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Fear as an Artifice for Framing Social Array: Resonating the Subaltern Consciousness in Hindu Culture in *Untouchable* and *The Dark Room*

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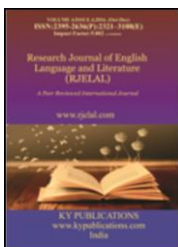
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ABSTRACT

Hindu society constructs and upholds its social order on the basis of divine ideologies. Fundamentally divided into four classes, the lowest strata of the society, Sudras and women are oppressed in the society on the basis of these divine ideologies. Culture imposes fear upon these weaker cluster and this fear is conveniently exploited by the more powerful classes in society. Considering literature as an echo of society, this paper attempts to prove that it is the imposed fear, which helps the dominant groups to exploit and utilize them. Bakha, the protagonist of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and RK Narayan's *Savitri*, protagonist of *The Dark Room*, are essentially the victims of such oppression. They both live a life engulfed in fear, fear imposed by the culture. With reference to the modern sociological theories and the sacred books of Hinduism, my paper attempts to dig out the psychology of the oppressed which helped in Hindu Social Ordering.

Key Words: Hindu Social Ordering, fear of oppressed, fear imposed by culture, social dominance, psychology of the oppressed



Every society has a social order which might be unique in its own way. Many social theorists including Marx, Durkheim and Talcott Parsons have defined the social order broadly on different terms. While Marx defines it based on economic terms, Parsons defined it on the basis of cultural values. Taking into consideration, India's deep rooted cultural and traditional heritage, we have to define India's social order and structure purely based on the cultural background. Deep rooted caste system in India, even in this post-modern era is the result of this deep rooted cultural and traditional background.

The Social Dominance Theory formulated by the Psychologists, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto

explains the social hierarchies of a society. As stated by the theory,

Human group-based social hierarchies consist of three distinctly different stratification systems: (1) an age system, in which adults and middle-age people have disproportionate social power over children and younger adults; (2) a gender or patriarchal system in which men have disproportionate social and political power compared to women; and (3) an arbitrary-set system in which socially constructed categories are hierarchically arranged. These arbitrary sets may be constructed to associate power and legitimacy with social

categories like race, caste, social class, religion, or any other group distinction that human interaction is capable of constructing. (Lange 418-419)

In the Indian context, gender and caste were two major stratification systems on which the traditional Hindu culture laid its background for the social order. This social order was widely practiced and accepted in India because it had a strong mythical background. Class conflicts and social inequalities were subdued to a greater extent.

The thoughts and literature of India are also closely linked with the Hindu culture. The essence of the age-old culture can be traced in most of the works of literature produced in this land. RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao were the illustrious writers of 1930s and it was them who paved the path for the modern writers. Being the most celebrated writers of the country, their works mirrored the cultural conflicts of the country. By selecting a selected locale for his works, Narayan unwrapped the essence and soul of India realistically. Realism was his tool and he presented the life situations as it is. He took no sides and was not a biased writer like Mulk Raj Anand.

He does not take sides and his novels have no message to deliver. He does not preach, he does not try to convict, he does not even try to point out the right from the wrong. He leaves the reader to see that for himself. And this is the greatest asset. It saves his art from pit falls of propaganda or bias which we find in Mulk Raj Anand. (Kumar 137)

Though Anand and Narayan widely differed in their writing style, their novels, *Untouchable* and *The Dark Room* had some common ideas. Mulk Raj Anand, definitely took a side which he considered as right. He was with the oppressed and he wrote for them. His novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie* had strikingly vocalized the abuses of an exploited community. Anand's first novel *Untouchable* chronicled the life of Bakha, an eighteen year old sweeper, who was treated meaner than animals by the upper classes of the society. Similarly Narayan's *The Dark Room* discussed the gender issue with respect to the status of women in our society.

Savitri, the protagonist, was a suffering and silent wife in the hands of a dominant husband.

In both novels, the protagonists were marginalized and labelled as inferior by the society. According to the Varnashrama dharma, Sudras or the low caste people were born to serve their masters. Their only duty is the selfless service to Brahmin and other upper castes. The only way to attain moksha which according to the Hindu culture is the only goal of life, is by performing this selfless service, says *Manusmriti* and other holy scriptures of Hinduism. Similarly the duty of a wife is also a selfless service. According to Manusmriti one has to treat her husband as God even though he is a drunkard and womanizer.

As a part of the Hindu society, one is not able to escape the sense of duties imposed on them. According to Hinduism, violation of these duties invites punishments both in this life and the life after death. Fear was used as a tool by the patriarchal feudal lords who created these rules. Pareto has pointed out that, there are two major means by which the members of dominant groups establish and maintain hegemony, force, and fraud. By force, Pareto meant the use of physical force and intimidation. By fraud he referred to the use of accepted and shared social ideology operating to legitimize the dominant position of the powerful over the powerless. In Hinduism, it was by the means of fraud, the members of the upper castes maintained their status as the dominant group of society. They legitimized the Hindu ideologies to suit their needs.

Bakha and Savitri revealed the state of mind of the oppressed. Bakha was born into a sweeper family, considered as untouchables by the rest of the society. While they cleaned the dirt of town, they remained as dirt throughout their lives. Bakha and Lakha, his father, belong to two different generations. Lakha, like his ancestors, was a victim of the cultural bondages from which he was unwilling to escape. But Bakha, influenced by the British customs, wanted to find a way to free himself from the cultural bondages. Bakha remained as a sweeper because his father was a sweeper. He couldn't choose his own profession; he was tied up by the system, by the culture, even though he didn't

know anything about the Hindu culture. He was born with an inner fear, inherited from his ancestors.

The sense of fear was visible in most of Bakha's daily activities. He was too modest to go near a shop and was even afraid to ask for a pack of cigarettes or sweets. Fear was the only concrete thing in his life. Bakha knew that he was an untouchable and was not permitted to walk freely as others do. Cultural traditions had deep impact on his consciousness too. Quoting Du Bois, it could be said that Bakha had "two souls, two thoughts, in one dark body" (Du Bois 116). The representative of a big community, Bakha looked at him both from his point of view and from the oppressors' point of view too.

The upper caste Hindus considered even the touch of these 'untouchables' as a great sin. A single touch of the untouchable was enough to pollute the upper caste people. Bakha was brutally humiliated and insulted by a high caste man in the town because he had 'polluted' the man by touching him unknowingly. The high caste man abused Bakha with all kind of abusive words that "his senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear, humility and servility" (38). Bakha, though physically well built, was not able to utter a word against the man because terror imposed by the culture prevented him from doing so. Fear gripped his soul and was convinced that he had committed a mistake.

It was not a physical barrier which prevented Bakha from reacting but mental or rather a cultural barrier. Thus he was unable to run away from the crowd. If he ran away, he might accidentally touch anyone and it might lead to another quarrel. But Bakha unlike his father, wanted to escape from this mental confinement. Secretly, he often tried to rebel against the rules. Out of curiosity to see what was going on inside the temple, he climbed the stairs of the temple. There was a conflict in his mind, whether to climb or not? When his curiosity gave him the courage to climb, the fear which he acquired by birth was held him back. "Oppressed under-dog that he was by birth, afraid of everything, creeping slowly up, in a curiosity hesitant, cringing movement" (50). Temple, a symbol of culture and tradition, advanced to engulf Bakha like a monster.

The people around the temple cursed and scolded Bakha for polluting the temple. Once again he was paralysed with fear.

The great irony of the situation rested in the fact that it was the priest of the same temple who tried to molest Bakha's sister Sohini. When she parried his attempts, the priest twisted the situation to suit his safety. Such instances of falsification of reality can be seen in the age old Hindu culture also. Bakha wanted to take revenge upon the priest but,

He couldn't overstep the barriers which the conventions of his superiors had built up to protect their weakness against him. He could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody, especially by a low caste man. (56)

No change occurred in the life of Bakha though he aspired for a lot of changes. He continued to live in the existential fear with which he was born, throughout his life. Anand was not able to provide a solution to this age old problem but merely described the cultural and social milieu of the pre-independence era of India. Narayan also articulated the same issue, the state of mind of the oppressed. However he dealt not with the low castes but with the status of women in the Indian social and cultural scenario. Savitri, the protagonist of *The Dark Room*, was a representative of the oppressed women folks of India.

Savitri admitted that her life was completely reigned by fear. Fear seemed to be the only definite thing in her life. In one of her monologues she disclosed that,

I am afraid to go even a hundred yards from the house unescorted; yes, afraid, afraid of everything. One definite thing in life is Fear. Fear, from the cradle to the funeral pyre, and even beyond that, fear of torture in the other world. Afraid of a husband's displeasures, and of the discomforts that might be caused to him, morning to night and all night too. (91)

She was oppressed by her husband Ramani along with the entire patriarchal society. Ramani considered kitchen as the only work place for women where they can take independent decisions. He used oppression as a tool to maintain a social

order in the house. Their family could be considered as a microcosm of the traditional Hindu society of the 1930s, where women were subjugated by men to maintain the social order of the society.

The dominant group of the society always enjoyed more freedom and pleasures than the "other." To make their life more comfortable the submissive group has to sacrifice their freedom. Savitri willingly sacrificed her identity as an individual and freedom for the family. Her identity as a traditional wife was moulded on the basement of fear. Ramani's own words, "what a dutiful wife! Would rather starve than precede her husband. You are really like some of the women in our ancient books" (11), made it clear that Savitri was a typical Hindu wife. For all the people around Savitri, she was a traditional and dutiful wife. All those women living according to the holy books of Hinduism were likely to have a collective identity. Betty Friedan once commented that,

Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night-she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-- 'Is this all?' (Friedan 88-89)

The crisis of identity through which Savitri was going through, had been highlighted by Narayan. He used the dark room as an objective correlative, to present the psychological trauma of Savitri. The dark room symbolizes the state of helplessness and inner fear of Savitri. The dark room provided her a temporary relief from her problems. But Ramani's relation with his associate Santa Bai, drove Savitri to protest against her husband. It was the breaking of a long silence. The angry face of Savitri was so strange to Ramani. He had never expected such a change in Savitri and all his effort to control her were in vain.

He tried once again to hold her hands, and she shook her hands free, violently. "I am a human being," she said, through her heavy breathing. "You men will never grant that. For you we are playthings when you feel like hugging, and slaves at other times.

Don't think that you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose. (85)

In her anger she was afraid of no one and she spoke out the truth buried inside her. She spoke as she was the representative of all women. When she was able to overcome her fear she was transformed into a new woman, perhaps to her original self, afraid of no one. Ramani withdrew his hand he raised to strike her when, she declared, "All right, strike me. I am not afraid" (87).

Till that moment it was the fear of Savitri which helped Ramani to control her, rule her. Once she was out of her fear, Ramani was not able to overpower her. Once out of the dominance, she was a free woman and talks freely about the condition of women living under the male supremacy.

We are responsible for our position: we accept food, shelter and comforts that you give, and are what we are. Do you think that I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, and drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money? No I will starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which we need be obliged to no man. (87-88)

She threw away all her possessions including the ornaments given by her father. For Savitri those "are also a man's gift" (88).

But the crisis which Savitri encountered was loneliness. Alone in the darkness, Savitri loses her willpower and her mind was numb when she reached the banks of river Sarayu. Meditated on her actions, Savitri herself felt so strange and, didn't want to believe that all the things happened was a reality. Her long soliloquy reveals the psychological trauma through which she was going through.

Am I the same old Savitri or am I someone else? Perhaps this is just a dream. And I must be someone else posing as Savitri because I couldn't have had the courage to talk back to my husband. I have never done it in my life...I am afraid to go even a hundred yards from the house unescorted; yes, afraid, afraid of everything. (90-91)

The only definite thing in her life was fear, which moulded her as a perfect traditional Hindu

wife. At last RK Narayan unravels the turbulent psyche of Savitri to the readers.

One definite thing in life is fear. Fear from the cradle to the funeral pyre, and even beyond that, fear of torture in the other world. Afraid of a husband's displeasures, and of the discomforts that might be caused to him, morning to night and all night too...Afraid of one's father, teachers and everybody in early life, afraid of one's husband, children and neighbours in later life- fear, fear, in one's heart till the funeral pyre was lit, and then fear of being sentenced by Yama to be held down in a cauldron of boiling oil. (91)

Savitri was forced to live a life in fear. Her last and the only way to escape from the oppressed life was to live a life without depending on any one. She tried to drown herself in the River Sarayu but was saved by Mari, a villager and was taken to his house. Savitri hoped for a new life at a new place, a free and independent life. She had decided to get rid of charity and the small job at the temple gave her strength to live a new life. "Savitri felt very happy, she saw a new life opening before her." (129) But living in a patriarchal society without a support was not as easy as Savitri thought. When she left her husband, rebelling against the male supremacy, she had in mind a life living under the open sky. But in reality she was relocated to another dark room in the temple. She was again a victim of the male domination. The priest was more dominating than her husband was.

Savitri was not prepared to live in such harsh conditions. All her attempt to hide her fear went in futile. Even though she told the priest that she was not afraid of anything, she found no way to escape from fear and charity. The lonely night at the temple terrified her. "The whole air was oppressive; the surrounding objects assumed monstrous shapes in the solitary hour" (146). Savitri became more vulnerable and insecure in the new atmosphere. In the end she accepted her defeat and had to return to her husband.

Her return to her husband's house was a realization, once again of her helplessness. Beaten by the unchanged harsh realities of the Indian

society, she willingly adapted to the norms of a patriarchal society. Savitri failed in her attempt to create an individual identity, but she compelled the readers to think about the status of women in our society. While discussing about the creation of *The Dark Room*, Narayan had remarked that,

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the 'Women's Lib' movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunningness that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances.(119)

It was against this "orthodox milieu of Indian society", Narayan's Savitri fought and failed.

Bakha too failed in his desire to be like a White man, respected by the society. While Savitri openly fought for freedom and individuality, Bakha's fights were secret. He lacked courage to fight openly. He touched a few upper caste boys when he played hockey and he ran through the crowd to see Gandhi touching a lot of people. Though caught in his act, Bakha's attempt to peep into the temple could also be considered as an act of rebellion. He rebelled against his own inner self. Fear was imprinted in him and he had to pull it out. But Bakha's combat with his own inner psyche was also a futile attempt. In the end he was convinced with the idea that with the introduction of modern sanitation systems his status will be changed. Words of the young poet, Iqbal Nath Sarashar who argued for the switch-over to the flush system, gave a new hope to Bakha, "when the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain untouchables" (146).

There happens no evident changes in the life of Bakha or Savitri as the novels end. Life is same as in the beginning though some occurrences provide them a little hope. Savitri completely surrenders in the end and realises that no woman can escape from their cultural bondages. This state of mind characterized by depression and a hopeless attitude towards the world is described by the

psychologist Martin Seligman as Learned Helplessness. She is convinced that there is no way to overcome her destiny as a dutiful and obedient wife. Learned Helplessness is more perceptible in Lakha than in Bakha, who still has some hope in his coming future.

Based on the works of George Herbert Mead and Georg Simmel, social scientists established an analytics which initially focuses on social transactions and relations. They created the theory about deviance which refers to individuals and their acts falling outside of socially accepted norms and regulations. Every society offers a general agenda of moral system for appraising its inmates, and violations of the directions produce deviance. In this sense Savitri and Bakha who tried to violate the accepted norms of the Hindu culture are deviants. Their violation of the rules and discomfort in the existing system show their struggle within the system. But their struggle had no evident influence over the society in which they live. As Wallerstein commented,

In the struggle over the system (or systems) that will succeed our existing world-system, the fundamental cleavage will be between those who wish to expand both liberties—that of the majority and that of the minorities—and those who seek to create a non-libertarian system under the guise of preferring either liberty of the majority or the liberty of minorities. In such a struggle, it becomes clear what the role of opacity is in the struggle. Opacity leads to confusion, and this favours the cause of those who wish to limit liberty (Wallerstein 89)

Class divisions and oppression of the weaker cluster by the dominant group existed in every society. Only the means of oppression varied. The Blacks were tortured and oppressed by the Whites across the globe. Black Africans were enslaved in many parts of the world. Karl Marx in his Conflict theory had advocated that the society is in a state of continuous conflict and the social order is maintained by oppression and power rather than harmony and conformity. The discriminations in the society is preserved through ideological oppression where the bourgeoisie would force acceptance of

the existing social order on the proletariat. In India the strategy to implement dominance over the weaker groups was cultural ideology. Women and the low castes were bound by strict laws which had divine authority over them and violation of these rules, according to the scriptures invite divine punishments. Concerning to the duties of women Manusmriti announces that, "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons. A woman must never be independent" (Buhler 195). Manusmriti also says that, "With whatever limb a man of a low caste does hurt to (a man of the three) highest (castes), even that limb shall be cut off; that is the teaching of Manu" (Buhler 303). These duties and restrictions were used to evoke fear in the oppressed class of Hindu society, which helped the high class to preserve their dominance in the society.

Untouchability could not be erased easily by the introduction of modern sanitation methods as the young poet, Iqbal Nath Sarashar said, and acceptance was not a solution for women oppression; both Anand and Narayan knew it. They were not able to provide a real solution for the major problems which they showcased in their works. But these works are not to be judged, based on the aspect that, whether they provided a solution or not. If literature is the expression of life, these works can be considered as pure literature in the sense that the socio-cultural condition of the age can be easily traced out in these works of fiction. Their aim was to throw light into the physical and mental state of the oppressed in our culture. *Untouchable* and *The Dark Room* deconstruct the cultural norms and values of Hinduism and alert its readers about the socio-cultural stigma existing in their contemporary society. The solution, they knew rested in the attitude of people. By drawing the brutalities of oppression, Narayan and Anand were able to move their readers. They intended to make their readers aware about the psychological trauma through which Bakha and Savitri went through. Their works marked the beginning of a new social movement. Two great figures in Indian English writing, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, wanted to change the existing social conditions but their

works were not meant to revolutionize the system. Cultural and traditional practices could be changed, only through value based education and awareness about the contemporary situation. *Untouchable* and *The Dark Room*, contrived the readers to think about the social evils that existed in the society. This thought, this awareness is the only solution.

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