Character and Identity Formation: Representing Dalits in the Indian Novel

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Introduction

“We live in a wonderful world that is full of beauty, charm and adventure. There is no end to the adventures that we can have if only we seek them with our eyes open.” – Jawaharlal Nehru

Nationalism in India offered hope to a people where men, women, the rich and the poor come together to imagine a country of their own. During colonization the British viewed Indians as second-class citizens and denied them their independence. In response, the nationalist movement wanted to develop a nation that included everyone regardless of race, socio-economic class, caste or religion. The movement allowed leaders to dream of a country that had the potential to be great. However, as in most places, this dream was difficult to achieve when colonization remained deeply ingrained in the mindset, culture and history of the nation. This being said, the desire for unification illuminates the progressiveness and hope of a country trying to define itself. In India, the 1930s were filled with promises for a country that would unite its diverse demographic. While there was initiative to create unity across India, there was also a subsequent uncovering of the many conflicts within the nation-state.

The issues that surfaced during the nationalist movement, such as caste, gender, and religious discrimination, still persist in modern-day India; however, many people now have lost hope. The biggest change from the 1930s to the present day is people’s attitudes towards their nation-state. As India becomes a global entity, people have largely abandoned the romanticized notions of nationalism and are confronted with the complexity of India. One of the main conflicts that continues to persist is the inequality of the caste system. The caste system is a hierarchal system that bestows privileges to certain groups of people based on their religious

associations. While the caste system is illegal today, the historical stigma continues to affect many citizens’ social and economic status in modern India. At the height of the nationalist movement people believed that an independent nation would change the lives for ordinary men and women; however the nationalist leaders’ promises never came to fruition. Thus caste, religious and class discrimination still happens in the present day.

The Indian novel has an important role in representing the inequalities that persist in the nation. The novel has been crucial in getting the daily struggles of the common man exposed to the nation. However, the caste system is represented differently in novels of the nationalist movement (1930s) and those of the present. Because the nationalist movement represented a hopeful time in Indian history, the nationalist novel participates in political debates by depicting the issues that need to change under colonialism, as part of the demand for independence. This differs from today’s novel, which uses satire to illuminate the prevailing discriminations after Independence. In this paper, I will compare two novels from these periods, which focus on the formation of Dalit identity. I position the authors in such a way that they are held responsible in defining not only their nation, but also the characters within it. This analysis will allow me to explore the different realms of developing one’s identity and ask the question of whether an identity can truly be regained through literature?

The novels that I focus on are *Untouchable* by Mulk Anand and *Serious Men* by Manu Joseph, which I juxtapose to explore whether constructing an identity is possible through literature. Both novels are products of history. *Untouchable* reflects the nationalist movement in the pinnacle moment in Indian history and *Serious Men* reflects the Dalit community within contemporary India. Anand uses the Dalit as a vehicle for political and religious reform whereas Joseph empowers Dalits to expose the cynical truth of contemporary India. Both authors
use realism to depict the lives of their Dalit protagonists, yet they have different impacts on their audience.

Anand, for instance, uses realism to show the morose reality of the Dalit figure. He portrays the daily adversities that a Dalit must endure because of his caste. This image of the Dalit has multiple effects on his projected readers. For both the Indian and western reader it expresses a sense of pathos and pity for the Dalit figure. Anand chose to use realism in this manner to reveal the need for reform in Hinduism for the betterment of the nation. *Untouchable* is representative of its nationalist history. Although Anand is successful in his approach, he does end up ignoring the character that he is advocating for, the Dalit himself. The style of realism that Anand uses becomes problematic in relation to the identity of the Dalit, yet at the same time it is important to acknowledge the power that his novel had on Indian literature as well as the nationalist movement.

Joseph also uses realism but includes satire to portray contemporary India. His use of satire transforms our sense of realism and gives authority back to the Dalit figure. Joseph’s style of writing changes our perception of the Indian nation as well as of his protagonist. He presents a reality that is cynical and corrupt, yet it is delivered in a light-hearted manner that does not define India but illuminates its complexities. As an Indian novel written in English, it presents India as real – as both beautiful and complicated. Joseph is able to break new ground for the Indian novel because it represents the identity of the nation through the Dalit figure. His protagonist is empowered and refuses to be silenced because of his caste. Joseph allows him to use his oppressive position, as a Dalit, as the source of his mobilization.

The first chapter will discuss Anand’s attempt to define Dalit identity, while revealing his shortcomings because his primary intention is to reform the nation. Anand’s use of realism is
driven by its nationalist agenda that, I argue, clouds Dalit agency. The second chapter will focus on Joseph’s use of satirical realism and how that transforms Indian literature as well as the identity of the Dalit. Both novels use political debates between Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) and Mohandas Karachand Gandhi (1869 – 1948) as a platform for tension. *Serious Men* mirrors Ambedkar’s ideals for Dalit liberation and empowerment through religious conversion. By contrast, *Untouchable* opposes conversion as the only means of empowerment and sides with Gandhi’s ideologies for religious reform. Both historical figures are important in the formation of the Indian novel and the nation. In contrasting the novels, I will reveal how the Indian novel is always transforming itself to reflect the nation’s current state. The power that the Dalit protagonist has in Joseph’s novel merely reflects the change within India. The novel is a product of its time and because of that, it has a responsibility to the nation, the character and the world to depict India’s reality. This shows a genre that is always changing and pushing itself to depict its country and the people within it.
Chapter 1: Realism, Nationalism and Caste in Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable

“Literature does not see the individual as something apart from society, but considers him as a social unit, because his existence is dependent on the society as a whole. Taken apart from society he is mere cipher and non-entity.” –(Premchand, qtd in Ahmed 2)

During the rise of the nationalist movement, there was a trend in Indian literature to reflect social concerns. The organization that spearheaded this reform was the All-India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA), who believed that writers had the social obligation to not only reflect on their reality but to also “question orthodoxies and existing power relations to reveal something problematic about life” (Ali, qtd in Ahmed 2). Ahmed Ali, a progressive writer, stated the importance of the collaboration between the nationalist movement and literature in an address to the AIPWA conference:

And as progressive writers it is our duty to produce literature which will not be bloodless and anemic, but pulsating with fresh blood, throbbing with new life –a literature with will envisage the future …We should not write for just a section or class, but join hands with the struggling humanity, and address those millions of human beings who are living in hunger, poverty, and squalor, for they are our public today, and they are our audience of tomorrow (Ali, qtd in Ahmed 3).

Through literature, the AIPWA attempted to repair the socio-economic adversities that many Indians faced. The AIPWA transformed the novel into a space where conversations about class, discrimination and poverty could be discussed in order to imagine a better future for India. The AIPWA believed that gradual reform would compel the privileged to make the necessary
changes to approach the problems at the core of their society. The AIPWA defined the Indian novel as a text that engaged with the reader on a social and emotional level, thus provoking change on a national sphere.

The emphasis on social protest during the nationalist movement allowed the novel to point out important flaws in Indian culture and society. For instance, there was a focus on the untouchable community (known as Harijans in Gandhian terminology, and in the present day as Dalits). Traditionall, the Hindu caste system was a systematic way of implementing social structure. There are four varnas, meaning ‘kinds’, the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (peasants). Dalits exist below this hierarchical system considering them ‘outcaste’. The system originally established non-kin dependent labor (Kulke and Rothermund 19-21). This type of labor became an integral part of early Indian civilizations because it provided everyone a role that would contribute to the greater need of the community.

What problematized this social order was that it prevented upward mobility and ascribed prejudices to lower caste Hindus, in particular to the jobs they were allowed to have. For instance, they were required to perform manual labor, the least desired occupation. The Dalit community was also responsible for the removal of human waste. In the social structure, the Dalits’ positions were essential to maintaining public hygiene—they were responsible for cleaning the streets, the latrines and sewers (United Nations Commission on Human Rights). Dalits were considered to be a tainted demographic because of their proletariat position and social status. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated and banned in Hindu social life. Priyamvada Gopal states in her article, “The Machine: Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable” that “Dalits were distinguished precisely by their invisibility and ritually enforced physical

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2 To remain consistent, I will use the present-day terminology, Dalit, to refer to the untouchable community.
segregation from other members of society” (Gopal 50). For example, Dalits were not allowed in publicly shared grounds such as schools and temples and they were forced to live outside of the community. These forms of treatment restricted the Dalits from upward mobility and civil rights.

The treatment of Dalits contradicted the mission of the nationalist movement. However, different nationalist leaders had different views on how to solve the problem of caste and unite the nation. Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), who was India’s first Prime Minister, proposed a secular government where national identity would supersede local identities. He wanted to create an ‘Indianness’ represented by the nation-state. He stated, “The hundred and eighty years of British rule in India were just one of the unhappy interludes in her long story; she would find herself again” (Nehru 52). Nehru acknowledged the history of the British rule, but he did not allow its presence and effects to determine the identity of India. In Ashis Nandy’s article, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance,” Nandy describes the Nehru’s government’s efforts to create a secular nation. He shows how the ideology of secularism was associated with slogans like “we are Indian first, Hindus second, or we are Indians first then Sikhs” (Nandy 68). Nehru’s push for secularism withdrew him from controversial conversations around caste because he championed equality for all Indians, including Dalits, and women. Secularism was Nehru’s approach to end caste discrimination and unite the nation.

Nehru’s approach differs from that of Gandhi, whose “religious tolerance came from his anti-secularism, which in turn came from his unconditional rejection of modernity” (Nandy 87) Gandhi grew up in an upper-caste Hindu family and was trained as a lawyer in England who then practiced in South Africa for twenty years. He returned to India in 1915 and became the leading figure of the Indian Nationalist movement (Gopal 43). Gandhi was determined to turn nationalism into an ‘all-India’ phenomenon that would include not only the elites and upper
castes, but also the poor and lower-caste citizens of India. Unlike Nehru, Gandhi did not want to modernize India. Instead, he wanted to revert back to the fundamental essence of India – an India rooted in simplicity and spiritualism. Gandhi stated, “I pray to Suryanarayan3 that India may not turn away from her civilization … please do not forget our ancient civilization” (Gandhi 103-104). Gandhi saw the essence of India in the villages but not in modernity. Gandhi went into the villages of India determined to unite their residents regardless of their caste.

Leaders like Gandhi attempted to eliminate the negative treatment of Dalits and declared it to be unethical and a sin. In his efforts to bring people together, he rejected Western clothing and only wore a loincloth. In response to a Muslim who accused him of indecency, he replied:

[The loincloth] will go when men and women of India help me to discard it…I wish to be in tune with the poorest of the poor among Indians…If we wear so many garments, we cannot clothe the poor, but it is our duty to dress them first and then ourselves, to feed them first and then ourselves (Tarlo 75).

Gandhi’s loincloth was an embodiment of the nation’s poverty. He attempted to dismantle caste division through his clothing. The loincloth became a symbol for his ideas of the nation. Gandhi was able to physically wear his ideals for the future of India. He refused to wear any other clothing but the loincloth until Dalits were treated equally – which unfortunately meant that Gandhi wore it for the rest of his life.

A third figure in this debate was nationalist leader B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar, like Gandhi, was also a major influence in the nationalist movement. He became the voice for the Dalit community and a leading figure for Dalit rights. He stressed his concern in his message

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3 Suryanarayana is the name of the Hindu sun god
given to the first issue of the journal *Harijan*,

started by Gandhi, on February 11, 1933. In the message Ambedkar states:

The outcaste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of caste system. Nothing can help Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of Hindu faith of this odious and vicious dogma (Keer 227).

Ambedkar toyed with the idea of conversion for multiple years at the height of the nationalist movement; however, it was not until October 16, 1959 that Ambedkar converted to Buddhism (Viswanathan 224). Ambedkar believed that the caste system was inescapable and the only way out was through conversion. Ambedkar felt that “the recovery of Dalit agency through conversion to Buddhism suggests alternative conceptions of nation and community that resist being encompassed by preexisting, received forms of the state and its apparatus” (Viswanathan 216). Ambedkar’s concern was the autonomy of Dalit identity and cultivating an identity that did not have the stigma of historical oppression and dehumanization. In this way he disagreed with both Nehru and Gandhi on the caste issue.

Because of the centrality of caste to the question of Indian nationhood, the figure of the Dalit became the protagonist in several Indian novels as part of the literary movement to effect change in Indian society. According to the progressive writers, in order for independence to foster, there had to be equality for people of different castes. The portrayal of a Dalit’s trials and tribulations would invite a new attitude and treatment towards this ostracized group of people. Their lives became the focal point of a new genre as well as a new nation. Nationalist writers

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4 During the civil disobedience movement of 1930, Gandhi started the English newsletter *Harijan* in order to educate people about the conditions of the untouchable. Gandhi coined the name “Harijans” instead of the term “untouchable”; Harijan meant “the Children of God.”
variously adopted Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar’s ideologies and used realism to represent the lives of India’s poorest citizens, in order to provoke change within the elite community. As a result, the novel became more than a prose, but a manifesto for coexistence among all castes and religions.

Through the novel, the nationalist message transcended the realm of politics and entered the homes and hearts of many literate Indians. Realism allowed writers to depict the lives of Dalits, thus illustrating the injustices towards this particular group. Through literature, Dalits were given a voice. Yet at the same time, it is important to point out that it was a voice constructed for them. Due to the strict social structure of the caste system, Dalits were excluded from receiving an education – with a few exceptions, such as B.R. Ambedkar. The lack of education prevented them from having agency over their own narrations, and because of this, progressive writers felt inclined to use literature as a tool for social change, on their behalf.

An important novel in this project was Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, published in 1935 at the height of the nationalist movement. Anand was born in Peshawar. He studied at Khalsa College in Amritsar before continuing his education in England. As a progressive writer, he used vivid realism to depict the lives of those in the Dalit community. In the 1930s, nationalist Indian literature focused on shaping Indian identity. To recreate an Indian identity there had to be a separation from colonial power, culture and ideologies. This separation is fundamental because it allowed people to define themselves outside of British constructions of India. For Anand, literature played an important role in the reconstruction of the Indian identity. As he stated to the second AIPWA Conference:

The task of building up a national culture out of the debris of the past, so that it takes root in the realities of the present, is the only way by which we will take our place among
those writers of the world who are facing with us the bitterest struggle in history, the struggle of the people of the world against Imperialism (Anand qtd in Ahmed).

Anand is suggesting a universal objective to end imperialism through literature. He wanted to use realism in particular to depict the lives of the poor under imperialism. Realism allowed Indian writers to illustrate the problems in Indian culture and society under colonialism in order to expose the flaws that needed to be reformed in the new nation-state. This allowed literature to enter the world of politics and social change.

Anand’s purpose in writing Untouchable was to change the perception people had of Dalits. This was inspired by a family tragedy caused by the strict laws of the caste system. Anand’s aunt, Devaki, committed suicide as a result of her ostracization by an orthodox Hindu society for visiting a Muslim woman (Sharma 88). His aunt’s death triggered Anand to want to reform Hinduism and the nation. He states, “formal religion provided no worthwhile answer for the inquiring mind, and that in order to be free, an Indian needed to be free of the social restrains imposed by our society as much as from imperial rule” (Anand, “Genesis” 11). Anand comments on the social constraints of Hinduism to show that discrimination are not derived from Hinduism but from the people. This is reflective in Gandhi’s work as well, which argues for coexistence on the social level.

Ostensibly, Anand uses his Dalit protagonist in order to continue Gandhi’s message of coexistence. After Anand initially wrote Untouchable, he travelled to India for Gandhi’s perspective on his novel. Anand recalls his experience in his essay “Why I Write.” He states:
The Mahatma allowed me to read portions of my novel to him … he felt that I had made Bakha a Bloomsbury Intellectual\(^5\) and he advised me to cut down a hundred or more pages and rewrite… I revised the book during the three months in the Sabarmati Ashram\(^6\) … I read the new novel to the old man, who more or less approved (Anand, “Why I Write” 8).

Anand’s interaction with Gandhi illuminates how central he felt his novel was to the nationalist cause. He represents his Dalit protagonist in order to make him human, and thus an equal part of the nationalist movement.

However, I argue that Anand’s attempt to exhibit the identity of the Dalit figure also shows the thin line between depiction and victimization. Anand states:

As a writer, I have tried to drink from the sources of love in our people, especially poor people, and to give them my own exuberant passion… My own personal gain has been that much inner happiness has come to me through the very act of creative writing, which has sustained me in the face of tragic events of our time, because in absorbing life one understands its disequilibriums. That is why I have always considered literature and art as the instruments of humanism. (Anand, “Why I Write” 9)

Indeed, even though Anand advocates for social change and reform in his characterization of Bakha, his Dalit protagonist, he does so by stripping Bakha of his own identity, autonomy and

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\(^5\) The Bloomsbury group was an influential group of English writers, intellectuals, philosophers and artists. [http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/70024/Bloomsbury-group](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/70024/Bloomsbury-group), accessed 28 Apr 2013

\(^6\) Sabarmati Ashram was one of the residences of Gandhi from 1915-1933. It was located in the Sabarmati suburb in Gujarat. Gandhi wanted to disconnect from modernity and at the Sabarmati Ashram he was able to farm, spin khadi and live simply. Gandhi said, “This is the right place for our activities to carry on the search for truth and develop fearlessness, for on one side are the iron bolts of the foreigners, and on the other the thunderbolts of Mother Nature. [http://www.gandhi-manibhavan.org/relatedlinks/sabarmati_detail.htm](http://www.gandhi-manibhavan.org/relatedlinks/sabarmati_detail.htm), accessed 22 Jan 2013.
voice. Although this is Bakha’s story, he loses his agency by becoming a subject of victimization rather than empowerment. Anand fails to write for the Dalits, but instead he uses them as a tool to inspire nationalism. Realism is used in Untouchable to highlight the struggles of Dalits in order to provoke pathos and sympathy. This chapter outlines the complexities of Anand’s representation of his Dalit protagonist. I will argue that although Anand writes Bakha into the nationalist narrative, he simultaneously robs him of his personhood. Even while trying to empower Dalit identity, he portrays them as weak and complacent to societal norms.

Untouchable is the story of a day in the life of Bakha, an eighteen-year old bhangi (sweeper). Anand characterizes Bakha as a product of colonization, revealed through his admiration of western culture and customs. Untouchable takes place in the outcaste colony of an archetypical rural village in India. Anand uses realism to depict the lives of the Dalit community. This reality is manifested through the perspective of Bakha as he attempts to exercise his autonomy in a society that only views him as an outcaste. He lives in an outcaste colony marked by its lack of clean water and simplistic mud houses. The story begins with Bakha cleaning the latrine for the upper-caste Hindus in the village. Anand also illustrates Bakha’s daily interaction with his friends, family and people in his community. Throughout the day, Bakha is constantly discriminated against because of his caste. He is publicly beaten for polluting a Hindu temple and has his food thrown into a dirty gutter. He discovers that a priest is molesting his sister, Lakha, and he is humiliated in front of his peers. Finally his father throws him out of the house because he did not fulfill all of his daily duties.

Bakha’s day is a maelstrom of doleful events. His situation seems to be inescapable until he happens to come across a nationalist rally whose audience is united regardless of caste. In the
rally, Gandhi is speaking to the Dalit (or Harijan as he called them) community about reforming Hinduism to end caste discrimination towards Dalits. Anand uses fragments of Gandhi’s speeches to enhance the nationalist rally. Gandhi states, “I shall only speak about the so-called ‘Untouchables’ whom the government tried to alienate from Hinduism by giving them a separate legal and political status” (Untouchable 146). Anand is presenting a debate that many nationalist leaders had on whether there should be separate legal and political status for the Dalit community in order to create equality. This scene also illuminates Gandhi’s attempts to dismantle the chasm between castes in order to unite the country. The nationalist event becomes inspirational to Bakha because he is able to feel that he finally belongs to a society.

In many ways, then, the driving focus of Untouchable is the nationalist movement. In his representation of Bakha, Anand shows how Indians are alienated from their own identities. From this perspective, Bakha represents India; as the narrator states, “Bakha was a child of modern India…Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement…he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life.” (Untouchable 11). This is reflected in his appearance; he wears the uniform of British and Indian soldiers – their overcoat, breeches, puttees and ammunition boots. In his appearance, he tries to adopt British identity. Likewise, the narrator states, “He didn’t like his home, his street, his town, because he had been to work at the Tommies’ barracks and obtained glimpses of another world, strange and beautiful… he had built up a new world, which was commendable” (Untouchable 78). Anand uses Bakha to show the consequences of colonization and the ways that it can strip a person of his or her Indian identity. In his description of Bakha, Anand illustrates an India without an Indian identity to show his readers how detrimental such a lack can be.

7 A ‘Tommie’ is a term used for the British.
Anand does not harshly criticize Bakha for wanting to aspire to western ideals because for Anand, the problem lies within society at large, as well as Bakha’s own circumstances as a Dalit. Anand suggests that Bakha’s lack of Indian identity is thus partly a reaction to the discrimination he faces in India. For instance, unlike caste Hindus, “the Tommies had treated him as a human being” (*Untouchable* 9). In the oppressive nature of colonization there is an understanding that all Indians are subservient; thus the British treat Bakha as they would all Indians. Ironically, then, from Bakha’s perspective he feels a sense of empowerment in assimilation.

Anand also uses realism to humanize Bakha. He paints Bakha as a human being—a quality that is restricted from Bakha because of his caste. This begins with his physical appearance. The narrator states:

His dark face, round and solid and exquisitely well defined, lit with a queer sort of beauty…so that you could turn round and say: “Here is a man.” And it seemed to give him nobility, strangely in contrast with his filthy profession and with the sub-human status to which he was condemned from birth (*Untouchable* 20).

Anand’s diction in his description of Bakha illustrates two important aspects. Firstly, Anand attempts to humanize Bakha and simultaneously show how he is marginalized from society. Anand starts with Bakha’s physical appearance because it is universal. Everyone has a conception of what makes one human— their face, their body, and even beauty. Disregarding Bakha’s caste, Anand is able to create a character that is still human and deserves to be treated as such. Anand shows how the treatment of Bakha as ‘sub-human’ is unjust because it is one that he has no control over. Anand’s characterization portrays the Indian novel as a tool for political and social reform rather than a mere fiction that has no influence on the readers’ reality. Yet at the
same time, Anand uses terms such as “dark” and “a queer sort of beauty” which further marginalize Bakha from upper-caste Hindus and, furthermore, eroticize him. Thus although Anand emphasizes Bakha’s humane qualities, his comparison is at least partly reliant on stereotypes that dehumanize Dalits. In this way, Anand does not show readers anything that is particular or unique about Bakha himself, as an individuated character.

Anand also shows the hypocrisies of Hinduism, illuminating how reform needs to happen both in the public and domestic sphere. Anand is able to highlight Bakha’s dehumanization by contrasting his treatment to that of a sadhu, or Hindu ascetic monk. A sadhu is typically shirtless and wears an ochre-colored dhoti. The sadhu’s hair is untamed and long, alluding to the idea of a wandering monk. The sadhu is dedicated to achieving moksa (liberation), the fourth and final asrama (stage of life), through meditation and contemplation. Many Hindus believe that the austere practices of the sadhus help burn off their karma and are thus seen as benefiting society (Melton 282). In turn, sadhus spend most of their days begging on the streets for food and money in exchange for blessings. Many Dalits also beg for food, water and money; however, they do so only because society has degraded them to such an extent that they have no other means of livelihood.

Anand illuminates this hypocrisy in the novel when Bakha and a sadhu are at a doorstep begging for food. The woman of the house treats the sadhu with respect and compassion because he is a holy man; however Anand shows that she only treats him well to benefit her own needs. She states, “please accept this, the house is all right; he [Bakha] didn’t really pollute it. I wonder if you have a cure for my son’s fever” (Untouchable 73). Her interaction with the sadhu differs from the way she reacts towards Bakha begging for food. To Bakha she states, “May you die… what have you done to earn your food to-day, you or your sister? She never cleaned the lane
morning and you have defiled my home. Come, clean the drain a bit and then you can have this bread” *(Untouchable 73)*. The women’s reaction to Bakha illustrates the power dynamic in Hinduism. Due to Bakha’s caste, he has to work for his survival, unlike the *sadhu* who is given food because of his religious importance. While both men are begging on the streets in order to survive, Bakha remains a Dalit and his status is further reduced in the eyes of his receiver because of his caste. By juxtaposing these two figures, Anand suggests if one can treat the *sadhu* with respect and dignity, it should also extend to the Dalit.

Anand’s nationalist message is confirmed in the novel’s ending, with Bakha stumbling upon a nationalist rally. Here, he enters a pseudo-utopia where he is treated as an equal. He describes “men, women and children of all the different races, colours, caste and creeds” *(Untouchable 136)* who were gathering in the rally. This space is drastically different from the humiliation and dehumanization that Bakha has encountered throughout his day. This is shown in Anand’s reenactment of Gandhi’s speech. Gandhi states, “I am an orthodox Hindu and I know that the Hindus are not sinful by nature, they are sunk in ignorance. All public wells, temples, roads, schools, sanatoriums, must be declared open to the Untouchables” *(Untouchable 149)*. Gandhi is rallying for the end of discrimination towards Dalits, which reinforces the euphoric feeling that permeates the space. Anand is portraying the ways that Gandhi’s version of nationalism has the potential to bring the nation together. He attempts to depict a space that allows Bakha to feel as if he has entered a world where he is no longer discriminated against because of his caste.

This nationalist vision is furthered emphasized in the conclusion of the novel. The final scene can be read as a merging of uplifting Dalit identity with celebrating Gandhian ideas of nationalism. The narrator states, “There was everybody going to meet the Mahatma, to pay
homage to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi…They were just going; the act of going, of walking, running, hurrying, occupied them” (Untouchable 136). The scene illustrates Gandhi as the unifying element in the nationalist movement. They ran towards him because in their eyes, he was the embodiment of something larger than themselves. The narrator describes the herd as “determined to crush everything” in order to “escape to Gandhi” (Untouchable 137). Gandhi becomes the savior for people to live in a world of unity and coexistence.

Most critics read this final scene as the light at the end of the tunnel for Bakha’s doleful life. The novel comes to a close with the reader ready to trust the nationalist movement to change the lives of Dalits. Bakha leaves the rally inspired to spread the philosophy of Gandhian ideology and morality. He states, “I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us” (Untouchable 157). Anand makes the conclusion uplifting and transformative to Bakha by acknowledging Gandhi’s power and influence in the nationalist movement. Anand ends the novel with the idea that Gandhi’s message is universal. As Chirantan Kulshrestha writes in his article, “The Hero as Survivor: Reflections on Anand’s Untouchable,” “the tentative ending raises the hope that Bakha has stepped out of the misty confusion of his arduous, twelve-hour autumn day into a mellower season which may promise maturity, emancipation, and well-being” (Kulshrestha 90).

At the same time, throughout this scene, although having entered a euphoric space of equality, Bakha experiences an undisputed feeling of difference from the crowd: “He became aware of the fact of being a sweeper by the contrast which his dirty khaki uniform presented to white garments of most of the crowd. There was an insuperable barrier between himself and the crowd, the barrier of caste” (Untouchable 137). Anand attempts to depict a space where discrimination against others based on caste does not exist; however, this scene illuminates how
even in an equal and peaceful gathering caste difference will still be present. Bakha is aware of this separation because it is so engraved in his social outlook that it becomes impossible to expel his untouchability.

Likewise, the novel’s ending shows the conflict between a universal understanding of the nationalist movement and Anand’s attempt to give agency to the figure of the Dalit. Anand uses Bakha as an example for the nationalist movement rather than an active voice within it. This is shown in his proclamation of his untouchability:

They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too…It is only the Hindus, and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (Untouchable 52)

This is a key moment in the novel because Bakha is confirming his own identity. Bakha is saying that he belongs to a community, one that is different from the beginning of the novel where he identifies with an unachievable identity – namely the British soldiers. Yet Anand appropriates Bakha’s voice in confirming this identity; he re-silences it through Bakha’s lack of understanding of the nationalist movement. The narrator states, “he had heard that Gandhi was very keen on uplifting the Untouchable. Hadn’t it been rumoured in the outcastes’ colony, lately, that Gandhi was fasting for the sake of the bhangis and chamars? Bakha could not quite understand what fasting had to do with helping the low-caste” (Untouchable 140-41). Anand refuses to develop Bakha’s identity because his empowerment means the devaluing of the universality of Gandhian ideals. Anand’s characterization of Bakha is solely for the purpose of evoking pathos from his readers. He creates a weak character for the nationalist movement in order to generate change. The problem with nationalist literature is that it leaves out the
individual. Although Anand writes about the individual, the individual is merely a backdrop to the nationalist message.

Anand’s intentions in uniting the country are deemed as positive, yet in doing so he suppresses the voice of the Dalit. He uses the Dalit as a political object rather than developing his agency and empowerment. This silencing of Bakha occurs again when Bakha becomes enraged when a Brahmin priest touches his sister inappropriately as she was cleaning the temple’s courtyard: “the son of a pig!’ Bakha exclaimed. ‘I will go and kill him’” (Untouchable 63). At this moment, the readers witness Bakha’s anger, which they have not seen before. However, it is short-lived:

His eyes caught sight of the magnificent sculptures over the doors … the sense of fear came creeping into him. He felt as if the gods were staring at him. They looked so real although they were not like anything he had ever seen on earth…He bent his head low.

His eyes were dimmed. His clenched fists relaxed and fell loosely by his side

(Untouchable 63-64).

Here, Bakha realizes he cannot do anything to avenge his sister, Lakha – but not because of his position as a Dalit, but because of the divine powers of the gods. It is as if instinctively, Bakha wants to confront the Brahmin priest, but Anand interjects, assuaging Bakha’s anger with his own religiosity. This is a point where Bakha’s true emotions are suppressed because of the ideals of Hinduism alongside the nation.

I suggest that in this scene, the nationalist movement turns into an idolization of a person, thus disregarding the main purpose of the nationalist movement: liberation from the British. Gandhi and his mission have taken the spotlight and he is seen as the symbol of the nation rather than the nation itself. His behavior, words, and lifestyle, in many contexts, become the format for
the ideal nation-state. This becomes problematic because it goes against the ideologies of democracy and agency. Gandhi becomes the definition of the nation, therefore investing an excessive amount of power in a person. Anand depicts this through his use of realism:

It was as if they knew, by an instinct surer than that of conscious knowledge, that the things of the old civilization must be destroyed in order to make room for those of the new. It seemed as if, in trampling on the blades of green grass, they were deliberately, brutally trampling on a part of themselves, which they had begun to abhor, and from which they wanted to escape to Gandhi (Untouchable 137).

This scene shows the violence that is involved in creating a new nation. As the people are running towards Gandhi they are metaphorically destroying their values of the past, their identities and their present in order to rebuild a nation that reflects Gandhi’s vision. Anand describes the people in the rally as if they are possessed. Gandhi seems to have a control over the people that allows them to lose themselves in order to achieve a new self.

I would like to further this idea and suggest that in Anand’s attempt to rebuild Hinduism for the betterment of the nation, he loses the individuality of the Dalit figure. Gauri Viswanathan draws a similar conclusion in her book Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief. In her chapter “Conversion to Equality” Viswanathan criticizes Anand for his belief, evident in Untouchable, that the way to achieve Dalit liberation was through repairing discrimination within Hinduism. Even though Anand tries to rebuild the reputation of Hinduism, Viswanathan points out that he neglects the agency of the Dalit. She states, “Anand’s narrative alienates and marginalizes the assertion of Dalit will” (Viswanathan 220) because of his approach to Dalit equality. In Anand’s attempts to define and reveal Dalit identity, he merely confines it to the symbol of the nation. This is depicted in Gandhi’s speech during the nationalist rally where he
describes Dalit emancipation as step towards swaraj (freedom). Gandhi states, “Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the Untouchables and the protection of the cow. When these two desires are fulfilled there is swaraj, and therein lies my soul deliverance” (Untouchable 149). Although Anand states that his “characters are concrete human beings and not generalized symbols” (Anand “Sources” 21) the nature of his novel is to endorse reform along the ideologies of Gandhi.

In order for Anand’s novel to align itself with the nationalist narrative, Untouchable suggests, the characterization of any individual has to be contained. In Anand’s article “The Sources of Protest in My Novels,” he addresses his reluctance to give his characters autonomy:

The novels about human beings need the author, and others, men, women and children, in the whirlpool …If the novelist liberates his characters, and they take charge of their own destinies, fiction may release their inner sentiments and feelings and action, dissolve the taboos of religion, or the state, and reveal their predicaments, which by themselves may lift the burden of pain and anxiety and make for transcendence which is ecstasy (Anand, “Sources” 28).

Anand believes that a character’s growth is dependent on the development of the story. Anand emphasizes the idea of the collective, but in order for the story to be unique each character must stand independently. This is why even while representing Bakha, the larger message of nationalism overwrites Bakha’s development throughout the novel. This novel still leaves unanswered the question, Where is the space for the Dalit in the nationalist narrative? This changes the progressive reading of Anand’s novel because it questions his purpose in representing Dalit identity. Was it to uplift the Dalit or was it merely a political idiom in which to reform the nation?
This ambiguity might be better understood through the writings of George Orwell, an English novelist and journalist who was an acquaintance with Anand in the 1930s, when they both worked for the BBC in London. Orwell’s works reflected his patriotism, his distrust of intellectuals, and his fear of a totalitarian future. There are numerous factors that connect Orwell and Anand other than their work at the BBC (Rodden 2). Susheila Nasta writes about their friendship in her article “Sealing a Friendship: George Orwell and Mulk Raj Anand at the BBC (1941-43).” She makes many comparisons between Orwell and Anand, from their political views to the similarity in their work. Nasta states, “They were clearly ‘moving in the same direction’ and were ‘powered by the need to show their middle-class readership what it is really like to be at the bottom of the social pile’” (Nasta 16). This comparison is important because it suggests that Orwell’s views might have influenced Untouchable, which illuminates the ambiguity embedded in the novel’s conclusion.

Orwell’s influence on Anand is shown in his aversion, despite his interest in social revolution, towards intellectuals in the political realm because he felt that they could not be trusted. Wilson Carey McWilliams’ article “George Orwell and Ideology” argues that Orwell believed that “Intellectuals [were] dangerous as such since they yearn to make their thought rule the world” (McWilliams). He describes a top-down approach of a belief controlling the mass and the problems that arise from this type of authoritative leadership. In his essay “Reflections on Gandhi,” Orwell states:

> In Gandhi’s case the questions one feels inclined to ask are: to what extent was Gandhi moved by vanity –by the consciousness of himself as a humble, naked old man, sitting on a praying-mat and shaking empires by sheer spiritual power –and to what extent did he

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8 George Orwell was born in Motihari, Bihar, India. His original name was Eric Arthur Blair. His importance to this thesis is in his writings on the Indian nationalist movement.
compromise his own principles by entering into politics, which of their nature are inseparable from coercion, and fraud? (Orwell 1349)

“Reflections on Gandhi” gives a detailed characterization of Gandhi from Orwell’s perspective. This biographical account serves as a way to humanize Gandhi, thus revealing the human-like qualities in the “saintly” portrayal of Gandhi. Throughout his essay, Orwell raises important questions about Gandhi’s position in the nationalist movement. He illuminates this disconnect between spiritual power and politics, which reveals the hypocrisy in Gandhi’s message.

Orwell’s interpretation of Gandhi is gestured toward in the conclusion of the novel. Anand portrays two different spectrums of the nationalist movement: one that is uplifting and has the ability to spread into the hearts and minds of all citizens within India, and the other which includes masses of people running towards Gandhi without reason or purpose. In the latter, Gandhi is a type of god whose people have no agency over his or her own destinies. As Anand states in his article “The Sources of Protest in My Novels,” “A new kind of religion was then emerging in my novels, a religion of love for people … Worship of each character became a passion behind the writing. I accepted all the strengths and weaknesses of the people” (Anand, “Sources” 21). If Anand, in his novel, creates a new religion that reflects the love of people, than this scene complicates his own ideology because his novel represents the nationalist movement rather than the individual.

Yet I argue that through Bakha, Anand questions the motives of the nationalist movement. He has the ability to uplift the nationalist movement while also recalling Orwell’s overwhelming concerns about Gandhi’s effect on the citizens of India. It is important to realize that Anand’s ending is ambiguous. On one hand Bakha succumbs to Gandhi’s influence, but it is also assumed that Bakha does not know any better due to his status in society. In this sense,
Bakha is merely an object to Anand. Anand is not concerned as much in Dalit identity as in his primary job, as a progressive writer, which is to change the perspective of his audience. This leaves Bakha and the Dalit community as victims that will continue to be used by both society and literature. The day in the life of Bakha shows pity and pathos surrounding the treatment of Dalits; however it only emasculates and victimizes Bakha through the process. Through realism and the nationalist narrative, Anand sacrifices the cause of the Dalit community.
Chapter 2: Satire, Realism and Characterization in Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men*

Although India has been independent for over half a century, the caste system continues to be a theme in the modern Indian novel. However, some things have changed. Today, instead of the nationalist narrative that provokes pathos in the audience, there has been a shift in Indian literature. For instance there is no longer a movement for progressive writing in the novel. Today’s novel is dealing with broader issues than politics. Likewise, the style of writing has transformed. The novel has become less collective and more focused on the individual. In the following chapter, I will show how the caste system plays an integral role in modern India through literature, even as the novel has evolved in its representation of the Dalit, who is now much more empowered and who assumes sovereignty over his or her environment and life.

This shift is shown in Manu Joseph’s first novel *Serious Men*, published in 2010. Joseph has been a journalist for fourteen years and is based in Mumbai. He was the deputy editor and Mumbai bureau chief of OPEN Magazine. Previously, he was the national feature editor of *The Times of India*. He has been shortlisted for 2010 Man Asian Literary Prize, society magazine’s Young Achiever Award and nominated for The Hindu Best Fiction Award 2010. He is praised for his style of writing and for dealing with controversial political topics. This is shown in *Serious Men* where he discusses caste discrimination, similar to *Untouchable*. By comparing these novels, I will examine the shift in realism from a nationalist literature to a satirical realism that allows characters to speak for themselves rather than letting the author speaking for them.

Joseph’s novel *Serious Men* focuses on India’s rising lower-middle class, particularly the second generation of Dalits in modern-day India. Joseph demonstrates how restrictive cultural

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traditions are still implemented in India today. His protagonist, Ayyan Mani, is a character similar to Bakha: he is the son of a sweeper who struggles to provide a better future for his family. Ayyan now works as a personal assistant to a brilliant astronomer, Arvind Acharya, at the Institute of Theory and Research in Mumbai. Ayyan, his wife and his son live in a small one-room flat in Mumbai. Ayyan hopes that his eleven-year-old son will accomplish more than he has; however, he understands the difficulty for Dalits to succeed due to the history of the caste system. One day, Ayyan develops the idea to manipulate the Indian media, his wife, and the Institute of Theory and Research by convincing them that his son is a genius. While Ayyan is successful in his manipulation, he puts an end to his elaborate lie before it becomes unmanageable.

Throughout the novel, Joseph develops the relationship between Ayyan and Arvind, his boss. In many ways they are foils for one another, which is ironic because one is Brahmin and one is a Dalit. At the end of the novel, both characters become mutually dependent. Arvind needs Ayyan to save his career at the Institute; Ayyan needs Arvind to bring his elaborate con to an end without comprising his son’s future. *Serious Men* is thus able to combine the themes of love, caste, science and corruption into a unique style that reflects the conditions of current Indian society.

*Serious Men’s* sardonic tone is central to the narrative. This is illustrated in the title of the novel, which refers to Brahmin men at the institute. Arvind is among the men in which the title suggests and while he is regarded as a world-famous astronomer, who seems to have his life put together, even as he is reliant on Ayyan to repair his reputation. The validity of public perception is also challenged through the understanding of Ayyan and his son. While Ayyan appears to be uneducated, he is able to out-smart the brightest minds at the
institute and although Ayyan's son is perceived to be to be a genius, he is just an regular child. In this way, Joseph is able to give birth to a different type of Dalit narrative. Satirical realism provides new insight about India. He depicts an all-encompassing India, with its contradictions and promises.

*Serious Men* presents the life of a contemporary Dalit as inseparable from farce and humor. In this way it differs significantly from *Untouchable*. Both novels depict the hardships of the Dalit family, yet their styles are distinctly different. *Untouchable*, like other nationalist writings during the 20th century, uses realism to highlight the struggles of the common individual. *Serious Men*, on the other hand, illustrates those inequalities using satire. In this way, Joseph does not compromise the characters’ independence. For instance, we are first introduced to the novel with the following line: “Ayyan Mani’s thick black hair was combed sideways and parted by a careless broken line, like the border[s] the British used to draw between two hostile neighbours” (Joseph 3). Already, in the first line of the novel, Joseph uses irony to change our perspective of his characters. Ayyan’s hair seems to reveal something about Ayyan, but also, in its direct referencing of Partition, serves as a parody for the failures of the nation-state. Joseph shows through satire what happens once the individual and politics are combined – allowing Ayyan to have an identity separate from political issues. Joseph is constantly pushing his readers to see beyond the obvious in order to have a better conception of India.

*Serious Men* has elements of social reform; however Joseph does not allow it to control the novel. This is shown in the setting. The novel takes place in Worli Seaface, Mumbai --a large residential area. Within Worli, there are the British Development Department (BDD) chawls, 10

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10 “The BDD (British Development Department) chawls in Worli are the earliest and the largest of the current residential areas in Worli. The BDD chawls provide the middle and the lower middle class of Mumbai a better means of living due its central location. These were prison
which are one-room apartments for the community’s middle and lower middle class residents. The location is significant because it shows the presence of the lower middle class in a class-divided city. These people are identified as Dalits. Ayyan states, “In this place that was spurned eight decades ago by the homeless and which was once a prison, now lived over eighty thousand people who heaved and sighed with the burdens of new unions and the relief of death” (Joseph 6). Joseph’s description of the BDD chawls presents the failures of the nationalist project. The BDD chawls throughout history have not been a place for socio-economical mobility. Thus even though Joseph presents the progress of modernization and industrialization in Mumbai, he also shows the failure of the nation to deliver on its promises. The fact that the Dalits live in the chawls exemplifies how the nation has failed them. The nationalist movement was a chance for Dalits to be considered into the mainstream of society and given a chance for upward mobility; however, their continued habitation of chawls merely shows how they are still marginalized.

Likewise, although the chawls are supposed to be an affordable environment for the poor to live in, its lack of space intrudes on privacy and natural human desires. This is shown through the sexual relationship between Ayyan and his wife Oja. In their one-room apartment, they are forced to sleep altogether on the floor. This becomes a problem when Ayyan and his wife want to engage in sexual relations: “Ayyan ran his hand over [Oja’s] waist. She opened her eyes without confusion or protest. She lifted her head to check on Adi. The couple moved with skill. They could caress and even tumble and roll a bit without making a sound” (Joseph 13). Joseph shows the struggles of the Dalit family. He shows that fulfilling their sexual desires has to be done in silence for fear that their son will wake up. The humiliation they have to endure to

buildings during the British rule and converted to residential use. Buildings contain one-room apartments. Mostly mill workers stayed here the 50s onwards” (http://sketchup.google.com/3dwarehouse/details?mid=eb46c212e8499e1c6933ac89006a446, accessed 22 Feb. 2013).
satisfy their needs forces them, eventually, to give up intercourse altogether. Ayyan states, “For the sake of our son, he said, ‘we must stop seeking our own pleasures’” (Joseph 14). Joseph reveals the relationship between socio-economical status and privacy, so that Ayyan’s status in society, which was dictated to him due to his caste, limits his sexual relationship with his wife. In this way, Joseph is able to further express the failures of the nation for the protection of the Dalit community. In this way, the novel shows how politics enters the home. However it is important to remember that Ayyan still has some agency. This is shown through his renunciation of his sexual desire for the betterment of his family. Society has restricted Oja and Ayyan from sexual fulfillment; however, the decision to desist was ultimately Ayyan’s own. This differs from Anand, who presents a dramatization of the effects of the caste system in which the Dalit characters are merely a backdrop to his main nationalist message. By contrast Joseph uses Ayyan to present the issues and the tensions within India’s lower class, but allows him to make the final decision over his own life.

Thus in addition to *Serious Men*’s satire, it also raises social and political issues that are of importance to Dalit communities. For instance, Ayyan is a Buddhist. After colonialism, many Dalits felt that it was impossible to remain Hindu because of the social laws that were implemented to restrict their selfhood and freedom. As a result, many Dalits converted to Buddhism. Ambedkar believed that conversion was the only way to put an end to discrimination towards the Dalit community (Natarajan 92). Ayyan is a Buddhist but his wife, Oja, is a Hindu. However because Ayyan, as the patriarch, determines the religion of the household, Oja remains silent in her opinion. During an argument with his wife, he states, “Isn’t Buddha enough? Buddha is our god. The other gods are gods the Brahmins created. In their deviant stories, those gods fought against demons which were us. Those black demons were our forefathers” (Joseph...
Joseph portrays two opposing sides of the religion debate in the intimate space of the home. These are not only political issues, but personal ones as well. Ayyan’s discussion with his wife illuminates how Joseph uses Ambedkar’s message. Joseph shows that conversion in fact is empowering because it gives choice in deciding one’s religion and future. Ayyan continues, “We are not Hindus, Oja, Ambedkar liberated us from being treated like pigs. He showed us how to renounce that cruel religion. We are Buddhist now” (Joseph 47). Joseph does not depict Ayyan as ignorant or helpless but instead he shows him as an active participant in his own future.

Ayyan’s conversion to Buddhism gives him the power to determine his own history for himself and his family. His rejection of Hinduism is his way of inserting his voice in a society that allows him little agency.

Joseph also gives Ayyan the ability to critique his position in society, a vocabulary that Anand restricts from Bakha. Due to Bakha’s lack of education, he was never able to articulate the injustices that he endures, meaning that Anand and his narrator have to speak for him. By contrast, Joseph displays Ayyan’s intellect as well as his anger – for instance through his ‘Thought for the Day’ blackboard. On the blackboard, Ayyan creates quotes that call attention to the hypocrisies of Indian culture through satire. At the end of these quotes, he signs them anonymously by a fabricated or notable person. In one of them he writes, “Reservations for the low caste in colleges is a very unfair system. To compensate, let us offer the Brahmins the right to be treated as animals for 3,000 years and at the end of it let’s give them a 15 per cent reservation – Vallumpuri John” (Joseph 93). This comment is in reference to the current political debate around reservations. Ayyan employs satirical language to poke fun at the assumed intelligence of Brahmins by adopting an identity that is above his own class. Despite Ayyan’s position as personal assistant he performs the role of an intellectual elite and uses their
vocabulary to show the inequalities in Indian society. The reservation system in India is similar to affirmative action in the United States. The long history of the caste system prevented many Dalits from achieving educational and professional equality. The caste-based reservations are implemented to even the playing field by setting quotas for the number of schedule caste members\(^{11}\) that institutions and government positions must have in their organizations. There have been many debates over the issues of caste-based reservations because they limit the number of seats in education and employment for people who do not benefit from reservations. The people in opposition feel that educational institutions and professional organizations only give up those seats in order to fill the quota (Chalam 15-16). This scene is important because it shows that Ayyan has the vocabulary to participate in this controversial debate.

Thus Ayyan is shown as knowing how to negotiate power. Later, when someone in the Institute asks Ayyan who told him to write the “Thought for the Day,” he simply replies by saying, “Administration.” He responds in this way because “Administration [is] a word everybody [understands] here, though nobody knew who it [is] or where it [sits]. It was an unseen being, like electricity, that made things work” (Joseph 94). What makes the scene comical is that Ayyan is fully aware of his position in society and uses it to his advantage. His unassuming role allows him to give a trivial response without suspicion – because no one would assume that he himself had written the comment. The authorities are reluctant to suspect Ayyan because a man of his stature is expected to do as he is told, without ownership of his own mind. Ayyan uses his intelligence to project his own political opinions. Through Ayyan, Joseph is able to challenge contemporary issues such as reservations. Unlike Anand, Joseph does not allow politics to compromise Dalit identity. Joseph’s satirical realism allows the individual to have

\(^{11}\) Caste-based reservations are not only for Scheduled Castes but also Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).
agency to criticize his environment and make change within it.

Satire is a literary form that incorporates humor and irony to denounce natural human response whether it is moral or immoral. Joseph uses satire to expose political discrimination within the nation state and to express the problems associated with the caste system. Satire has a long history in Indian literature that is described in Ulka Anjaria’s article “Satire, Literary Realism and the Indian State.” Anjaria compares Fakir Mohan Senapati Oriya’s novel, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (*Six Acres and a Third* (1897-99)) with Shrilal Shukla’s Hindi novel, *Raag Darbari* (1968), to show the development of satire as a political critique of the nation (Anjaria 2006). Anjaria depicts the relationship between satire, history and the state of the nation. Her analysis, however, leaves space for new types of satire to reflect the changing circumstances of the nation in the 21st century.

Anand’s realism is more similar to Shukla’s. In *Raag Darbari*, Shukla uses satire to reflect the problems with society post-Nehru. He states:

> In our ancient books of logic it’s written that wherever there is smoke there is fire. To this should be added that wherever there’s a bus-stand, there’s filth *[Hamare Nyaya-Shastra ki kitaabon mein likha hai ki jahan-jahan dhuaan hota hai, wahan-wahan aag hoti hai. Wahin yeh bhi badha dena chaahiye ki jahan bus ka adda hota hai, wahan gandagi hoti hai]*” (Shukla qtd in Anjaria 4797).

Shukla uses satire to depict the reality of India, which differs from the promises of nationalism. The nationalist leaders promised an improvement in Indian society. However, the filth that is derived from the bus-stand reflects the lack of improvement and thus the failure of nationalism. Shukla compares it to the ancient books of logic to show the correlation between the facts in the
books and the reality of India. This effect imparts his readers with the harsh reality of the world they live in. Shukla uses satire similarly to Anand in *Untouchable* because the primary object of critique is the nation, within which the individual has no significant role. The novels’ political agenda loses the characterization of the individual because the reader is more focused on politics than on the characters. The development of the characters becomes secondary to the overall message. Thus both Shukla and Anand project their opinions onto the novel through satire rather than giving their characters the ability to construct their own commentaries.

Joseph uses satire as a commentary on Indian society; however, instead of projecting his own ideals, as an author and a narrator, he uses the individual as an agent and a catalyst to reveal issues of the Indian nation-state. *Serious Men* can be defined as satirical realism because it uses elements of humor and irony, yet it does not lose the story of the individual. This is shown in the structure of the novel. Throughout the novel, Ayyan attempts to create an image of his son, Adi, as a boy genius – particularly a Dalit genius. Joseph describes his efforts as a game between his son and himself, therefore revealing its playful nature. Ayyan tells his son to ask questions during class in order to seem an inquisitive student. He tells him to ask: “What is gravity made of, miss? Or ‘why are leaves green?’” (Joseph 114). In this way, although Adi interrupts the teacher’s lectures, he only appears as a student trying to further his education. To the reader, Adi’s incessant questions are comical because it is part of a game. Adi is not aware of the effects of his action; however, he enjoys the attention that he receives in class: “He looked forward to disrupting every class” (Joseph 114). Ayyan continues to play this game with his son because he wants to provide the best for Adi.

Ayyan is not in the position, as a secretary, to provide the finest opportunities in life for his son. The peon that works with Ayyan states, “You are such a clever man, Mani, if you had
the fathers that these men had, you would have had a room of your own today with your own secretary” (Joseph 24). The peon’s comment reveals how caste restricts a person’s socio-economic mobility. Joseph creates Ayyan, a character who is willing to do anything to secure a quality future for his child, one that far exceeds his own. It is difficult to characterize Ayyan as an amicable character. Instead he is better depicted as a person who blurs the binaries of right and wrong in order to achieve socio-economic equality. For this reason, Joseph removes Ayyan from a strictly antagonistic position and builds him as a man with doubts:

That’s what frightens him. Despite his own disgust at the cruelty of the myth he was creating around his son, Ayyan feared that he might not be able to stop. He was falling into the intoxication of the game…the trill of erecting the story of a boy genius and the tales that drew his small family in a cozy huddle in their one-room home—he did not want to lose all that. Because that was all they had. So, what must a man do? (Joseph 116)

Ayyan’s fear is universal. He is questioning his choices and analyzing the risk that is involved to achieve upward mobility. This moment of self-doubt makes Ayyan relatable to Joseph’s readers because the reader understands that his reason for lying is to give his family a chance. Ayyan is a satirical character; however, that does not restrict him from being relatable and personable.

In this sense, Ayyan is similar to Balram, another satirical character in Indian English fiction. Balram is the protagonist of The White Tiger (2008) written by Aravind Adiga. The White Tiger describes the life of Balram Halwai, born in a rural Indian village. He desires to be a successful entrepreneur but he cannot achieve upward mobility due to his class and caste. He gradually realizes that the only way to achieve social and economic mobility is through the murder of his boss, Mr. Ashok. Adiga uses Balram to show the continuing effects of the caste system in India today; however, it is significant that Balram uses violence to reach his objective.
Balram’s use of violence makes him an unrelatable character - a caricature of the common man but not someone with whom most readers can sympathize. Thus Adiga uses caricature pointedly, in order to tell a certain truth about Indian society. This type of characterization is a vehicle to illuminate the failures of democracy in relation to the caste system. In order to deliver his message, Adiga sensationalizes the corruptions embedded in Indian society, whereas Josephs adopts an honest and unbiased approach to depict a complete image of India that nevertheless carries the same message as Adiga.

Thus Serious Men, like Raag Darbari, “not only makes humorous political critique, but also quite poignantly represents the extent to which the disillusionment of the era penetrates deeply into the Indian psyche –into the very crevices between the representation and the real” (Anjaria 4795). While nationalist literature tended to depict themes of unity, empowerment and change for India, this could not be sustained forever. Once the allure of nationalism began to diminish, the failures of democracy became apparent. The prevalence of corruption, injustices, and dehumanization engendered a new style of writing in the Indian novel. Writers wanted to express their frustration with the government and expose the truth of the failures of their society. Authors like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry and Adiga were able to redefine the Indian novel by using satire to make these critiques. They used irony, hyperbolic characteristics, and raw realism to create a satire that presents a dystopic reality. However, in doing so, they sometimes deprived their characters of any form of autonomy. Both nationalist and satirical narratives thus have the potential to deny their characters’ independence. They become examples of a larger political message. By contrast, Serious Men creates a space for both realism and satire to coexist without compromising the characters’ agency and identity. Joseph’s realism uplifts the dystopic
reality of the nation-state because it focuses on the victories of the Dalit in modern India. His example of realism combined with his witty irony shows a new direction in Indian writing.

At the same time, it is important to point out that even while representing his Dalit protagonist in complex ways, Joseph compromises the individuality of the Dalit woman in the process. Oja, Ayyan’s wife, is an active participant in the novel; however, she is depicted as the stereotypical housewife. She cooks, cleans and when she is not busy doing that, she takes time for herself to watch her Tamil soap operas. As the narrator states, “From seven to nine every evening, she was hypnotized by the melancholic Tamil soaps. During this time she encouraged everybody to disappear” (Joseph 9). Although in part the Tamil soaps represent an assertion of her own power, this power is still in the space of the home. Outside the home, Oja has no voice of her own. It is interesting because those moments when she chooses to be quiet are the only times that we listen to her. Thus when Ayyan and Oja attend a function at their son’s school, Ayyan does not allow Oja to wear the clothing that she is comfortable with but chooses clothing that makes her seem above their socio-economic level. In this way, it is clear that Ayyan wants to project a certain lifestyle through Oja’s image:

He walked to her side to get a better look. She was surprised at how seriously he was taking this. He pointed to the only sari that did not shine. It was a blue cotton sari with small white squares. “There will be a lot of rich people” he said, “and rich women laugh at women who wear shiny clothes in the day” (Joseph 187-188).

Here, Ayyan feels it is important for him to present himself and family as cohorts of the Brahmin and upper caste families. However, by dictating what Oja should wear to the school, he is stripping away her ability to express herself. Thus unlike Ayyan, who manages to reject
stereotypes through his religious conversion and his clothing, Oja has been restricted to the household and has no identity outside of it. Thus despite Joseph’s concern with redefining Dalit identity and avoiding the stereotypes of a novel like *Untouchable*, he ends up only illuminating the male voice, to the exclusion of all others.

Ayyan’s control over Oja’s clothes is similar to the restriction that women endured during the nationalist movement, when *khadi* became representative of an independent India, and a symbol for freedom and purity – the essence of Indianness. *Khadi* united elite Indians with rural villagers, and worked across religions and class. At the same time, as discussed by Emma Tarlo, *khadi* silenced the diversity within India – particularly feminine identities. Many women, like Gandhi’s wife Kasturba, were reluctant to wear *khadi* because of its lack of expression. Tarlo states that *khadi* posed a threat “to their aesthetic senses and indeed to their sense of identity as women” (Tarlo 110). Once again, woman’s identity is sacrificed in order to portray a larger political ideal.

Another way Oja’s agency is restricted is in the fact that she has no knowledge of the ‘game’ that Ayyan and Adi are playing. She believes, along with everyone else, that her son is truly a genius. Ayyan does this intentionally because he wants the best for his family. At the Grand Finale, Ayyan tells Adi some of the questions that will be asked during the game. Even though Adi is not a contestant in the competition, Ayyan instructs him to shout out the answers from the audience, hoping that this will direct the attention to the ‘boy-genius’ and help promulgate the news of Adi’s success. This is one of the ways in which Ayyan is able to convince people – including his wife – that Adi is truly a genius. Thus even though Ayyan lies to everyone, his intentions are understandable:
This woman’s life, Ayyan told himself, is not ordinary any more. For that moment alone, he knows it was all worth it. Did she ever imagine when she was growing up as a waiter’s daughter, when she walked into a humid one-room home as a new bride, or discovered one evening that her son could not hear well in one ear, that she would see a day like this (Joseph 196).

In this moment, he sees his wife, the woman whose moments of happiness occur only in front of the television, finally find joy. Joseph represents this scene in such a way that we understand why Ayyan participates in corruption. Without celebrating immorality, he is invested in the ways society forces one to choose corruption because there are no other options. However, as presented here, Ayyan’s commitment to the betterment for his family comes at the cost of Oja’s individuality.

Joseph also shows the complexity of Ayyan’s identity through his relationship with his Brahmin boss, Arvind. Although Arvind is a Brahmin, he serves in the novel as a foil to Ayyan. Arvind is a successful man and well accomplished in his field. He has been rumored to be shortlisted for the Nobel Peace Prize. His success in life has to do with his intellect but also his caste. As a Brahmin, Arvind does not fall victim to the same adversities that Ayyan has endured as a Dalit. Yet despite these differences, they come from the same ethnic background: “[Ayyan] always spoke in Tamil to the director because he knew it annoyed him. It linked them intimately in their common past, though their fates were vastly different” (Joseph 38). In an English-speaking environment, Ayyan’s choice to speaking to the director in Tamil dismantles the barrier that separates them and shows that regionally they are the same. This is important because it shows Arvind trying to escape his identity, while Ayyan is willing to confront it.
Ayyan’s choice to speak Tamil illuminates the way Joseph’s satirical realism works, showing that it is not only about Ayyan’s willingness to confront his identity but also about changing our perception of power relations. As we have seen, by means of his son Ayyan uses the close relationship between knowledge and power to cheat his way to success. Likewise, here as well, he is successful because he plays with the double-meaning of Tamil: while on one hand it is assumed, by the upper class, that because he is in the lower class Tamil is what he is comfortable speaking, at the same time he uses Tamil to emphasize his shared history with Arvind. In both cases, he uses society’s assumptions to achieve authority.

In a similar way, Ayyan is able to trick the Indian media and his employers into believing that his son is a genius precisely because he knows that the media and the elite are attracted to such stories:

The Brahmins had summoned him. They had read the article in The Times and they had called Ayyan on his mobile. They wanted to see for themselves a Dalit genius though they had put it differently. Ayyan could not resist the entertainment of watching those great minds mill around his boy, expressing their grand acknowledgement of his infant brilliance. Genius to genius, they would make it all seem (Joseph 204).

Ayyan knows that the Brahmins will be intrigued by Adi because for them, it is unheard of for a Dalit to be a genius, when Dalits are often viewed as poor, illiterate and unemployed. Ayyan uses these stereotypes to his advantage in order to trick the elites into believing that Adi is in fact a genius. Joseph examines the ways that Ayyan turns Adi into a spectacle. Here, his caste is important; however it does not completely define his identity. Joseph opens up the conversation for the possibility for one’s identity to not be defined by their caste – or at least, not completely so.
This establishes a new power relation between Ayyan and the Brahmin scientists because he has the ability to make everyone, including the intellectual scientists, believe that his son is a genius. In this situation, Ayyan has authority over the Brahmins. However, the fact that Ayyan had to lie in order to gain this authority is a comment on the fact that corruption is the only way to change the balance of power. In order for Ayyan to achieve upward mobility he needs to lie and cheat, which Joseph alludes to as a reflection of modern Indian society at large. Adi becomes a news story for the elite to admire and praise but the real issue of caste injustice continues to be ignored. Joseph suggests that there is a problem with Indian democracy, in which people are more interested in media attractions rather than the real socio-economic struggles that Dalits have to endure to achieve a sustainable lifestyle.

The ending of *Serious Men* thus marks a significant departure from Anand’s *Untouchable*, in which the driving force is one of nationalism and unity. *Untouchable* ends with Bakha stumbling upon a nationalist rally with Gandhi as the focal point. In *Untouchable*, Gandhi is described as a savior and the novel leaves readers with a fairly romanticized depiction of the nationalist movement. By contrast, *Serious Men* concludes with an uprising of the Dalit community *against* the dominant discourse of the nation. This occurs because in trying to protect his son’s secret from being exposed to the public, Ayyan records a conversation that Nambodri, the newly appointed director after Arvind, and his colleagues were having in his office: “The astronomers continued in this vein. They spoke of the racial character of intelligence and the unmistakable cerebral limitations of the Dalits, Africans, Eastern Europeans and women.” They even insult Ambedkar, “which stunned even Ayyan. What Nambodri had said about the liberator of Dalits was so damning” (Joseph 280). The conversation illustrates the ignorance of the social and intellectual elite. It shows that even though the nation is progressive it does not mean that the
elite in the nation conform to this ideology. Through this conversation Ayyan discovers the lack of acceptance in society that deems to be progressive.

This conversation is the catalyst that drives the novel to an end. During an interview in celebration of Adi’s ‘accomplishment’ of gaining admission into the Institute of Theory and Research – which Ayyan was able to manipulate by getting the answers to the entry exam in advance - Ayyan reveals the reasons that his son will not be attending the postgraduate course after all. The first is that he feels his son should finish his schooling like other children. However the second is that because of the type of leadership at the Institute, it is a “scary place”. After saying this, he proceeds to play the conversation between Nambodri and the scientists for all to hear: “All the news channels were now playing the voices of the men in the room –their plebeian views about the intellectual limitations of Dalits, and of women” (Joseph 302). The conversation instills anger in the Dalit community as well as in the general Indian public. Some of the discontent turns violent: “[Nambodri and the other scientist] could hear the roar of the mob down below. Five more stones landed in the room. They could hear other windows break and the sound of things being beaten to pulp, and the shrieks of women. They lay on the floor without moving. Then they heard the riot come closer” (Joseph 307). The Dalit community’s incitement to action reveals the politicization of Dalit identity. The community is standing up for itself and refuses to allow blatant discrimination about their leader, Ambedkar, as well as themselves. Unlike Anand, Joseph gives Dalits an active voice in society:

Across the city there were protests, but they were less violent. Later in the evening, outside the Bombay hospital, mobs paraded an effigy that was named after Nambodri. They beat it with slippers and finally burnt it. There were reports of stray violence in other parts of the country but after two days the riots receded (Joseph 308).
The riots are important in the narrative of the Dalit identity because they show a certain unity among the Dalit community. This unity is not seen in *Untouchable* because that novel is more focused on the unity of a nation rather than of any one community within it – even though it is critical of caste oppression. Whereas Anand uses anti-Dalit discrimination as a universal symbol for unity through the use of pathos, Joseph constructs nationhood through empowerment of the Dalit community. The riots show the strength of this identity. It becomes difficult to pity the Dalit community because they stand up for themselves.

These differing reactions to anti-Dalit discrimination are not insignificant. Bakha is at a nationalist rally where Gandhi saves him; he leaves the rally inspired to continue on the nationalist path. The particular form of Anand’s realism comes close to being a form of political propaganda, in which readers have a sense of sadness and pity for Bakha. Yet this pity is not empowering; it ends up reflecting poorly on Bakha’s character and personhood. By contrast, the ending of *Serious Men* presents a community that is willing to fight to end discrimination, unlike Bakha who accepts his position in society. The new Dalit identity that Joseph depicts does not need a Gandhian figure to come save them. Dalits become active participants in their own futures. Throughout *Serious Men*, Joseph finds strength within the Dalit community – their agency, voice and identity. Both novels reveal that the Indian novel is a product of history. *Serious Men* reflects a contemporary India that is rooted in individuality and upward mobility whereas *Untouchable* was primarily focused on the collective narrative in order to surmount colonialism.

Thus, through his complex presentation of Ayyan, Manu Joseph presents a new direction for the Indian novel in English. He uses satire and realism as vehicles to express the long-term effects of the caste system but does not allow the novel to completely define Dalit identity. He
shows through *Serious Men* that there is not one way to define an identity. It becomes hard to classify all Dalits as ‘Ayyans’; yet at the same time, he offers another perspective on the typical depiction of the Dalit community. Joseph shows that an identity cannot be contained by the structure of a novel because Dalit identity comes in many different forms and interpretations. 

*Serious Men* demonstrates that a novel can be more than a political message, but that it also has the ability to be personal. As readers, we can relate to different aspects of Ayyan – his love for his family, his humor and his ambition. *Serious Men* is an all-encompassing novel that not only discusses the internal politics of India, but also touches upon the intimate experience of human interactions and the identity struggles embedded within it. Joseph shows that satirical realism can simultaneously reveal the issues in society without compromising the identity of the Dalit in India. Joseph illustrates the corruption and dehumanization that continue to exist in India; however, he chooses not to write in a form that is harshly critical, dark or one that evokes pity. Instead, he reveals the ridiculousness within the reality of Indian society. He shows the plurality of India through its corruption and injustices, but also those moments of laughter, empowerment and beauty. This new form of satirical realism allows literature to be more than a social commentary but a mirror that reflects the identities and personhood of the individuals it represents.
Conclusion

Both *Serious Men* and *Untouchable* attempt to represent the Dalit experience. The novels try to hone in on the Dalit’s psyche in order to expose the failures of the nation-state. Both novels discuss the continuing problem of the caste system. Similar to Joseph, Anand is interested in depicting the discrimination within Hinduism and its effects on his Dalit protagonist. The authors use different literary styles to interpret the Dalit experience – *Serious Men* uses satirical realism while *Untouchable* uses a more standard realism. Yet *Serious Men* succeeds in portraying the reality of Dalit experiences without defining the identity of its protagonist. Instead, Joseph allows Ayyan to develop throughout the novel and depicts him as having agency and as being empowered. This differs from *Untouchable*, which uses realism to expose the Dalit’s reality – but with the end goal of reforming the nation and Hinduism, and thus compromising the autonomy of the character. While both novels discuss similar issues, *Serious Men* is able to revolutionize the literary characterization of the Dalit and create a protagonist that reflects modern India.

Both authors share an upper-caste Hindu background. Indeed, Anand's personal life was drastically different from that of Bakha’s in *Untouchable*. Anand was educated and lived in England for many years before returning to India. He never cleaned latrines, swept the streets, or felt the struggle of being a Dalit because of his upper-caste background. This does not discredit Anand’s effort to depict the Dalit experience; however, it does reveal why his use of realism differs from Joseph’s. Anand has a disconnected and impersonal relationship with the Dalit experience because his approach is only to ‘save’ the Dalits from discrimination. He is not concerned with the character that he portrays because his main objective is to reform Hinduism for the betterment of the nation. His intentions are positive, but as readers, we end up not
understanding his characters, which inadvertently reflects Anand’s inability to conceptualize the Dalit as an individual.

By contrast, Joseph is able to conceptualize the Dalit experience even from his upper-caste background because of the cosmopolitan location in which he sets *Serious Men*. The city becomes a place that blurs caste divisions. It is best described in Joseph's novel as “this unnerving constriction of Mumbai [Ayyan] loved, because the congestion of hopeless shuffling human bodies he was born into was also, in a way, the fate of the rich. On the streets, in the trains, in the paltry gardens and beaches, everybody was poor. And that was fair” (Joseph 5). Joseph moved to Mumbai to fulfill his journalism career. He, like Ayyan, lived in the BDD chawls when he first moved to Mumbai as a young, unmarried staff writer. He did not have to endure the dehumanizing living conditions that most families confronted, yet his experience in the city gave him a new perspective to write from, allowing him to write about national issues, but in a form that is relatable and universal to a wide demographic. Despite his own caste privilege, Joseph develops a successful Dalit character because he is able to build a bridge of understanding between the politics and the individual, due to the universality of the city.

*Untouchable* and *Serious Men* show that to discuss caste in the Indian novel, it is important to develop a Dalit identity that has agency and empowerment because it creates an authentic representation of Dalit experience. Joseph transforms the political nationalist novel, making it current and universal to not only the Indian elite, but also the rising lower class in the cosmopolitan cities. The question is not which novel is better, but rather to use the contrast between them to reveal larger trends in Indian literature and demonstrate how it continues to transform itself to reflect not only its nation but the individuals that construct it.


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