

SUREKHA BHOTMANGE AS A SYMBOL OF DALIT RESILIENCE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S "*THE DOCTOR AND THE SAINT*"

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Abstract :

This paper explores the portrayal of Surekha Bhotmange in Arundhati Roy's "The Doctor and the Saint", where she stands as a poignant emblem of Dalit resilience. Although Roy's text primarily navigates the ideological debate between Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar, she anchors the discussion within the stark and painful realities of caste violence in contemporary India.

Surekha Bhotmange, a Dalit woman brutally murdered alongside her children in the Khairlanji massacre of 2006, emerges in Roy's essay not merely as a victim but as a symbol of defiance, dignity, and endurance. Through her presence in Roy's argument, this paper highlights how the story of Surekha shifts the focus from philosophical discourse to ground-level experiences of caste oppression. Ultimately, Surekha's life and tragic death become a testament to Dalit resilience and an enduring reminder of the unfinished struggle for justice in postcolonial India.

Keywords : Caste, discrimination, untouchable, marginalization, Untouchability, Inhuman Oppression, Underprivileged

Introduction :

In contemporary Indian English literature, Arundhati Roy has emerged as an anti-establishment voice and campaigner of social justice for the lower class and caste people. She has used her writing and activism to protest against the Indian government's policies, such as its nuclear program and the Narmada dam project, and has become a liberator of the exploited. She wrote against the government's nuclear policy. She also protested against the Narmada Irrigation Scheme.

Arundhati Roy's "*The Doctor and the Saint-Caste, Race and Annihilation of Caste*" (2017) is a polemical essay that shows her sense of social and intellectual commitment to fighting for social justice and argues the moral and political differences between Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and also highlights that they had fundamentally different approaches to the caste system. Roy points out that while Gandhi sought to preserve the varna system in a '*purified*' form for positive social structure, Ambedkar, on the other hand, argued that the system was inherently flawed and oppressive and must be destroyed, and so he unequivocally called for the '*annihilation of caste*' (Ambedkar, 1936/2014,

p. 23).

In the essay, Roy shifts the conversation from a historical, theoretical debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar to the very real and violent experiences that Dalits still face today, highlighting their ongoing fight against oppression. She notes: '*Caste is not a thing of the past. It is the engine that drives modern India*' (Roy, 2017, p. 19). To prove this point, she foregrounds the Khairlanji massacre, where Surekha Bhotmange and her family were murdered. By bringing Surekha into the narrative, Roy moves beyond theory into the lived experiences of Dalit oppression and resistance.

This paper highlights that Surekha Bhotmange is represented by Roy as a symbol of Dalit resilience. Her struggle against justice, her assertion of dignity, and her tragic death embodied Ambedkarite resistance against caste domination. It is an attempt to present the deep sufferings and inhuman conditions faced by Dalits. Due to their lower caste, the figure in Arundhati Roy's *The Doctor and The Saint*. The book uses the stories of people like the Bhotmange family to show that untouchability and caste discrimination are not just historical problems but continue to cause deprivation, disgrace, and Untouchability and slavery symbolize the deprivation, disgrace, and oppression and also highlights that the problems of untouchables continue in modern India. It is really against human rights in a civilized democratic country. The harassment and exploitation of the lower caste continue without change.

Research Methodology :

The present research uses analytical research methodology to deal with the topic of the study. It follows a post-colonial theoretical framework and a descriptive method of content analysis. Interpretative and close reading techniques have been used to explore subaltern groups- the most marginalised and ill-treated characters are pushed to the fringes of the text, showing that that used to marginalise classes through military, police and militant organisations. Similarly, a strong patriarchy and societal norms have been shown to push the lower caste class towards the borders.

Further, casteism, which is the ore concern of the study, also examines the marginalisation and the social background of different classes in Indian society. To support its analysis, the research incorporates secondary data, such as the opinions of earlier research scholars, research works, online and offline resources, web sources have been taken into consideration and also research articles about specific incidents in India that are referenced in the text, and the secondary data provided ample support for the topic.

Analysis of the Research Topic :

Dalit resilience refers to the incredible strength and perseverance of Dalits in the face of systemic discrimination, violence, and humiliation and Surekha Bhotmange and her tragic life story is an evidence of it.

Historical Context: The Gandhi–Ambedkar Debate :

The essay explains that Gandhi and Ambedkar had fundamentally opposing views on the caste system. Gandhi believed that caste divisions were a natural part of Hindu social order, claiming: *'The caste system is a natural order of society'* (as cited in Guha, 2018, p. 301). He sought to reform untouchability but did not believe the caste system itself should be dismantled.

Dr. Ambedkar, however, insisted that caste was an essential part of Hinduism that had to be eliminated. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he declared: *'Hindu society must be reorganized on a religious basis which would recognize the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity'* (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 65).

Roy (2017) critiques Gandhi for *'sanitizing caste'* (p. 45) while she praises Dr. Ambedkar for his bold fight against it. She also shows that Ambedkar's ideas are still crucial today. To underscore Ambedkar's continuing relevance, she brings in the lived horror of the Khairlanji massacre, emphasizing that caste is a violent, modern reality, not just a historical one.

The Khairlanji Massacre :

On September 29, 2006, in Khairlanji, Maharashtra, a violent mob from the dominant caste brutally killed Surekha Bhotmange along with her daughter Priyanka and her two sons, Roshan and Sudhir. *"The mob dragged Surekha, Priyanka and the two boys, one of them partially blind, out of the house. The boys were ordered to rape their mother and sister; when they refused, their genitals were mutilated, and eventually they were lynched. Surekha and Priyanka were gang-raped and beaten to death. The four bodies were dumped in a nearby canal, where they were found the next day....."* (Roy, 2017, p.3).

The above quotes show horrific violence, including sexual assault, mutilation, and public humiliation. It was not a random crime but a targeted act of revenge and a demonstration of power. Anand Teltumbde (2008) describes it as *'not an ordinary crime but a chilling reminder of how caste hatred consumes Dalit assertion'* (p. 7). The Bhotmange family belonged to the Mahar community, historically oppressed and marginalized. *"Because she was a Dalit, she had no right to aspire to a good life; the village panchayat did not permit her to get an electricity connection, or turn her thatched mud hut into a brick house. The villagers would not allow her family to irrigate their fields with water from the canal, or draw water from the public well..."* (Roy, 2019, p.3).

The above quotes clearly highlight that though the Indian constitution has offered equal rights and protection to Dalits but still the reality is horrible; they are kept far away from basic facilities like electricity, safe water and brick houses. Surekha had been targeted because she dared to stand up to dominant -caste men for filing complaints against local men and refused to surrender her family's land. Gail Omvedt (2011) explains: *'The Bhotmanges were punished not for crime, but for dignity—for daring to claim equality'* (p. 142). This event serves as a chilling example of the extreme violence Dalits can face for asserting their rights, which the

attackers saw as a challenge to their social dominance.

Surekha Bhotmange in Roy's Narrative :

Arundhati Roy (2017) writes: "*Surekha Bhotmange's name is not as well known as Gandhi's or Ambedkar's. But she belongs in this story because her death speaks to the unfinished business of caste*" (p. 62). By focusing on an ordinary person, Roy re-centers the conversation from philosophical leaders like Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar to ordinary Dalits whose lives embody the struggle. This move underscores that caste is not a relic of the past but an ongoing, violent "*unfinished business of caste*" that continues to claim lives.

Surekha is portrayed not as a passive victim of a brutal crime, but as a person who actively resists against caste-based oppression. Roy emphasizes that her act of filing police complaints, confronting harassment, and defending her family's dignity were '*acts of rebellion against a system designed to crush her*' (p. 63). This framing transforms Surekha into a symbolic figure whose resilience and fight for dignity represent the everyday Ambedkarite struggle of ordinary Dalits to survive and assert their rights.

Surekha Bhotmange as a Symbol of Dalit Resilience :

Assertion of Rights :

Surekha's use of legal avenues to fight harassment is presented as a practical example of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy, 'educate, agitate, organize.' As Ambedkar (1936/2014) insisted: '*Political power cannot be a panacea, but without it we cannot protect our rights*' (p. 78). The text exposes that her use of the law shows how Ambedkar's ideas are not just abstract concepts but are actively used by suppressed Dalits to gain a form of power and protect their dignity in the face of ongoing oppression.

Resistance Through Survival :

Living as a Dalit woman in Khairlanji was itself an act of defiance. Roy (2017) remarks: '*Her survival in that hostile village was already a fight against caste*' (p. 64).

Gendered Resilience :

Dalit women often face the 'double burden' of caste and gender oppression. Sharmila Rege (2006) notes: '*The body of the Dalit woman is the terrain on which caste patriarchy plays out its most violent dramas*' (p. 92).

The above quotes from the prescribed text highlight that Surekha Bhotmange's very existence as a Dalit woman in a hostile environment was an act of resistance. This is because Dalit women face a "double burden" of discrimination from both their caste and their gender. Their bodies are often targeted to enforce a violent caste-based patriarchy. Therefore, simply surviving day-to-day in such a society is an ongoing act of resistance against a system designed to oppress them.

Inspiring Collective Mobilization :

Surekha Bhotmange's death galvanized Dalit protests. Her story, and the injustice of her death, argued a deep simmering anger among Dalits that the rest of the nation had previously ignored. Teltumbde (2008) observes: *'Khairlanji lit a fire that made invisible Dalit rage visible to the nation'* (p. 21).)

Ambedkarite Legacy and Dalit Resistance :

This mobilization is presented as a continuation of B.R. Ambedkar's legacy. Ambedkar envisioned resilience not as passive endurance but as an organized struggle for rights. He declared: *'History shows that where ethics and economics come in conflict, victory is always with economics'* (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 59). Surekha's attempt to claim economic and legal rights for her family resonates with this Ambedkarite framework. The text connects Surekha's personal struggle for economic and legal justice to Ambedkar's belief that material and economic power are crucial for real-world development against exploitation and oppression.

Arundhati Roy (2017) situates her within this legacy: *'If Ambedkar gave Dalits a vocabulary of resistance, Surekha gave it flesh and blood'* (p. 66). Provided quotes from *'The Doctor and the Saint'* highlight that while B.R. Ambedkar provided the intellectual framework for Dalit resistance, Surekha Bhotmange's tragic story and death gave this resistance a tangible, human face. She embodies the lived reality of the struggle.

Roy's Critique of Indian Democracy :

By highlighting Khairlanji, Roy critiques Indian democracy's failures. She argues: *'What kind of democracy allows a woman like Surekha Bhotmange to be lynched in this way and then erases her name from its conscience?'* (Roy, 2017, p. 68). Furthermore, through Surekha's story, the writer exposes the hypocrisy and deep-seated flaws of Indian democracy. She contends that a system that allows such brutal violence to happen and then systematically ignores or forgets the victims has failed in its fundamental duty to protect the citizens.

Teltumbde (2008) supports this indictment, writing: *'Khairlanji exposed the complicity of state and society in perpetuating caste'* (p. 12).

Conclusion :

To conclude, Surekha Bhotmange's pathetic and humiliated story, presented by Arundhati Roy in *The Doctor and the Saint*, is a symbol of Dalit resilience. Her assertion of dignity, her refusal to submit, and her ultimate sacrifice embody the Ambedkarite vision of resistance. Roy's use of Surekha bridges elite debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar with the lived evidences and experiences of Dalits. As Roy (2017) writes: *'The battle over caste will not be won in books alone but in the blood and courage of people like Surekha Bhotmange'* (p. 70). Surekha's story compels India to confront its contradictions. She is not merely a victim of atrocity but an enduring emblem of Dalit resilience, ensuring that the call for caste annihilation

remains alive.

Arundhati uses Surekha's narrative to ground the abstract, high-level debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar in the brutal reality of caste violence. While Gandhi sought to reform the caste system from within, Ambedkar called for its complete annihilation. The Bhotmange family's ordeal demonstrates that caste is not a relic of the past but a violent, active force that targets those who dare to protect their dignity. Her story underscores Roy's point that the struggle against caste is fought not just with ideas, but with the "blood and courage" of people on the ground level reality. We can conclude that true freedom and equality for Dalits could only be achieved when the social and religious hierarchies of caste were completely eradicated. Her narrative is a reflection of what she sees. Having noticed the unnoticeable, she thinks the unthinkable and says the unsayable.

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