

## Literary Prospects of Dr B. R. Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa*

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### Introduction:

Untouchable the novel written by Mulk Raj Anand is a book that has gone on to frame our idea about the lives of untouchables in the first half of the twentieth century. This novel is considered a definitive book as far as understanding the plight of the untouchables of that time is concerned. But we forget one important thing that Mulk Raj Anand was not an untouchable himself and whatever he wrote in his novel was perceived rather than experienced by himself. The torments of Bakha are more the matter of perception than experience. His anger, his frustration and his desire to react is all what the writer feels through his imagination. What actually Bakha wanted and what exactly he felt is never revealed to the reader. That discrepancy between what Bakha actually might have felt and what the reader was provided to read can be addressed by referring to an account given by an untouchable himself living and writing at the same time in history.

Dr Ambedkar in his *Waiting for a Visa* presents an account of himself and his fellow untouchables. This book is more focussed on the reality of the day than mere serving of literary diet added with exaggerated taste of pain and humiliation. The literary decoration may be missing in this account but that is well compensated by first-hand experience.

Unlike the *Untouchable* where excessive torment and frustration coupled with the writer's sympathy drives the story forward, *Waiting for a Visa* is a more natural going work, giving sufficient sanction to the reader's understanding through imagination rather than stressing and loading the account with appealing words and forms of expression.

There the concern of the writer seems to be creating a strong effect of the situation of the protagonist on the reader. Here the concern of the author seems to be presenting the reality he faced without much care for the kind of effect it might leave on the reader. The reader here, has been provided with larger space as the creator of meaning. The writer has well held himself from a narration that tends to pull the reader towards a desired standpoint.

The first section of this book deals with the experience of Dr Ambedkar when he along with his siblings was going to meet his father in Koregaon. His experience on the way with the station master and later with the cart men was traumatic. As a child he saw how people reacted when they learned that he was an untouchable. The faded response of the station master in helping these needy children and the denial of the cart men to drive them to their destination and the agreement finally reached on cost of double fare and driving the cart themselves all seem to be overpowered by the children's strong desire to reach their destination.

The problem of untouchability has not been presented with a sense of urgency but as an essential part of Indian society, where in spite of its presence, lives have to be lived and desires have to be fulfilled. Dr Ambedkar, as a child feels the urge to reach to his father than feeling offended at the treatment people subjected them to. This behaviour of the people offends more the idea of humanity and grown up Ambedkar who toils to present an account of this experience that he had had at a very tender age. The experience of childhood turns into a trauma when he grows up. This is how this account becomes more natural and real. It has kept the childhood memory and the trauma in the adult age apart from each other.

Dr Ambedkar in his childhood was conscious of a few things. He knew that he "was an untouchable, and that untouchables were subjected to certain indignities and discriminations. For instance, I knew that in the school I could not sit in the midst of my classmates according to my rank (in class performance), but that I was to sit in a corner by myself. I knew that in the school I have a separate piece of gunny cloth for me to squat on in the classroom and the servant to clean the school would not touch the gunny cloth used by me. I was required to carry the gunny cloth home in the evening, and bring it back the next day."

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This consciousness was generated in his mind at a small age. He writes how he had to wait for the peon in order to drink water. The absence of the peon meant that he had to go thirsty. The washerman would not wash their clothes not because they were unable to afford the cost but because they were untouchables and the washerman would not pollute himself by washing their clothes. The same was the case with the barber. His sister, instead, would cut his hair and had become an expert barber in the process of doing so.

He had the knowledge of all these practices and he was not especially shocked or surprised by this. What shocked him was his journey to Koregaon where he found himself in trouble because of untouchability. The untouchability that Dr Ambedkar talks about was a matter of course in its routine form but in its extreme form it took a horrible shape.

In the next chapter Dr Ambedkar describes his experience in Baroda where after his return from London he presents himself in the service of Baroda state. He candidly describes how he felt while planning to find lodging— his hesitation to go to his friend's house, given his being untouchable. The entire internal conflict about impersonation, the dire consequences it may lead to has all been well described. This takes this account to a different level. This is reminiscent of books by black writers—*Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, for example.

The horrendous experience that he faced as a result of impersonation lets us see into the reality of the day. The climax of shameful guilt, soul corroding harassment that he faced can even agitate a beast. His foreign educated sensibilities might have been crashed and splintered like broken glass. What he lacked at the moment were people who could assuage him. The price he paid for staying in the Parsi inn destroyed his peace of mind.

The situation he faced can be imagined through his own words: “ They lined up in front of my room and fired a volley of questions . ‘Who are you? Why did you come here? How dare you take a Parsi name? You scoundrel! You have polluted the Parsi inn.’”

A soul harrowing narration of events that took place in the life of a person easily surpasses any piece of literature that is merely based on imagination.

The next chapter describes an incident that took place when he was appointed by the Bombay Government member of a committee to investigate into the grievances of the untouchables. He was allotted a

district for the purpose. The untouchables on learning about the arrival of Dr Ambedkar intended to welcome him in a dignified manner. But as no cartman was ready to take their guest from the railway station to the village, one of the members of the untouchable community had to drive the cart himself. Being novice in cart driving he was making mistakes in the traffic and finally met an accident injuring his guest. At the centre of all these problems was surely the practise of untouchability. These people faced a difficulty in choosing between the dignity of their host and their hospitality on the one hand and the safety of the guest on the other. They preferred the dignity of their guest and their hospitality. Such difficulties emerged from caste system and left their consequent impact on people's conduct leading to harm. The mechanism of one problem leading to another has well been presented in this account. This account shows by example that the problem of untouchability has a far reaching impact on the lives of people who are subjected to it.

The fourth chapter describes the sight-seeing tour of the members of Depressed Classes. They happened to pass through the town of Daulatabad in Hyderabad state. They visited the fort of Daulatabad. While at the fort and having been covered with dust after the long journey they happened to have a wash in a tank near the fort which resulted into an angry and abusive outburst of reaction from the Musalmans of that place as they considered the water of the tank polluted by the Untouchables. The kind of tolerance and patience the untouchables showed there merits appreciation. In spite of all humiliations inflicted upon them by the Musalmans of that place they maintained their calm and avoided any violent clash. But such abusive and humiliating experience does not go without harm. The sensibilities of the people of the Depressed Classes were definitely hurt beyond repair. There was no healing of that in the given circumstances. This constitutes the essence of the frustration that might have built up in the untouchables and Dr Ambedkar has recorded that in entirety.

The sixth chapter presents the story of a Bhangi boy. He worked on the post of clerk in a government office. He was subjected to the worst form of discrimination and untouchability. He could not touch the water pots. There was a separate rusty pot kept for him and filled by a waterman. The waterman did not like the idea of giving him water and he slipped away whenever he saw the Bhangi coming for water. As a result he had to go without water.

He had difficulty regarding his residence. No caste Hindu would rent a house to him. His position as Talati was unacceptable to the villagers and it resulted into abuses and humiliations by the villagers. Consequently he left the job and came back to Bombay.

This account of the Bhangi boy reminds of Dr Ambedkar's Experience while serving the Baroda state. These experiences of government servants tell how it was impossible for an untouchable youth to do government job in towns and cities. Dr Ambedkar presents a vivid description of not just the confrontation but also how the characters felt, what agony they suffered. Their fear and sense of insecurity, the enormous hardships and the courage that they mustered up to face these challenges initially, and later in front of the gigantic monster of caste felt defeated.

#### Conclusion:

This volume presents an account of the social reality of the time of its creation. The suffering and pain are vast and their vastness is felt through this volume. The vivid description of incidents, experiences and internal conflicts and agonies of characters is accurate. The account is so factual and free from any artificial decoration that it dismisses any possibility of falsification. The characters are lived and the incidents are faced even today in the same or different forms. This book is not just a social document but qualifies as a literary document. It has everything that a work of literature is necessarily supposed to have.

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