

You Are What You Wear: A Study Of Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchables In The Light Of Channar Revolt

ANUSREE K
I MA English
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Jain Deemed-to- be University
Palace Road, Bangalore

Abstract-This article discusses how clothing becomes a man's identity in Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchables'. The story is about Bakha a young man filled with dreams and aspirations for his future, but because of lower caste he is alienated from the society. Clothing is a signifier of religion and castes, in the eyes of Bakha clothing becomes a metaphor for superiority and enlightenment. He thinks that if he wears the dress which the upper caste used to wear, he would cast off his untouchable status and become a respectable person like them. He was a toilet cleaner and when he wears the habiliments of the upper class then the onlookers were perplexed that someone dressed like Bakha is from the untouchable caste. This stresses the social truth that 'you are what you wear'. The caste barrier in dressing, which restricted the lower caste to wear proper and decent clothes, also restricted them from coming to the main stream and occupying a respectable position in the society. Many riots take place to gain the right to wear decent and proper clothes. One such was the 'Channar Revolt' that took place among the Nadar community in Kerala. It was a community in Travancore and the Nadar women were not allowed to wear clothes that covered their breasts whereas higher caste women covered their breasts and shoulders. Baring of chest to higher caste was seen as a sign of respect. Similar to Bakha who is uneasy with his social status, a large number of Nadar Climbers embraced Christianity and started to wear 'long clothes' and Nair women covered their upper parts with breast clothes. In both the cases clothing becomes an identity of a person's status as 'untouchable'. This paper aims to analyze 'Untouchables' in the light of 'Channar Revolt', a protest against the discrimination done by the type of clothing that marginalizes one as untouchable.

Key words: Untouchable, Habiliments, Nadar community, Channar revolt, Caste

INTRODUCTION-This research paper aims to bring out the similarities in *Channar* revolt and *Untouchables* regarding the dressing of lower castes and how it affected their emotions regarding caste practices and caste conversion. There are a lot of malpractices in the name of caste that destroyed the humanity in humans. *Channar* revolt was one such revolt in which the females needed to fight for their pride and freedom to cover their breasts. In both these novels the way of dressing marginalized lower castes from the upper castes. The apartheid system was prevalent in India during those times. Through this research I wish to bring out how the apartheid system is portrayed in a novel and a real incident and their similarities that makes them related to each other and raise the slogan ‘you are what you wear’.

Channar revolt was initiated by the Nadar community women in Travancore district of Kerala who were not allowed to wear breast clothes. They were prohibited from covering their breasts since it was seen as a respect to bare your breast before the upper castes. And if anyone disagreed to do that they were forced to pay ‘breast tax’ or *Mulakaram*, quite sickeningly, by the size of their breasts. Among the many rebellious stories of Travancore women there is an anecdote regarding the revolt: the story of *Nangeli*.

She is said to have been a poor woman during those times, who was asked for breast tax. Enraged at the idea that the dimensions of her breasts would determine how much she would pay, she cut off her breasts and handed them to the officials. She bled to death on the spot. Her husband upon finding out was so scared and distraught that he jumped in her funeral pyre. This has been dubbed by historians as the first example they have come across of male *Sati*. The place she fell has been named “Mulachiparambu” or the breast woman’s plot. Nangeli may not have meant much to the administration of the time, but her memory means a lot in our day.

Untouchables by Mulk Raj Anand also portray the theme of dressing as a barrier among lower and upper castes people. The way of dressing was used to determine the lower caste from the crowd and they will be punished if they cross path with the upper caste. They have to bear all the tantrums of the upper class society. Bakha, the protagonist of the novel was made to clean the toilet early in the

morning by Havildar Charat Singh but he was puzzled when he caught sight of Bakha. He addressed Bakha as gentleman on seeing his dressing but inside he was holding the grin which symbolized six thousand years of racial and class superiority.

In the novel and in the revolt in order to get well dressed without fearing the caste system both the community and Bakha were attracted towards the Christianity and attires of Britishers. In this paper the analysis is done on how both Bakha and Nadar women were discriminated on the basis of dressing and how they earned their right to get dressed decently, their emotions regarding dressing which arose, the idea of getting well dressed and questioning the norms of the society, and how dressing made them to look caste from a different perspective and latter led to the conversion to Christianity.

Channar Revolt: A Struggle For Dignity-Our society is no stranger to clothing being used as a tool of repression, especially for women. There are always people judging you for how you dress but now, it is based on your choice. The situation was different in the earlier 1800's of Kerala. The lower caste Hindu women were not allowed to cover their breast. Rather than baring their chest before the upper caste they don't have any other choice, which on those days was considered as an act of respect. On the other hand Nair women of upper caste Hindu were allowed to cover their breast and wear shoulder cloth and their nakedness was not a matter of respect for the lords of those times. Nair women only take off their clothes before the priests only whom they consider as the authority of god. The women of lower caste who disagree to follow this custom was obliged to pay 'breast tax' or *Mulakaram*, whose amount was determined quite sickeningly, according to the size of their breast.

Nadar women were the first to protest against these malpractices. They declared that they wanted to have the right to get dressed the way they want. But they were given choice by the *Diwan* (judicial officer) of Travancore rather than granting them their rights. In order to please the upper class and to oppress the inevitable chaos Colonel John Munro made a drastic judgment that is if the Nadar women need to wear breast cloth they need to get converted to Christianity. A verdict passed on 26 July 1859, by the king of Travancore under pressure from the Madras Governor Charles Trevelyan, Nadar women were allowed to wear long blouses like Muslims or Syrian Christians of those times but forbidden from wearing Nair Sharf. But the verdict was withdrawn since the courtesans of the

kings court complained that this would end the difference that identified them with their castes. Nadar women were also not satisfied with the verdict since they fought not only for modesty but also as a matter of equality. They questioned the norms why all Hindus cannot be equal in the matter of dressing. So they preferred the breast cloth of higher Hindu community like 'Nair'. The result was tearing off their clothes in the public by Nair community and filing cases against them.

Many Nadars got converted into Christianity, since it didn't have any caste bias regarding the dressing and dignity of women. They were attracted to Christianity because of this and the missionaries exploited their dilemma and offered them all the rights that the other Christians in the state enjoy. Even then also Nair men attacked Nadar Christian women who wore upper cloth. The missionaries approached the court regarding this matter and got a favorable order. The Nadars embraced Christianity promoted by British missionaries as a way out of the oppressive caste order enforced by upper caste Hindus, which included the royalty. Hindus were not against the conversion but they resisted the attempt of lower castes to claim social parity with them by moving out of Hinduism. Dress had become a metaphor for equal rights — a subversive idea that rejected the graded inequality embedded in the social hierarchy founded on caste.

You Are What You Wear: A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchables In The Light Of Channar Revolt- Untouchables (1935), is one of the prominent work of Mulk Raj Anand which portrays the one day life of Bakha, an outcast or an untouchable in the caste ridden Indian society. This novel brings out the other facade of India before the world. Bakha was an attractive and proud young man but because of his lower caste status in the society he was made to follow the job of his father that is to clean latrines and to sweep. The theme of dress plays a vital role in this novel. Dressing becomes a man's identity in a society which follows the apartheid system.

Bakha and his people were marginalized from the society because of caste. They live in an untidy slum in mud houses with inadequate attires to cope with the situation and minimum requirements to fulfill their needs. The question of equality and that of his unclean surroundings arouse in his mind. The solution he finds for equality and superiority was through the means of dressing. But he cannot go against the lunatic people of India who keep caste above humanity. Poor people were not allowed to wear decent clothes by the upper castes. The Britishers have considered him as a human and the

Muslims also. They have no problems if he touched them but the higher caste Hindus had beaten up him in public for just touching them. Bakha, seen apart from his caste is a gentleman a good brother and a hard worker. But the attires you wear change your outlook. Bakha was interested in Europeans since they consider him as human being. So he started to think that he will be honored if he wears their clothes. He will get superiority in the society just like them. He gets the jackets and the overcoat of the Britishers and he feels that at least he is superior among his people. The onlookers were also unable to believe that someone like Bakha is from a lower class. It is seen in the words of Havildar Charan Singh, *'You are becoming a gentreman, ohe Bakhya! Where did you get that uniform?'*

Bakha knows he is aping the higher castes that's why he feels shy when Havildar puts forth this question and says it's all your bless rather than considering it as his right to dress decently. To escape from the clutches of caste system Bakha embraced the life style of English people. There was distinction in between religion also. The upper Hindus wore dhoti and Muslims wore long white cotton tunic and baggy trousers as like even now. During the beginning of Bakha's day, clothing is used to differentiate the many men that come to use the latrines, *"Men came one after another, towards the latrines. Most of them were hindus, naked, except for loin the cloth, brass jugs in hand and with the sacred thread twisted round their left ears. Occasionally came a Mohammedan, who wore a long white cotton tunic and baggy trousers, holding a big copper kettle in his hands."*

Bakha blindly follows his companion Chotta since he is the lad who wears khaki shorts and tennis shoes. In the eyes of Bakha he is a model gentleman and a smart fellow whom he admired. Bakha always dreamed of being a Sahib and wish to speak their language but his uncle told him if he wanted to be a sahib he needs to go to school. It was not allowed for a lower caste like him. May be he must have felt that living a life of the Tommie's in all ways will offer him a dignified position rather than a mere latrine cleaner and an untouchable. He feels that he will be considered as a human. The Muslim man also allowed him to light a cigarette with much liberty rather than the Hindus. So he felt nearer to them than to the people of his religion.

The missionary colonel Hutchinson was also too kind too kind to him. When he tells Bakha that he is same like as him and he is not a sahib and a padre of the Salvation Army, Bakha replied “yes, sahib, I know”. “To him all the sahibs were sahibs, trousered and hatted men, who were generous in the extreme”. He didn’t know much about the padres and what they did. “To him even the padres were of interest because of their clothes. This padre did not wear a hat like the padre in the barracks of british regiments. But that was of little account. He wore all the other items of clothes that the sahibs wore (115).”

Bakha was interested to convert in to Christianity if he is given the dignity of sahib talking their languages, wearing the sahib’s clothes. Trousers had been the dream of his life since he reminds of the kind interest the trousered man had shown him when he was downcast. Bakha followed the sahib because he wore trousers. The idea of embracing Christianity arose in his mind but the sudden thought of his forefathers made him to stay in his religion. But the words of the missionary that Jesus sacrificed for both rich and poor, for the “Brahmin and the Bhangi” enlightened him that there were no difference between him and the upper caste.

Latter he meets a *desi sahib* who wore a smartly cut English suit he had, yellow gloves on his hands and a white cloth on his buckskin shoes. Bakha stared at him to identify him from his attires but he himself made his introduction. The novel ends on a note of Bakha imaging of getting the machine to flush up the caste system.

We can see in both Channar revolt and in Untouchables the idea of dressing plays a pivotal role. The idea of dressing decently and getting a dignified position in the society was the dream of the lower castes in both these cases. If it was a matter of equality and modesty for Channar women, it was a matter of superiority and enlightenment for the protagonist Bakha. In order to attain a decent position or acceptance from the society they were ready to embrace Christianity and most of the Channar women got converted into Christianity.

The Channar revolt took place to fetch their right to get dressed decently from the upper castes. Bakha on the other hand was bearing all the insults of the upper castes and he find solace and

acceptance in the clothing of Tommie's and they were the one who considered him as a human being and not as a downcast. Here we can see how the idea of acceptance through dressing changes the perceptions of the human being. So Bakha was willing to follow the English customs to escape from the brutal clutches of Hinduism. The Channars were also ready to follow the British and Christian customs to escape from the cruelties of upper castes who treated them brutally as animals and giving no respect or value for their pride and self-respect. Analyzing both the context we can say that your attire plays a role in your social status. You are dignified by what you wear rather than analyzing what you are.

CONCLUSION-Analyzing untouchables by Mulk Raj Anand and Channar revolt it can be concluded that clothing played a major role in the lives of lower castes in the Indian society. They were not allowed to wear the dress of their interest by the upper community. Their dress also played a role in their identity. Paying rent for covering your own body part and considering valueless as a latrine cleaner unregard less of one's feeling as a human is the worst situation beyond words. Both these contexts clearly states he cruelties and emotional turmoil undergone by the lower castes.

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