

Chapter III

DEPICTION OF CHILDHOOD IN DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHS

In the autobiographies there is a multilayered personalized saga of the social transformation of Dalits in India. At one level, it is loving tribute from a son to his father; at another, it gives an intelligent appraisal of the caste system in India and traces the story of the awakening of Dalits traversing three generations; at yet another level, it is reflective of the aspirations of millions of Dalits in India.

A. Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables: My family's Triumphant Escape from India's Caste System*

'*Untouchables*' is a story of awakening of Dalits. It is a story of one Dalit (untouchable) family's struggle, inspired by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar who touched the lives of millions of Dalits and Damu (Damodar Runjaji Jadhav). The author's father, Damu was an ordinary man who did an extraordinary thing; he stood up against the oppression of the caste system by teaching his children to believe in themselves and reclaim their human dignity. Damu's guts and sinews are too strong and his response to Ambedkar's calls to Dalits to "Educate, Unite and Agitate" too complete and all consuming to allow him to live in the past. (Qtd. in *Untouchables*)

Damu comes to Mumbai to escape the tyranny of the upper castes in his native village Ozar, in Nashik District of Maharashtra. His struggle for survival and his transformation under the guidance of Dr. Ambedkar, from servility to awakened self-consciousness, is the main theme of this book. Damu was not a born leader, nor did he ever become one, but he had one exception as he chose to rebel against the prevailing caste system to create his own destiny. An intelligent man, with no formal education, he worked hard to be allowed to live with dignity. Damu is abused and severely

beaten up by upper caste people in his village, for refusing to take out a putrefied body from a well. His forefathers were required to wear clay pots around their necks to keep their spit from polluting the ground, and brooms were tied to their rumps to obliterate their footprints as they walked. Damu's story differs from those Indian Dalit autobiographies which revisit and relive the horrors of untouchability without going beyond. The simplicity of the narrative brings out the misery in the story and triumph of the Damu's family describing various landmarks like, a radical transformation under the spell of Dr. Ambedkar in Damu and his family; their sloughing off of servility and realization of their self esteem; and finally their empowerment through education. Well known economist Stanley Fischer has noted that:

The book eloquently tells the story of a Dalit (Untouchable) family's journey from an Indian village to the Indian and international middle class. It is the story of the genius and determination of the (author's) illiterate father and his stalwart mother, and their remarkable children. It is also a story about modern India and its potential. Even more, it is a moving story about humankind in all its complexity. If you have a burning desire, you can come up in life against all social odds. (In Jadhav 18)

It is a fact that one out of every sixth person on the face of the earth is an Indian. What is staggering and often unknown is the fact that one out of every sixth Indian, which ultimately translates to 165 million people, is an untouchable or a Dalit, the lowest caste position in Hinduism. Over many years these people have been subjected to inhuman cruelties, subsequently having been made lower than animals.

The onset of globalization in India enabled Dalits to raise the issue of discrimination based on caste in international forums. Dalit activists and intellectuals

made out a case for recognition of caste based discrimination in India as being similar to racial discrimination in the west, in the world conference against Racism on 31st August to 7th September 2001 at Durban, South Africa. The debates on caste and Dalit rights at the global level gave a new dimension to the struggle against caste with the emergence of non-governmental organizations and Dalit Diaspora as representatives of Dalits in India. The new visibility of Dalits and the debate on caste in the global arena created a new interest in Dalits and their literature. Narendra Jadhav says:

There is widespread interest in Dalit writing now, all over the world. The upsurge is not because it is politically correct but because people want to know more about the underprivileged sections, about the lives of these whom they knew so little. I was amazed at the range of questions about the caste system that were raised during my public interactions in different parts of France. (26)

The Hindu religion traditionally divides all people into four caste designations upon which wealth, religious access and social power are defined and the Dalit "untouchables" are so low that they do not even reach the toes of caste system. Jadhav, a Dalit himself, provides a concise, extremely readable introduction that opened my eyes to Indian culture, both beautiful and dark, and described the rise of a social and political movement in the last century that is still striving to grant the "untouchables" their true, human rights.

Every sixth human being in the world today is an Indian," begins the introduction to Narendra Jadhav's family history/memoir *Untouchables*, an indispensable opening from which I learned more than the many rapt hours I have spent watching *Bend it*

like *Beckham, Bride & Prejudice* and *Mississippi Masala* combined.

(28)

Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste* explores the world he lived and struggled in through the eyes of his family. It is narrated from the perspective of his father, mother, himself and his teenage daughter. It traces the journey of Damu, the author's father, from a small village, Ozar in Maharashtra to Mumbai. Written in the form of a memoir, the novel bears testimony to the success of a Dalit family in the course of a single generation. It is a story of the metamorphosis of Dalits in the context of the social movement led by Ambedkar. Arjun Dangle suggests that:

In Dalit autobiographies we see varying facets of the Dalit movement; the struggle for survival; the emotional universe of Dalits life; the man woman relationship; the experiencing of humiliation and atrocities; at times, abject submission, at other times, rebellion. (272)

Dalit autobiographies subscribe to the elements of Postmodernism. The protagonists in the post-modern novels suffer from schizoid analysis. Dalit autobiographies succinctly project post-modern propositions. The protagonists in Dalit autobiographies exhibit self-reflexive, self-introspective and schizoid analytical traits. Jadhav's *Outcaste* presents Damu's self-reflexive, scherzo analytical perspectives at the backdrop of strong exploitation. It offers the evolution of three generations of the protagonist's family. Thanks to his grit, hard work and courage, his children and grandchildren fulfill his aspirations, armed with little besides education and determination. It's a story about dreams coming true the kind that audiences all over the world find irresistible. Jadhav says, "The book is in two levels, it's the story of a family on the one hand; it's also about the social metamorphosis that has taken place over the past 80 years". (Qtd. in *Untouchables*)

The novel is a dramatic piece of writing that forces us to acknowledge the inhumanity and injustice of a social order that treats humans worse than animals. It is an expanded version of Narendra Jadhav's best selling Marathi novel *Amcha Baap Aan Amhi*, meaning 'Our Father and Us' written in 1993. Damu was not born a leader, nor did he ever become one, but he had one exception i.e. he chose to rebel against the prevailing caste system and create his own destiny. An intelligent man, with no formal education, he worked hard to be allowed to live with dignity. In his Author's note, Jadhav describes Damu as:

Damu was not a leader but he refused to define himself by circumstances and aimed at shaping his own destiny or 'Damu had no formal education, yet he steered his children to educational heights and inculcated in them the spirit of excellence', or 'Damu was not a guru but he taught his children to believe in themselves and retain human dignity', or 'Damu was often humbled. Yet he maintained goats are special offerings, not lions' or 'Damu was an ordinary man, they said but he did an extraordinary thing; he stood up against the tyranny of the caste system'. (31)

Damu is one of the few assertive, independent Dalit characters in Indian writing in English. In the opening pages of *Outcaste*, we see Damu doing his *yeskar* duties (village duties to Mahars) in his native village, Ozar. We see Damu running in front of the Mamledar, senior revenue official, announcing his arrival. Later, Damu was asked to guard the dead body of a woman found floating in the well. He was not allowed to go back home to inform his wife and also to have his food. He was abused, insulted and forced to stay near the well the entire night. The next morning Fauzdar (a police officer) arrived and asked Damu to get into the well to

draw the corpse out. Damu refused to do so under the pretext that he was not supposed to touch the dead body of an upper caste woman. The author declares:

The caste system is so deeply ingrained that change can, at best, be cosmetic. The caste system was disposed by God and not by mortals. It has such a powerful sanction behind it that no laws, no reform movements, and no revolutions will ever change it completely. (35)

Damu was beaten up by the Fauzdar for refusing to obey his orders. He was stubborn and determined. He speaks out,

In spite of these inhuman traditions, I am not going to abide by such traditions. I am a man of dignity and I will not go from house to house begging for *Baluta*. What are all of you going to do? Kill me? (37)

Change, however, does take place, little though it may seem. He decides to leave his village that very night. He runs away along with his wife Sonu to Mumbai, “Together, they started walking towards freedom”. In Mumbai Damu struggled hard, Jadhav narrates, to survive through the Great Depression in the 1930s. He worked in the Railways, the Port Trust and some textile mills to earn his living in Mumbai. Inspired by Ambedkar’s call for Dalit emancipation, Damu participated in Dalit movement. He had actively involved in the Nasik Temple Entry Movement in 1930, in Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, in the Buddhist conversion movement in 1956, Ambedkar’s funeral procession and other activities of the Dalits. He inculcated in his children an ambition to succeed in life through education and hard work. Damu refused to be cowed down by all the odds in his life. He had always declared himself as the master of his own will. He is presented as a self made man in many ways. The character of Jadhav is again that of an assertive, self made Dalit in the text. He

inherited the philosophy of his father that a human being is a master of his own will.

He asserts:

If others look down on me in their belief that my caste is low, it is their problem, not mine. I certainly don't need to torment myself over it. I pity them, for they are the victims of their own obsolete prejudices. (38)

Dalit identity gave Damu's family confidence and pride to reject their ascribed status as low caste Mahars. The making of this modern identity as Dalits is possible because of two historical processes. One is the journey of Damu from his village to the urban space, Mumbai, and the other is the Dalit movement led by Ambedkar.

Damu's granddaughter feels that, "Now I think, I know who I am. I am Apoorva, not tied down by race, religion, or caste". Throughout the narration runs the clarion coined by Dr. Ambedkar, which unites all Dalits, "Educate, Unite and Agitate". (Qtd. In *Untouchable* 46)

Damu sees this slogan as his personal mission and, though illiterate himself, he educates his children to the best of his abilities. He even tries to educate his wife Sonu, something that was unheard of in those times. Fortunately, the children fulfill his aspirations and rise to high positions in their chosen careers, a great triumph for a man who has devoted his life to bettering their prospects.

Babasaheb Ambedkar's teachings have a profound effect on Damu and Sonu and they realize that they are beginning to develop a sense of self.

Truly, we sensed a change in the way we carried ourselves. We proudly proclaimed ourselves Dalits, with our chin up, and we looked

everyone in the eye. We began to lose our former servility, associated with being born in low caste. (Jaffrelot 82)

The simplicity of the narrative brings out the pathos in the story. Damu is shown in this novel as a man of strong character with forward looking approach and progressive views. He instills a greater degree of confidence in his wife. He wins his wife on his side when he explains the purpose of living and meaning of life. He, in short, makes a scholar out of his wife. Finally, his wife Sonu understands him and joins him in every stage of upheaval and conflict. Despite the romantic relation that exists between them, the marital life has been based on mutual trust, love and sacrifice. The tenderness with which Damu treats his wife is unusual for the times and extremely touching. Asked about the qualities she liked most in her husband, Sonu makes a telling comment on the poor expectations of women in her generation. "He never drank, never abused me. Best of all, he never raised his hand to me." (49)

The book ends with the realization that further change is required. The world has to stop treating Dalits as different. It is up to the present generation to carry the torch lit by the tears and blood of their ancestors. In this Memoir, the author examines the issues, which are so deep and penetrating in a manner, which is poignant. From one angle, it is an attack on the social structure of Hindu society. If this novel is studied in another angle, it is a call made to unite all the oppressed and humiliated people to empower themselves by devoting themselves to education and finally to stand as one nation of brotherhood to fight against tyranny, subjugation, slavery, oppression and those who perpetuate and sponsor the notion of birth defined elitism which is not only irrational and illogical but also ridiculous.

"*Untouchables*" alternates primarily between his father and mother's first person accounts, and while Damu is the "official" focus of this biography, it is Sonu

whose story grounds the tale. Where Damu is presented as a myth maker, visionary, and activist granting himself ultimate commitment to the Dalit cause, it is Sonu's telling ripe with *bhakri* and *sheeral*, *memsahibs* and *kumkum* that lends veracity and spice, making *Untouchables* a far more human tale. Here is the story of Indian womanhood, and its combination of ignorance, innocence, and steel is movingly told:

Echoes of a South Asian "American Dream" abound, and it is one of the book's most valuable elements the gift of a new perspective on an old tale. Similarly, there are *facts* here that will shock many western readers. The mystical, beloved, peace bringing Gandhi? (Jaffrelot 86)

Not always, it turns out, such a nice man. Much of this book deals with the battle between tradition and acceptance and the need to make, or claim, something better and something new. And yet it is the small moments of nostalgic clarity (Damu describes receiving his first pair of slippers, and of finally being able to provide shoes for his own sons) that resonate.

All that said, the novel often seems too long: a too generous creation myth of the author's father, of his hardships and triumphs, of the obstacles he surmounted through his (apparently) unflagging force of will. (Qtd. In *Untouchable*)

But then, Damu's arrival in Mumbai has a charming, Dickensian quality as 'street urchin' phase, adoption by a wealthy white *Gora sahib*, a tiger hunt, the fantasy of fair haired *Missybaba*. The few chapters that describe the culmination of the family's (and thousands of Indians') spiritual and cultural awakening are somehow quietly powerful amidst the madness of the events being portrayed.

Ultimately, this autobiographical novel takes us through the very earliest years of the author's life, and only in the very last pages do we see the author and his father

together in a series of short, deeply loving scenes. Even the modern success depicted in the transcendently grounded epilogue is a clear testament to the success of Damu and Sonu's long and difficult lives.

The book portrays Ambedkar as the icon for democracy of Dalit awakening. Ambedkar being quite relevant today, Aamir Khan's *Satyameva Jayate* has been criticized in some quarters due to the absence of any mention of Dr. Ambedkar. Quite ironic is the fact that more Indian citizens today seem to search for Dr. Ambedkar than Mahatma Gandhi. Dr. Ambedkar remains an inspiration and icon for Indians, whether they are Dalits or not. However, the imprint and influence of Dr. Ambedkar remains especially strong on Indian Dalits, for whom he is a true hero. (Star T.V)

B. Vasant Moon's Growing up Untouchable in India: A Voice for the Voiceless

Vasant Moon was born on 22 January, 1932 in Nagpur city of Maharashtra. Since his childhood he enjoyed the proper upbringing. In Maharpura area of Nagpur, he completed his primary and secondary school education. As he grew, he became more careful about his studies. For a few months he worked as a Deputy Accountant General in Post and Telegraph office before he had completed his M. A. He wrote a few small dramas and staged them in his town Maharpura. Later on, he got a job of County Commissioner. First he worked in Madhya Pradesh, and then worked in other cities of Maharashtra. He was so attached to his community that he committed himself till death. He considered entire neighborhood as his family. He got everything in it. He was influenced by Wamanrao Godbole and Dr. Ambedkar. He converted from Hinduism to Buddhism along with his followers on 14th October, 1956. He is also

well known for his autobiography and his editions of Dr. Ambedkar's Writing and Speeches in English. He lived his entire life in cities.

Vasant Moon candidly writes about the poor in his vasti (neighborhood) with whom he was most familiar. He truly immersed himself in the sub world of the injured. His intense feelings for the suffering masses of India color his fiction at every step, and it becomes a major influence in making him a staunch believer in Dr. Ambedkar, the champion of the untouchables. Vasant Moon's writings thus lend a powerful voice to the voiceless and powerless Dalit community who have put up with centuries of suffering. *Growing up Untouchable in India* is the testimony of their suffering and social ostracization. In his writing, Vasant Moon establishes that to be marginal is not to be powerless, but to be powerful.

There is much in Vasant Moon's story of his vasti, his childhood neighborhood in India that would probably be true of any ghetto anywhere in the world. There is hunger and deprivation, to be sure, but also a sense of community, an easy acceptance of petty crime and violence, the saving grace of sports and organized activities led by caring adults, the off again on again aid from relatives, the inexplicable cruelty and unexpected generosity, and escape through education. But there is much here that is peculiarly and vividly Indian as well:

Primary among these is the factor of caste, a hierarchical system unrelated to race but based on ancient principles of hereditary pollution and purity, with Brahmans the purest and Untouchables the most polluted. Second is the presence of a hero so important he is described as a "wave," and surely no despised group has ever had a leader as meaningful as Dr. B. R. (Babasaheb) Ambedkar was and remains for India's awakened and ambitious Dalits. Third is nature, with Moon's

compelling descriptions of Nagpur's heat and the vivid joy brought by the monsoon. (Moon 21)

Indeed, every tree, every fruit, every nook and cranny of the world in and around the vasti plays an important part in his story. Dalit literature, poetry, plays, and autobiographies have been one of the most important developments in the culture of India in the past thirty years, yet little has been translated for a Western audience. Vasant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India*, the first Dalit autobiography to be published in English, is a moving and eloquent testament to a uniquely Indian life as well as to the universal human spirit.

Dalit autobiography is a recent phenomenon in the genre of autobiographies and it differs from the content and theme of the mainstream autobiographies, as it is largely associated with the Dalit consciousness, Dalit society, Dalit movement and its progress. It is different in the style of writing, use of particular language, etc. Dalit autobiography is a kind of subjective narration by a Dalit writer in which more importance is given to the social life than the writer himself, but common social life is analyzed through the writer. The aims and objectives of these autobiographies are different as they are not written and published for the self gratification or self glorification. "Dalit autobiographies serve as a weapon for creating a social change and awareness in an unequal society. Likewise, Malagatti says, "We are choosing memories that create social change". (93)

The main purpose of the Dalit autobiographies is the emancipation of the oppressed and exploited people, as Dalit literature is one of the integral parts of the Dalit movement. Dalit literature is not a recent one but it has been there for centuries. Since the Dalits were not recognized, their writings were relegated to the background. Gradually, in the twentieth century it came into public arena, and in the post-

independent India it gained great momentum. At present, it is one of the most discussed subjects at national and international level. The term Dalit is defined in *Growing up Untouchable in India* as:

The literal meaning of it is the masses that have been depressed, downtrodden, and exploited economically, socially, culturally in the name of religion, gods, goddesses and other factors. Dalit is not a caste. (Qtd. In *Growing up Untouchable in India*)

Glorifying the term 'Dalit', Marathi Dalit writer Baburao Bagul observes that "A Dalit is the hero of the modern world. A Dalit is the centre of today's revolutionary activities. Dalit means revolutionary; Dalit means proper change."

It is quite obvious that the people who are ignorant, unaware, weak, and powerless are harassed and deceived by the non-Dalits. At the same time, the Dalits are in search of their self identity and have started being assertive and self respecting.

The Dalit autobiographies like *Taral Antaraal*, *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*, *Joothan*, *Baluta*, *Ooru Keri*, etc. are very famous. They portray the realistic Dalit and non Dalit life. They have been revealing the pseudo dignity of Indians and falsifying notion of unity in diversity. They have been examining and depicting the manipulative and pretentious ideology of the mainstream literature which has always been spreading that India is free from the caste system and the practice of untouchability.

As far as Indian social structure is concerned, there have always been two kinds of the denizens-one representing the 'colonizer' and other the 'colonized'. The Western colonizers colonized all the Indian societies and oppressed them. Their oppression was imposed on the Indians since when they came to India. But the non-

Dalits have been exploiting and deceiving the Dalits, from time immemorial. So, the system of colonization was already in India, and it is still there. Although Dalits are constitutionally free, they are somehow or the other controlled by the caste Hindus. Shankarrao Kharat, a famous Dalit autobiographer and intellectual narrates how his father was enslaved by the non-Dalits. The conversation that goes on between his father and Kharat himself at the moment when his father was forced to look after corpse without having food and water for a long time indicates the cruelty of enslavement.

No, son, I'll only have time to eat my bread when everything is over with this corpse. Not before that! "But when will it all be over? And how long will you go without food? To my questions, Anna (Kharat's father) replied," The village chief was here a little while ago. He told me that the head constable has arrived in the village. But he is dining. He'll come only when he has finished eating and drinking. When the corpse is fetched out of the well, the inquest will be held. Then well be free. (Qtd. in *Poisoned Bread* 73-74)

Moon has written historical and social books. *Life of women in Buddha's Period (1989)* is one of his powerful pieces of writing. In India, the Dalits have been converting from Hinduism to other religions. The benefit of education and an alternative 'caste free' religion has given the Dalits confidence, faith and an improved quality of life. Ramanathan notes that:

From the psychological point of view, conversion has divergent effects. When adoption of a new religion provides satisfaction of material and psychic needs which affiliation to the older religion could not give, it seems to strengthen faith, and consequently, identity. (65)

Similarly, being a Dalit, Moon converted to Buddhism with the mass conversion. In his *Life of Women in Buddha's Period*, he has shown the life style of women during that particular period of Buddhism. He asserts that the period of Buddhism was quite favorable and convenient to ensure equality for women. In that period, there did not exist any oppressive, unequal and separate laws for men and women. In the beginning of that period, there may have been such separate laws and their practice to some extent. Before Buddhism, there was no equality between men and women. In the course of time, the equality came in to existence during the Buddhist period. Again, this period of Buddhism, the unequal treatment crept into the society. Therefore, according to Moon:

The Buddhist period was the first period in which for the first time, women were given full freedom and were treated equally. In the same period the duties of a daughter, wife, mother, widow, woman laborer, and none were considered ideal. So, he shows the egalitarian nature of Buddhism. (34)

His next book is *Buddha Dhamma Pradeep*. The title of the book itself shows that it too is about Buddhism. Moon points out that religion like Hinduism and Christianity have faith in the existence of soul and Buddhism says that there is no soul.

The book deals with the renunciation of Lord Buddha and its proper causes. It differentiates between the duties of followers of Buddhism and those of its nuns and monks. At the end of the book the concept of non violence is explained in detail by Moon. He says:

According to Buddhism, there are two ways of killing living beings a desire to kill and a need to kill. If a person happens to have any desire to kill any living beings, it is violence. But if it is his or her need to kill, then it cannot be called the violence. (43)

His another important book is *Dalit Movement in the Central Provinces before Dr. Ambedkar (1987)*. It portrays how the Dalits in that particular part of India strove for social, political, religious, and educational development. They always tried to make progress in the society, according to their own possible ways. Among them Kalicharan Nanadagavali played the leading role. In Moon's writings, the readers may know the life of pre-independent Indian Dalits, and the Buddhist way of living in its period and how those people were influenced by it.

Like Moon, Malagatti's pieces of writing are also about the Dalit life in Karnataka. In his novel, *Kaarya*, he portrays a real picture of the Dalits' day to day life and their usual habits. It depicts how the Dalits are ignorant and unaware of the world. They are lost in their narrow limited world.

In the next book *The Gift of Cow and Bonded Labor*, he points out the superstitious Dalit people and the hypocrite behavior of the Brahman with them. The Brahman hypocrites have been befooling them and retarding their progress. Still the same inhuman system exists in India.

In *The Tenancy Act*, Malagatti portrays the pathetic and miserable life of a Dalit man. It deals with the strategies of a Dalit to progress in his life and how his strategies fail, and how he gets caught in a debt while he attempts to make progress. At last, in a fit of frenzy, he ends his life. Malagatti shows that acts like tenancy can be dangerous for the ignorant and the poor Dalits.

His *The Copper Coin and the Well Water* also reveals the hypocritical life style of the caste Hindus. The treatment, which they give to the Dalits, is not reasonable. In this text Malagatti shows that animals like pigs are dearer to them than the Dalits. They can accept the well water in which a dead pig floated, but if ever a Dalit happens to touch even the well, then he or she has to pay a price for the act. Moreover, the well should be purified.

Malagatti's next book is a collection of poems, *The Dark Cosmos*, in which he portrays the realistic picture of the life of the Dalits and the non-Dalits in Karnataka. All the poems touch almost all aspects of a Dalit. It shows how the Dalits too are human beings and self respecting who make attempts to come up in life.

Through Moon's and Malagatti's writings, the realistic account of the Dalit history and the Dalit contemporary world is depicted. Moon's writing deals with the religions other than Hinduism, but Malagatti's is about the Hindu people and their sphere.

Vasant Moon's autobiography presents us with a powerful personal and collective memory of caste oppression and struggle in India from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the decades after India's independence from the British in 1947, several trenchant testimonies by writers from India's formerly 'untouchable' castes have been published, but few have been translated into English. During the anti caste political resurgence of the 1970s, many Marathi writers from untouchable castes in the Indian state of Maharashtra, including Vasant Moon, began to call attention to an oppressed status by identifying themselves. Since then, the term has gained currency as a self chosen name of political and cultural identity for former untouchables throughout the country. (68)

The translation of Moon's work from Marathi brings to a broader audience what has been a crucial Dalit contribution to Indian historiography and literature.

The Hindu caste system, which forms the backdrop of Moon's narrative, operated on a graded, hereditary scale of purity and pollution, with Brahmans (priests) as the 'purest' and Dalits as the most polluting. Along with having to engage in unwaged labor in the fields, Dalits were also relegated to work that was considered ritually unclean, such as the disposal of dead animals, upkeep of crematoria, cleaning of latrines, and tanning of leather. The latter occupations made their touch and even shadows contaminating to caste Hindus, and Dalits existed literally as 'outcastes' living in the margins of villages in Indian society.

Man and his place in society have always been a matter of concern to a writer. A true artist must have the capacity to have an insight into life and should be aware of his surroundings and environment. He cannot afford to live in an ivory tower when humanity is writhing in pain. Vasant Moon is a realist whose social vision was shaped by time, place and the circumstance of the contemporary period. He is writing with a mission to put an end to hypocrisy, cruelty, insensitivity and injustice prevailing in the society.

After the conquest of northern India by the Aryans, the aborigine population was either driven to the south or enslaved. This element of the Hindu Aryan society was the out caste class or the subaltern. Its function was to do the menial job of removing human excrements. Aryan culture insisted upon enforcing racial exclusiveness, physically as well as spiritually. The term subaltern owes its origin to Antonio Gramsci's writings and underlines a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, caste, race and culture. It was popularized by Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak's essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1985). According to her, the subaltern cannot

speak. For her, subaltern is not just a classy word for the oppressed. In an interview, she clarifies:

Everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern. (45-46)

Thus the word subaltern signifies deep meaning. She argues that to work for subaltern is to bring them into speech. Vasant Moon was deeply influenced by Dr. Ambedkar, the champion of the poor. He rejected the domination of one class over the other on the basis of superiority in the hierarchical order. He stood against the subhuman status granted to the low class people by the people in the ‘centre’ who do not choose to acknowledge filth, squalor, cruelty, laziness and sensuality. Vasant Moon’s voice is for the voiceless, the subaltern.

The concept of Untouchability is one of the most difficult issues for non Indians to understand. They fail to appreciate that there are groups of people who are by birth permanently impure, not to be touched, given the work that is polluting, relegated to the margin of society and yet necessary for the maintenance of that society. This concept bears some relation to racial or ethnic divisions elsewhere, but is far more systematized in the culture of India. An advocate of the downtrodden, and the underprivileged, Vasant Moon exhibits in the novel an acute concern for the subordinates in terms of class, gender, caste, office and in other ways. A character Maniram, a young Mahar, was fearless from childhood on. As an adult he came to the gymnasium, and the ranks of wrestlers started to form. A preplanned quarrel started between the Mahars and cow herds. “You bastard scavenger, don’t you have any respect? The Mahars were caught by surprise”. (71)

Class distinction and the aristocratic system are repugnant to him because they check the natural and free current of fellow feelings which should flow uninhibited from one man to another. His friends and classmates helped him a lot by giving him clothes and food. He felt no shame in accepting the help, but the pride in the Mahar boys made them reject the scholarship for the 'Harijans' from government. They disliked to be called as 'Harijans'.

Untouchability is deeply rooted in the Hindu belief system. It commutes that:

A touchable person would be defiled, if he touches an untouchable. This injustice had been practiced by the Hindu society for long. The touchable communities, until the present time, have not accepted the untouchables as fellow human beings. Though the Hindu spirituality depicted in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and smritees has emphasized on "Human Equality, Enlightenment, Uplift, Love and Kindness" to all not only to human beings but also for every living creature, generally this spirituality has remained untouchable to the Hindu society. (78)

Mahatma Gandhi had painfully called this evil "a disgrace on Hinduism". Gandhi's idea to uplift the untouchable by changing Hindu's hearts was never materialized. In the democratic India, even in the beginning of the 21st century, untouchability still exists in one form or another. The priest of every religion knows that the concept of untouchability is highly irreligious. As most of them are enveloped by a kind of spiritual emptiness, they lack the moral strength to fight against it. In fact some of them are even happy to fish in the troubled waters in which the untouchables are struggling to float. Vasant Moon says:

On every Thursday a big market without a fair was held in kamathi. An abundance of Muslim goons loitered there. They were fascinated by untouchable girls. If any beautiful girl came into the market, the Muslim goon tried to kidnap her. (49)

Rejecting the practice of untouchability, Swami Vivekananda wrote that the caste system is opposed to the religion of Vedanta:

Caste is a social custom and all our great preachers have tried to break it down. From Buddhism downwards, every sect has preached against caste and every time it has only riveted the chains. (Qtd. in *Growing up Untouchable in India* 31)

In *Growing up Untouchable in India*, Vasant Moon highlights the social wrongs to which we have subjected a large number of our brethren whom we have declared as untouchables. The status of an untouchable is, considered incomplete and imperfect “Once, several boys laughed at such impure pronunciation, but the teacher’s attention went specifically to me. He came over and gave me a powerful slap on my left cheek. I swallowed the insult and kept quiet”. (81)

His soul was rigged with innumerable wounds inflicted on him by the casteism in the society. His whole body and soul writhed under the pressure of casteism and ached to establish its identity. After passing eighth standard, most of the Brahman boys would be put in the A class, which was English Medium. The Brahmins were considered more intelligent and capable. As an untouchable, Vasant Moon was entitled only to the leftovers of the Brahmins:

I felt like taking the science class. My thought was that if Brahman students took it, why shouldn’t I? However, when I asked the science

teachers, they said, 'This subject is very difficult; you will not be able to manage it. (85)

Vasant Moon expresses a sympathetic and insightful view of women through his mother Purnabai. Through the image of his mother he conveys the message that the poor becoming the underdog is a matter of economic determinism, but it can be reformed by love, compassion, sympathy and a humane consideration of man as man. The sufferers are not victims of fate or God, but of society, which is man-made. It is universally accepted that human happiness is attained only by harmonizing the hardship of life which is mainly undertaken by the women. Dalit women are doubly marginalized as Dalits and as women. Vasant Moon's mother is a typical example:

After she left Pestonji's bungalow she quickly got a job in a second Parsi home. This family paid three rupees a month. One day Vasant's mother was given the son's clothes to wash, "The colors faded, so one and a half rupees were cut from her pay. (95)

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