

Themes and Patterns in Dalit Representation: A Comparative Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

The representation of Dalit identity in Indian English literature has been a contested and evolving domain. Dalits, historically marginalized as “untouchables,” have often been depicted by non-Dalit authors in ways that reflect both sympathy and limitation. This paper examines four landmark Indian English novels—Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1955), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)—to identify recurring themes and patterns in the portrayal of Dalit characters. These novels span six decades of Indian English fiction and reflect shifting literary, political, and cultural attitudes towards caste. By analyzing their representation of humiliation, resistance, social hypocrisy, political exploitation, and human dignity, this study argues that while these works foreground the plight of Dalits, they often filter Dalit identity through liberal-humanist or tragic lenses rather than amplifying autonomous Dalit voices.

Keywords: Dalit identity, caste, marginalization, Indian English fiction, social exclusion, representation.

INTRODUCTION

Caste remains one of the most enduring hierarchies in South Asian society. The term “Dalit” (literally, “broken” or “oppressed”) refers to communities historically relegated to the lowest strata of the Hindu caste system, subject to exclusion, humiliation, and violence. In the twentieth century, especially after B. R. Ambedkar's interventions and the rise of Dalit literature in vernacular languages, the question of Dalit identity entered mainstream intellectual and cultural discourse. However, in Indian English fiction, Dalits have predominantly been represented by upper-caste or non-Dalit writers.

The four novels selected for this study represent different historical contexts and authorial positions: Anand's *Untouchable* emerged during the nationalist movement; Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* was shaped by the Gandhian era's moral reformism; Mistry's *A Fine Balance* reflects diasporic anxieties about postcolonial India; and Roy's *The God of Small Things* interrogates caste in the post-globalization literary moment. Together, they allow us to trace recurring themes and patterns in Dalit representation, as well as the ideological implications of narrating Dalit lives through non-Dalit voices.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: The Dalit as Victim and Symbol of Reform

Published in 1935, *Untouchable* is one of the earliest Indian English novels to place a Dalit protagonist, Bakha, at its center. Bakha, a latrine cleaner, is depicted as physically strong yet socially powerless. His daily experiences—being abused for “polluting” a caste Hindu, being denied entry into a temple, and facing systemic humiliation—illustrate the dehumanizing effects of untouchability.

Themes:

1. **Humiliation and Stigma** – Bakha's identity is entirely determined by his caste occupation.

2. **Desire for Modernity** – His fascination with English clothes and colonial modernity reflects a longing for dignity outside caste.
3. **Liberal Reformist Solutions** – The novel ends with Gandhi’s speech on the removal of untouchability and the suggestion of flush toilets as a technological solution.

While groundbreaking for its time, Anand’s novel tends to portray Bakha more as a passive sufferer and symbol of reform than as an agent of change. The Dalit voice remains mediated through an upper-caste, liberal-humanist lens.

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger*: Caste as Hypocrisy

Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1955) satirizes caste hypocrisy in colonial Bengal. Its protagonist, Kalo, a blacksmith, rebels against upper-caste humiliation by masquerading as a holy man. By exposing the moral corruption of caste Hindus who blindly worship him, the novel highlights the performative and constructed nature of caste hierarchy.

Themes:

1. **Rebellion through Deception** – Kalo’s strategy undermines Brahmanical authority.
2. **Caste as Social Hypocrisy** – The novel critiques the hollowness of ritual purity.
3. **Individual vs. Collective Resistance** – Kalo’s rebellion is personal, not systemic, limiting its revolutionary potential.

Unlike Anand, Bhattacharya uses irony and satire rather than realism. Yet, similar to Anand, his representation lacks an authentic Dalit perspective and instead serves as a vehicle for middle-class moral critique.

Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*: Caste and Class under the Emergency

Set during Indira Gandhi’s Emergency (1975–77), Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995) provides one of the most harrowing depictions of caste oppression in Indian English fiction. The Dalit characters, Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, attempt to transcend their caste inheritance as leather workers by becoming tailors. However, their efforts are thwarted by systemic violence—massacres of Dalits in their village, police brutality, and sterilization under state coercion.

Themes:

1. **Caste-Class Intersection** – Caste oppression is inseparable from poverty and labor exploitation.
2. **Structural Violence** – The Emergency exposes how state power reinforces caste subjugation.
3. **Tragedy and Suffering** – Dalits are portrayed as victims of history, their resistance crushed.

Mistry’s diasporic position allows him to critique Indian society with detachment, but critics argue his narrative aestheticizes Dalit suffering, offering pathos without envisioning emancipation.

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*: Caste and Transgression

Roy’s Booker Prize-winning *The God of Small Things* (1997) presents caste through the doomed love story of Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a Paravan (Dalit). Velutha is portrayed as skilled, intelligent, and sensitive, yet he becomes the victim of both caste and class prejudice. His relationship with Ammu violates the “Love Laws” of caste society and leads to his brutal murder by the police.

Themes:

1. **Forbidden Love** – Caste enforces boundaries on intimacy and desire.
2. **Dalit Masculinity** – Velutha’s body becomes both a site of attraction and violence.
3. **Power and Silence** – Velutha’s death symbolizes the silencing of Dalit voices within dominant social structures.

Roy’s narrative blends postmodern style with political critique. However, like Anand and Mistry, she writes as a non-Dalit author, which raises questions about whether Velutha’s voice is fully realized or primarily constructed as a tragic victim.

COMPARATIVE PATTERNS

Analyzing these four novels reveals recurring patterns in Dalit representation:

1. **Victimhood as Central Motif** – From Bakha to Velutha, Dalits are depicted primarily as sufferers of systemic oppression.
2. **Limited Agency** – While Kalo in Bhattacharya’s novel rebels, his resistance remains symbolic rather than transformative.
3. **Caste as Social Critique** – All four texts use Dalit characters to critique upper-caste hypocrisy or state violence.
4. **Non-Dalit Authorship** – Each author speaks *about* Dalits rather than *as* Dalits, which risks reducing them to symbols of social critique rather than autonomous subjects.
5. **Intersection of Caste, Class, and Gender** – Especially in Mistry and Roy, caste oppression intersects with economic exploitation and gendered violence.

DISCUSSION

These novels highlight the endurance of caste discrimination across colonial, nationalist, and postcolonial contexts. Anand and Bhattacharya reflect Gandhian-humanist reformism, while Mistry and Roy dramatize the persistence of caste in “modern” India. However, the absence of Dalit self-representation remains striking. Unlike Dalit autobiographies such as Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* or Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi*, which foreground assertion and dignity, these novels largely frame Dalit characters as tragic victims or instruments of satire.

Thus, while these works are valuable for keeping caste visible in Indian English fiction, they do not replace the need for Dalit-authored narratives that articulate agency, resistance, and alternative worldviews

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of *Untouchable*, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, *A Fine Balance*, and *The God of Small Things* reveals a consistent pattern in Indian English fiction: Dalit characters function as symbols through which upper-caste or diasporic writers critique social injustice. Themes of humiliation, rebellion, systemic violence, and forbidden desire recur across decades. Yet, Dalit subjectivity often remains muted, mediated through non-Dalit perspectives.

These novels thus perform a double role: they foreground caste as an inescapable social reality, but they also underline the limitations of representation when the subaltern cannot fully speak in their own voice. To complement these portrayals, it is essential to read Dalit literature itself, which reclaims narrative authority and redefines what it means to be Dalit in Indian society.

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