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Literature as a Device of Human Rights

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Abstract: As we know the powerful always dominates the powerless and tries to snatch the rights of the less privileged. But all human beings are born free and don't want to be let down by others. So there came a universal law of Human Rights to decide some certain principles to lead a peaceful and a saner life because it was in the best interest of the world. But these are not followed in its true spirit and the violation of human rights is observed. We know that literature takes its soup of sustenance from society, so it is natural for the litterateurs to present these incidents in forms of their creative writings. There have been many authors in India and abroad who have raised their voices against the injustices done to the marginalised people around them. Therefore the present paper tries to show that there is an intimate relationship between literature and human rights and literature has been used as a device of human rights in one way or the other.

Keywords: Human Rights, Dickens, Blake, Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Das, patriarchy, untouchability, nuclear proliferation, environment, hunger, women, children.

Human Rights are those ones which human beings think to have for their spiritual, moral and mental elevation and sustenance to pull their life in a sane social order. These rights are supposed to be fundamental to survive; otherwise there would be "anarchy mere loos'd upon" in the world. Human Rights strive to achieve a better and saner world where no one tries to snatch and grab the rights of the others, where everyone is expected to have an understanding of the 'otherness of the others'. The basis of the modern concept of human rights is the slogan of the French Revolution, "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood," (Dhillon 179) says the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was held on 10 December, 1948. Almost all the rights of this universal Declaration are preserved in the Indian Constitution either as "Fundamental Rights" or as Directive Principles. The Preamble, which has been called the soul of our constitution, mentions the essential individual rights as "freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship". Human rights include rights to life, food, shelter, clothes, pollution free air, noise free surroundings, rights to have safe drinking water, rights to franchise, participation in all social, economic and political activities, rights of choice to embrace any religion and the very essential element of democracy is the right of expression. The fundamental rights of all human beings are the rights listed out above. And everyone has a right to enjoy all these because they are absolute, universal and a necessity too. So, it can't be suppressed or no one can be deprived of this right.

But the Denial of Human rights has become a usual phenomena in our country which is an amalgamation of multicultural and multilingual people and where an encounter with ethnic violence, terrorist attacks, political unrest may occur anytime at once thus leading our nation into

a clash of social conflict and putting us into a mess of national perturbation. In our society mostly persists the problem of untouchability, the problem of sanctioning the same equal rights to women which are enjoyed by the male members of our society, and lastly the children which become the victims of the violations of human Rights easily being a soft target. They are usually denied of their rights as a human being.

Human Rights lead us mostly towards the legal, sociological, psychological, philosophical and political arenas of study. But its concept is as old as Art itself. Being related with life, it takes its soup of sustenance from life and in doing so it does not only provide aesthetic or artistic pleasure to humanity but also bears a stamp of social consciousness and human significance in its very face. Simply the art that depicts the various moods and feelings, sorrows and happiness, ups and downs, rise and fall of Humanity in minute details is Literature. Hence, the socially conscious artists transform contemporary history into literature of permanent relevance to mankind. Therefore, Human Rights and literature are interlinked with each other. If we perceive literature from this point of view, we find a long list of litterateurs whose works combine the strain of Human Rights. We may name a few of them like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Das, Bhawani Bhattacharya, William Blake, Charles Dickens, Arundhati Roy, etc.

India is a country of diverse cultures and communities and thus having a rigid caste system since long. So one of the major problems was of untouchability which we got as a legacy after independence and it was a stigma to the socially backward peoples. This social stigma has been a subject of many a novelists in English literature. In this connection Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) is the most prominent and a classic one. He has voiced the agony of the lower classes very poignantly in the novel. This novel was rejected by nineteen publishers for having such an unusual story of an untouchable. And it could be published only after its endorsement by a British writer, i.e. E. M. Forster. There was a genuine concern for the lower strata of society in Anand. So he has raised his voice to provide the same equal rights to the underprivileged which the upper-class people enjoy ceaselessly without any interruption and hesitation. Anand says:

“.....my fictions arose from the compulsions of life of the lower depths, where the rejected in our country have been condemned to live. I have reenacted their tragi-comedies again and again”. (Anand, *Protest* 19)

Untouchable, Anand's first novel is a graphic depiction of the hardships and humiliations that the outcastes suffer. 'It exposes the ugly deformity of the Hindu society' (Babu 31) which considers them untouchables and forces them to live far away from caste Hindus. The novelist exposes the social malaise with surgical precision using the stream-of-consciousness with great finesse. The novel has a good deal of human faces, and more of sweeping and sweepers, but as E.M. Forster says in the Preface of the novel *Untouchable*, 'the book seems to me indescribably clean..... it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it.' (Anand, *Untouchable* 7) The story describes a single day in the life of Bakha, an eighteen year son of old Lakha, the Jemadar of the sweeper of the town and cantonment. Although fascinated by western dress (as we see in his securing a pair of old breeches from an English

soldier and a pair of old boots from a sepoy), he is damned to live in outcastes' colony and his job is to clean three rows of latrines several times single-handedly in spite of stirrings deep inside his soul. 'They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt' (Untouchable:89) and the dream of a better life – 'That machine', he thought, 'which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it' (Anand, *Untouchable* 174), he is a steady and efficient worker. The hard toil has made him strong and sturdy, as Anand says,

“Each muscle of his body, as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass. He must have had immense pent-up resources lying deep in his body, for he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one doorless latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring, pouring phenol. 'What a dexterous workman!' the onlookers said. And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean. He didn't even soil his sleeves handing over the commodes, sweeping and scrubbing them. 'A bit superior to his job', one would have said, 'not the kind of man who ought to be doing this.' (Anand, *Untouchable* 18-19)

During the course of his usual toil, Bakha happens to touch a caste Hindu and he is slapped for it by the latter and subjected to the most inhuman treatment before a crowd. He is called 'Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! Offspring of pig!' That makes him aware of his place in the society.

'Bakha recognizes with shock his social position. It illuminates the inner walls of his mind. He realises that though he possesses like any human being, head and heart, and flesh and blood, he is in the eyes of the world as untouchable.' (George:34)

Immediately after the slap scene, he observes an old Hindu touching a bull and reflects critically on it. Then Bakha learns how the priest, Kalinath had attempted to molest his sister Sohini. That enrages him but his clenched fists soon relax and fall loosely by his side. He knows that he cannot retaliate. Lakha who has accepted untouchability in a fatalistic manner is alarmed by the incident and enquires whether he reacted violently which he feared, would have dangerous consequences—'you didn't abuse or hit back, did you?' to which Bakha replies saying that he did not do anything like that but

'I was sorry afterwards that I didn't.' (Anand, *Untouchable* 18)

What makes Bakha heroic is his dream to fight the curse of untouchability and destroy it rather than meekly surrender to it as seen in the case of his father Lakha and several other members of the sweeper community. Therefore, Bakha sees hope in the three options before him – Christianity, Gandhi's movement against untouchability and the modern sanitary system. In this way, in *Untouchable* Mulk Raj Anand makes a forceful indictment of the evils of a perverted and decadent orthodoxy. To Iyengar *Untouchable* strikes us 'the picture of a place, of a society, and of certain person not easily to be forgotten.' (Iyengar 339)

In the history of Indian English Fiction the year 1980 is now taken as the point from where Postmodernism stepped in (because Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is considered

a milestone in this respect). But the scars of untouchability could not be removed because still it pervades our society badly. In 1997 Arundhati Roy stormed the literary scenario by winning the Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. Velutha, though a marginally cornered person of the society, is the central character of the novel which is the modern version of Bakha because the whole story revolves around him and Ammu, with whom he commits the mistake of falling in love. Though he is much more modern than his former incarnation but he imbibes the same fate, rather to say a worse fate because life sentence is given to him by the evils of society. The only fault of him is that he dares to love Ammu who belongs to the upper strata of society. Velutha belongs to the Paravan community and suffers a lot of miseries at the hands of people who are slaves of age-old casteistic pattern of society. He is too hated like Bakha but when his help is required in technical matters he is welcomed through the backyard of Ayemenem House. Here we can see how the system of untouchability is followed:

“Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched.” (Roy 73)

But the irony is that Velutha and his father are both Christians like their masters because their ancestors adopted Christianity but they are still treated as untouchables and are denied their status as a human being. And here we find the violation of Human Rights. When he is seen with Ammu in the darkness of night, his father informs the incident to Mammachi:

“He trembled his own body like a man with malaria. Mammachi ordered him to stop it but he couldn’t, because you can’t order fear around. Not even in a Paravan’s. Vellys Paapen told Mammachi that he had seen. He asked God’s forgiveness for having spawned a monster. He offered to kill his son with his own bare hands. To destroy what he had created.” (Roy 78)

Velutha did not advance himself in the affairs with Ammu but it was she that advanced to him for having a relationship with him. When his affair is disclosed and he is to be punished for what he has done, even Police plays its foul role under the feeling of casteism and takes law in his own hand to deliver the judgement on the spot. He is killed with severe brutality and nothing worse than it could be:

“His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lips, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered, one has pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breath bright red. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion has paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered.” (Roy 310)

This was the final blow to his life. He could not get the due status in the society which is caste-ridden inspite of having all the humane qualities only because he belonged to the outcastes' community.

Women also pertain to a weaker/vulnerable section of this male chauvinistic society. They have not been given due status and respect in our social structure of patriarchy since ancient times but as ill luck would have it, they have been treated like a soulless, insensitive creature subjecting them to physical assaults, molestations and brutal murders sometimes for money (dowry) and sometimes for lust. Their life becomes encircled in the kitchen and bringing up the children. They are not properly educated. In most cases they are even not fed properly. With the rise of Feminism in literature these issues have been got voiced and proper attention and space has been given. In this reference we may study Kamala Suraiyya (Kamala Das) who is a phenomenon in the history of Indian Writings in English. She had the courage to express feminine sensibility which she stood for. She had articulated the bitter feelings which she got from this so-called male-dominated society. She is a conscious artist raising her voice against the societal oppression of women where even today women have no-say. The strain of the consciousness of human rights may be seen in her writings when she voices her Right to Language which she felt to be intruded upon. In this context she writes in "*An Introduction*"—

“I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone.....”

(Das 36)

She presents her condition, rather better to say the womanly condition, in the male-chauvinistic society when a wife wants love in return of love which is a natural right of a wife but through what mental and physical strain she goes has been described aptly here:-

“I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me.
But my sad woman body felt so much beaten
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully.”

(Das 36)

Here love is pleasure only but her partner does not understand that she is in need of emotional nourishment. The phrase 'a youth of sixteen' reminds us of those days when early marriages occurred in our society (child-marriage which is an offence) and it was and even today is prevalent in our society which is a violation of Human Rights. The harassing attitude of sexual act is quite obvious from these lines where copulation is not done for procreation or pleasure but becomes an act of bearing the tortuous silent acceptance of the male partner's masochistic

behaviour. And here too we find the violation of Human Rights. The line “I shrank/Pitifully” presents the image of a girl afraid of being raped or has already been molested/raped. About the qualities of Kamala Das K.R.S. Iyengar says,

“Kamala Das’s is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world.”
(Iyengar 680)

Arundhati Roy’s women characters also present a very pathetic condition where they have no says in society and are victims of the male-chauvinism and patriarchal system of society. Whether it be Mammachi, Ammu or Rahel, all suffer due to the black shadow of male-domination. When Ammu returns to her father’s home after quitting her husband who had submitted her to the lust of his Manager, Mr. Hollick, Chacko says that she has no “Locusts Stand I” and also says that “What is yours is mine and what is mine is also mine.”(Roy 57) It is ironical enough to see that Baby Kochamma, being a woman herself, plays a vital role in the annihilation of the life of Ammu and did not like even her children, Estha and Rahel. Pappachi is a habitual beater of Mammachi. Mammachi makes a way for the fulfilment of her son’s carnal desires but when it comes to her daughter, Ammu, it is not applicable. She has to renounce Ayemenem House and dies away in a pathetic condition where no one is to mourn over her miserable death.

Another more important and less visible section of our society is children which is our nation’s future. They belong to a weaker group and are easily exploited by the underdogs of society and are exploited as child labours in factories, hotels and as a domestic help. Sometimes they are stolen and trained and engaged in beggary because people easily are swayed away in emotions to see the plight of those children. There are many causes of this situation in our country. Some people don’t restrict the numbers of children in family despite knowing the fact that they can’t afford their proper nutrition and education and thus succumbing to the growth of infantile mortality rate and starvation. Starvation is such a condition for these soft flowers of innocence that they get easily adopting the ways of petty crimes leading to them unsocial activities in future.

The Victorian novelist Charles Dickens has expressed and exposed the tyranny and cruelty inflicted upon them in his literary creations. In *David Copperfield*, he presents the condition under which David and Mileay Potatoer worked in factories and mines of England. Children have been presented as chimney sweepers in *Oliver Twist*. The bitter experience of his own childhood days made Dickens describe the pathos of children’s plight in his novels. It was Dickens who established the theme of childhood or the concern for children in English Fiction. *Oliver Twist* (1838) was his first effort to begin with a focus on childhood. He has tried his best to depict the conditions of children at least in his half a dozen novels like *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times*, and *Great Expectations*. We may find this strain in other novelists too. Some novels are *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Kidnapped* etc. Dickens has exposed the evils of schools, tyrannies of teachers and corruption prevalent in the schools of his times. In *David Copperfield*, Mr. Creakle is a authority of a private school and beats students mercilessly in the name of education. In *Hard Times* he presents Thomas Gradgrind who teaches merely facts and his students are not allowed

to enter the world of fancy and wonder. Even nursery rhymes are forbidden and imagination was tabooed. Ironically enough this type of education system had evil effects on his own children, Tom and Louisa. The Romantics also described childhood in their poetry.

“Along with Rousseau, the Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth, shaped the nineteenth century sensibility towards childhood. The Romantic poets reaffirm Rousseau’s belief in the child’s essential innocence and one’s capacity for joy.” (Desai 6)

The poet of the precursor of the romantic revival William Blake has described child’s joyfulness vividly in his *Songs of Innocence* where child is the subject of almost all the poems and glorifies childhood’s innocence, joys and his nearness to God. But when he grows he loses all the innocence, simplicity and naturalness of his childhood and Blake “attributes the loss to ‘experience’, which he equates with the forces of society, secular and religious.” (Desai 8) The innocence, simplicity and naturalness which are natural attributes of children are lost by the societal oppression inflicted upon them. And there is seen the violation of Human Rights. He is of the opinion that both church and society are responsible for the sufferings of the Chimney Sweepers. In the poem, “*The Little Boy Lost*” he speaks of a boy who is put to death by the intolerant clergy:

“The weeping child could not be heard,
The weeping parents wept in vain;
They stripp’d him to his little shirt,
And bound him in an iron chain;

And burn’d him in a holy place,
Where many had been burn’d before:
The weeping parents wept in vain.
Are such things done on Albion’s shore? (Blake 100)

If we throw a cursory glance over the Indian English Fiction we find that there have been dealt many dominant themes which form the basic element of Human Right. Recently the Indian Government has passed a Bill in the parliament to secure food to everyone. This discloses that even today in our country there are many people who sleep on the pavements of the roads without any food. The theme of Hunger has been presented by Bhawani Bhattacharya in his famous novel “*So Many Hungers*”. The novel depicts the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Quit India movement of 1942. In the words of Shyam Asnani:

“In *So Many Hungers!* no hunger is sated, but in the midst of these ghastly and heart-rending scenes of human sufferings and tortures, life steeped in abject adversities, utter despair, gross injustice and apathetic alienation, what the novelist suggests emphatically is the sanctity of human spirit, its richness and beauty.”(Asnani 16)

Environment has become an issue of Human Rights because it is related with our health and sanitation. So, we find there are many writers who stands committed to the cause of Environment because we are safe until our environment is safe. In this regard Arundhati Roy deserves to be mentioned here. Through her non-fiction writing and active participation in the agitations against

the government's Dam and Nuclear policy, she has raised her voice in the cause of environment. In her famous essay on nuclear proliferation, "*The End of Imagination*", she thinks globally and declares herself as

"an independent, mobile republic. I am the citizen of the earth. I own no territory."

(Roy, *Imagination* 21)

Further she says:

"If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements—the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water—will turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible."

(Roy, *Imagination* 6)

Arundhati's love of humanity may be seen in her writings which make her a global thinker raising the issues of human concerns beyond the barriers of nationality ceaselessly in her non-fictions.

So, we have seen that how literature in its every form pleads for the cause of the downtrodden, women, children, freedom and upliftment of people, environment –which constitute the basics of Human Rights. Whether it be Mulk Raj Anand, Bhawani Bhattacharya, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, Blake or Dickens, all the litterateur are the micro observers who dissect the evil elements to lay bare before us the true picture of the society and shows us the causes which eat up and grab the other's place and rights in society. In one way or the other, they support morally and ethically the rights of humans through their writings. Therefore, we see that literature has been used as a device of Human Rights in a justified way.

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