

Segregation of Untouchables in Chaman

Nahal's *The Crown and the Loincloth*

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Abstract

Chaman Nahal is a contemporary Indian English novelist, short story writer, essayist, autobiographer, and critic. The major themes of his writings are partition, freedom struggle, joint family, oppression, discrimination, and so on. His novels mainly focus on social, political, religious, and economical issues. Nahal centers Gandhi as a leading force in most of his novels. His notable work *The Crown and the Loincloth* is the first volume of *The Gandhi Quartet*. In this novel Nahal depicts a caste ridden society divided on the basis of class discrimination and many incidents highlight the lives and sufferings of the marginalized during the freedom struggle. In this novel, Nahal attempts to abolish untouchability through the character Sunil. This paper investigates Sunil's beliefs on non-violence resistance and his strive to eradicate untouchability. As a humanist, Nahal sticks on to the principle of Gandhian ideology and envisions a caste free nation.

Keywords: discrimination, untouchable, segregation, casteism, marginalized.

Introduction

Indian writers in English especially of 1920s, not only focused on the liberation of the country but also for the emancipation of the people from the social evils. Most of the Indian writers during freedom struggle concentrated on the same theme having Gandhi as the center of their works. Indian freedom struggle popularized under the guidance of Gandhi, it changed the entire scenario and motivated everyone to write on social themes such as untouchability, class discrimination, and so on. For example, Gandhi's impact on Mulk Raj Anand inspired him to write the novel *Untouchable* (1935). In this novel, Anand projected the repression of

the upper class to the untouchables and its result. His another novel *Coolie* (1936), pays attention on the desperation of the downtrodden class. In Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Gandhi lives with untouchables, teaches non-violence and motivates them to participate in the freedom struggle. Nahal in his real life was an ardent lover of Gandhian philosophy and advocated non-violence. Most of his novels reflect the socio-economic problems of the society.

Chaman Nahal is not only a contemporary Indian novelist but also the best proponent of Indian Writing in English. He was born in Sialkot in 1927. He was migrated to India from Pakistan during the partition of India and brought up in an Indian environment and culture. He was honored with Sahitya Academy award for his masterpiece *Azadi* in 1977. He is a reputed author of sixteen books which include novels, short stories, and an autobiography. His novels are embodied with ethical and moral values without any touch of exoticism. The themes of his novels are purely Indian which reflects Indian life and culture. Nahal's *The Gandhi Quartet* consists of four books which acclaimed an international reputation. In each book Nahal has presented Gandhi as an omnipresent character with his own opinions and beliefs. His sequel of four novels in *The Gandhi Quartet*, *The Crown and the Loincloth* (1981), *The Salt of Life* (1990), *The Triumph of the Tricolor* (1992), and *Azadi* (1975) are based on the life history of Mahatma Gandhi. The present paper highlights how Dalits are segregated from the upper class people.

Nahal's *The Crown and the Loincloth* is the first volume of *The Gandhi Quartet*. As the title suggests, it was the confrontation between the mighty British Empire (the Crown) and the Indians and their leading force Gandhi (the Loincloth). It makes comparison with Paul Scott's novel *The Raj Quartet*. It also deals with the final episode of British rule in India. Nahal begins the novel with Gandhi's return journey to India from South Africa in 1915. His launching of non-cooperation movement in 1921, is the most dramatic period of Indian History. In *The Crown and Loincloth*, Nahal made a bold depiction of untouchables who have been the victims of social injustice during the freedom struggle. In this novel, Nahal attempts to eradicate untouchability through the character Sunil.

The social evil untouchability has an ancient history. The four Varnas of Manusmriti, the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya, and Sudra played a vital role in dividing the society based on caste. It analyses the professions of the four varnas within the society. Sudras were dictated to serve these other three castes. They were doomed to live away from the higher social groups because their very touch would pollute the purity of those upper class. Untouchability is a snare and social evil, it can be a practice which discriminates a particular

caste of people belong to that particular caste or class. They are menials such as sweepers, gutter cleaners, scavengers, cobblers, and rearer of unclean animals. Therefore, they are physically and socially separated from the society. This immoral practice of untouchability came into existence since time immemorial. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi were the two initiatives who took major effort to refine the untouchables. They became the spoke persons of the untouchables in India. Like Martin Luther king of Africa and Frederick Douglas of United States, they also preached the importance of abolishing caste discrimination and untouchability in India. As a social reformer, Gandhi protested against the social distinctions and injustice of every type practiced in India. He thought that untouchability is a sin against God and man. Mohan Rao in his book *Message of Mahatma Gandhi* quoted Gandhi's words:

There is an inefaceable blot that Hinduism today carries with it. I have declined to believe that it has been handed down to us immemorial times. I think that this miserable, wretched, enslaving spirit of 'untouchableness' must have come to us when we are at our lowest ebb, this evil has staunch to us and still remain with us.... (91)

This research paper investigates Sunil's beliefs in non-violence resistance and his strive to eradicate untouchability. Sunil, the protagonist who lives in a small village called Agitha, in Punjab. He is influenced by Gandhi's manifesto of non-violence. He wants to serve Gandhi and eagerly participates in Gandhi's constructive programs such as spinning, weaving, eradication of untouchability and the uplift of the poor and downtrodden. As an active political worker, he goes to Simla hills to recompense the sufferings of the plantation workers. On every Sunday he organizes a protest against the timber merchants to sense the danger of the problem. As a result, the officials of the district declare the merchants to make a compromise with the labourers. There he sees a cluster of small village called Doms village. People live in that village are sweepers, barbers, cobblers, and washer-men. They are considered as Outcastes. So, Sunil asks Amin Chand, one of the workers:

'What's that, Amin Chand?'

'What maharaj?'

'That village-that tiny village.'

'It is Doms' village, maharaj.'

'Doms' village?'

‘Yes, maharaj-of the untouchables.’

‘Untouchables?’ Sunil stopped, watching the village closely. ‘The sweepers, the barbers, the cobblers, the washermen-that type maharaj, low castes.’ (214)

Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* is also an attested record of the precarious situations of untouchables. In this novel, Anand has projected the predicament, and humiliation of the dalits, due to the dominant social-hierarchy. They existed as outcastes and assigned to menial jobs. Anand’s depiction of the so-called out caste colony visualizes them as a smudged, eliminated, and segregated caste. He says:

The outcastes’ colony was a group of mud walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them.

There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcaste from Hindu society. (Untouchable 1)

Nahal employs an irony to delineate the plantation workers who are being humiliated as untouchables, themselves practicing untouchability. “Here was a man complaining about victimization and was himself hell-bent on victimizing” (215). Sunil regrets that no other sect or religion that discriminates its own members. The upper class neglects the untouchables even though they believe the same God, celebrate the same festival, and observe the same fast. He writes a letter to Gandhi about the discrimination. Gandhi suggests him to live in the midst of untouchables or bring them to live with him. Gandhi replies:

‘I too live in the same shame and humiliation. Only I shouldn’t let the larger issues, the fight for freedom, be clouded by it. When we become a free nation, abolition of untouchability will be the primary aim of my life –as long as I last, In the meantime, think of yourself as an untouchable and befriend these lonely children of God. If they won’t let you live in their midst out of fear, why not bring one of them to live with you? My blessings.’ (216)

Sunil realizes that there are many things to be achieved before independence. He decides to work for the upliftment of untouchables, a cause dear to Gandhi. On Gandhi’s advice, he employs an untouchable named Chandru. He cleans latrines in his village. He invites several dignitaries to dinner. After their delicious meal

they praised the new cook. When Sunil reveals that he is a sweeper, they shocked with anger. They strongly condemn that he is defiling their very existence. Sunil made Chandru to be bold and assured. If the upper class people restrict him to enter the temple, he was insisted to touch the outer walls of the temple in their presence just to annoy them. If they feel polluted when Chandru cross their path or get water from the same well, he would refuse to clean their latrines and let the filthy job to do themselves. Here, Nahal has commented on the heartbreaking conditions of the low caste people who live separately, cook separately, fetch water from separate wells and they have to wait until the upper class people provide them water. Amarnanth Prasad in his essay entitled "Mulk Raj Anand: the Lawyer of the Lowly and the Lost" expresses that:

The law book of Hindu social code domestic life, the pathetic plight of untouchables have no right to go to the temples and no liberty even to listen to the incantations of the Vedas or some other holy scriptures. They were not allowed to study the language Sanskrit which is supposed to be the riches of language. (32)

Sunil looks for an achievement in fighting for a social cause. He is concerned about the health of the untouchables much to the consternation of the timber merchants. With the help of a local doctor he becomes an itinerant medicine man and helps the downtrodden people. He trains them in satyagraha and insists them to run khadi bandars even after his departure from the hills. In spite of Sunil's appeal many fail to realize the importance of wearing handspun cloths and eradication of untouchability. Even though Sunil, the protagonist tried to uplift the life of Chandru, he is forced to send him away. But soon he finds that it is very difficult to eradicate this age old practice. Here Nahal depicts Sunil as a disappointed person.

Conclusion

The Crown and the Loincloth is a fierce attack on the upper class who eternalize inhuman activities against the untouchables. Religion is something sacred. God and religion are common to all. But in the name of religion, in order to make their life comfortable, the upper class forces untouchability on the weaker section of the society. Nahal's picture of Chandru is an authentic example of it. Castes were based on profession in the distance past and have been followed by generations over centuries. But in modern India caste has no significance and man's profession does not determine his caste. After the Independence, the untouchables are radically enriched. Their fundamental rights were denied formerly, have been extended to them. In some remote villages the outcastes are still treated with hatred as revealed in *The Crown and the Loincloth*.

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