigated economic exploitation, but it is also a system of uncontrolled economic exploitation. (Ambedkar)

It is the operation of this economic principle which obliges Dukhi mochi to graze a herd of goats of an upper caste villager and when a negligible dereliction of duty takes place, instead of a glass of milk for a whole day's labour, he gets a sound thrashing. On another occasion he is summoned by a Thakur to ground dry red chillies into powder. Dukhi works at the mortar pounding the chillies with a long pestle, not expecting to be paid more than a pittance, but unfortunately for him the mortar breaks in two towards the end of the day and crushes his left foot in the process. And instead of sympathy and payment, in cash or kind, he is treated to several blows.

The economic discourse extends to the professions traditionally reserved for the dalits as well. They are expected to be happy with their unclean and demeaning occupations and never aspire to higher professions. If they do, they can be sure to earn the disapproval and discouragement of the upper caste colleagues and self-appointed custodians of social norms. Velutha is a gifted carpenter and highly skilled mechanic working at the pickle factory owned by Ammu's family. His accomplishments oblige his employers to put him in charge of the general maintenance. The upper caste colleagues resent this for "ancient reasons" (Roy 121). During a conversation with Ammu's brother, Chacko, Comrade Pillai puts it down point blank:

"That Paravan is going to cause trouble for you," he said. "Take it from me ... get him a job somewhere else. Send him off." ... "He may be very well okay as a person. But other workers are not happy with him. Already they are coming to me with

complaints ... You see, Comrade, from local standpoint, these caste issues are very deep-rooted.” (Roy 278)

Velutha, like other dalits in these novels, pays with his life, among other things, for crossing the economic boundaries demarcated ages ago.

These and similar discourses constantly seek to construct dalit subjectivity. They work at the subtle psychological level and offer unfair advantages to the upper castes. The upper castes are therefore unwilling to question them and the dalits are too weak and too scattered to oppose them. For taking on any evil social system people need to unite. Now, the caste system is characterized by graded inequality, which automatically excludes any possibility of a united opposition. This principle applies to the dalits as well since they too are divided into many castes, they too fight among themselves, and even practice untouchability, perhaps because of the unconscious absorption of the upper caste ideology. Given this scenario it is certainly difficult to visualise the possibility of a united dalit opposition to the upper caste oppression.

It is in this context that the dalit characters’ resistance to the hostile discourses should be viewed. Bhikhu of *The Road*, Narayan and Ishvar of *A Fine Balance*, and Velutha of *The God of Small Things* have all had the advantage of education, even if they had to struggle a great deal to obtain it, and the benefit of exposure to the world outside their immediate social context. Their levels of understanding far surpass that of their parents, and so they protest against the injustices they are subjected to. Bhikhu realizes the futility of fighting the vested interests in the village and seeks immunity from persecution in the city of Delhi. Encouraged by their father Narayan and Ishvar, and later Narayan’s son Om as well, learn tailoring rather than become leather workers and that way make a significant move in the direction of breaking the stranglehold of the caste-imposed economic order. And finally Velutha, who is endowed with several natural talents, becomes a carpenter and mechanic at a pickle factory, and does not for a moment think of taking to toddy tapping which is his family’s traditional profession. Thus the choice of their professions is a form of their resistance to the social values that seek to subordinate them to the upper castes. They demonstrate their resistance

silently, by questioning the rationale of the established order, and without seeking to subvert it.

The resistance of these dalit characters has been feeble, sporadic and largely ineffectual but it is certainly suggestive of a move in the right direction on the part of the dalits in general. Confrontationist approach to the problem is more likely to alienate the dalits even further from the mainstream Indian society and mark them off for greater harassment. This is why I adumbrated earlier on that the affirmative economic policies of the government and battle cries of the dalit activists, even if they have their own relevance, are unlikely to erase caste identities and obliterate untouchability since they seem to ignore the importance of a social agenda aimed at bringing the dalits into the mainstream. Therefore, while the dalits should do everything they can to help themselves, the way the dalit characters of these novels have done, civil society organizations, the media, rights groups, conscientious members of the society and above all creative writers should step in to help them and facilitate their rapid integration with the larger Indian society. This integration will be the final and lasting solution, and it can be better achieved through psychological transformation within the country and moral pressure applied from outside. The aforementioned organizations, groups and individuals – being articulate among other things – can easily sensitize the upper castes to the terrible suffering of the dalits. There is a well known example in history which proves the worth of this kind of social project. During the Victorian Era Charles Dickens's novels sensitized the English society, as nothing else had ever done before, and led to the reformation of the institutions and practices that were detrimental to the downtrodden. Similarly, an honest discussion of the issue of untouchability and caste based discrimination on the global arena would for sure exert enough external pressure on the lawmakers and hasten the integration of the dalits. If apartheid could be dismantled by fixing the international gaze relentlessly on it there is no reason why untouchability, which for all practical purposes is the Indian form of apartheid, cannot be rooted out by sustained international attention paid to it. And the three novels discussed in this paper have, I think, made at least a modest contribution to the solution of the dalit issue by raising the upper caste consciousness and by calling the world's attention to it.

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