

# Phenomenology of Untouchability in Cho. Dharman's *Koogai*

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## Abstract

Dalits have suffered countless inhumane, and callous treatment by the upper-caste community. Acts of revulsion, repugnance, and antagonism are the favours of untouchability. Gandhi proposed to abolish untouchability and reform the Hindu religion whereas Ambedkar anticipated the annihilation of caste. "Phenomenology of Untouchability" of Sarukkai argues that the real untouchables are the Brahmins and the purity-pollution concept substantiates the purity of the upper castes than the impurity of the Dalits. The logic of supplementation as deduced by Sarukkai proposes that the dominance of the upper castes lies in the subservience' of the Dalits. To always have people in the lower rung is needed to maintain the status quo of the upper-castes in the dominant state. This paper intends to examine the aforementioned concept of the phenomenology of untouchability verified by the logic of supplementation in Cho. Dharman's *Koogai*. And it also aims to delineate the diffusion of the purity-pollution ordeal into the infrastructure of the social space.

**Keywords :** Cho. Dharman; Logic of supplementation; Phenomenology; Sundar sarukkai; Untouchability.

## Introduction

The verisimilitude of Dalit literary writings especially the Dalit novels penetrates the cognizance of intentions in the wake of Dalit representations. Untouchability has always been seen as a problem to do with the Dalits or the so-called untouchables. Sundar Sarukkai in an article titled "Phenomenology of Untouchability" published in the Economic and Political Weekly and also as a book chapter in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (2012) alongside Gopal Guru, argues that the real untouchables are the Brahmins. The Purity-pollution ordeal em-

ulates more with the purity of the upper castes than with the pollution of the lower castes. The phenomenological inquiry of touch and the logic of supplementation as deduced by Sarukkai illumines intelligible inclination towards foregrounding this concept into the literary analysis of the same.

The genre of Dalit novels found space in the Dalit oeuvre a little later only after autobiographies and memoirs. The rationale behind such a claim also owes to the time taken for the translation of regional novels into English. Despite such challenges, forthright narratives with unconventional storytelling have lured the attention of translators and the reading community to take part in the articulation of joys and pain of the forgotten coterie. Novels like Devanoora Mahadeva's *Kusumabale*, Cho. Dharman's *Sool*, Imayam's *Sellatha Panam* have won the Sahitya Akademi Award which stands testimony to the literary adroitness of the Dalit novelists.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the logic of supplementation as represented in Cho. Dharman's *Koogai* and ligate with the disposition of phenomenology of untouchability as propounded by Sarukkai. The general notion of untouchability as something to do with the untouchables is contested and the dialectic of purity-pollution concept is explored in its totality with its connection to the sense of touch not only physically but also morally. This also accentuates the reason behind the proscriptions imposed by the upper castes upon the Dalit communities even after transcending space, class, and time. Hence, the study aids in discerning the need to dissect the Dalit issues phenomenologically for a deeper understanding of their sufferings which are otherwise generalized and are considered superficially.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Untouchability is an age-old practice interspersed into the social system of India sanctioned by religious caste order. Untouchables are said to be the people belonging to the lowest rung of the society denoted by words like *Achyut*, *Achyuta*, *Antyaja*, and *Antyavesin*. "The varna ideal in the Brahmanical texts excluded untouchables from the social order by describing them as *avarna* - literally 'out of caste' or outside of society" (Rawat and Satyanarayana 18). The now Dalits are the untouchables identified by their appalling living conditions and especially denoted by ignominious occupations like removing dead carcasses of cattle, sanitary workers, and other deplorable jobs. The untouchable gets "excluded from religion, from education and is a pariah [leather people] in the entire sanctified universe of the '*dvija*' [twice born]" and is considered a "shit bearer" (Ghose 83).

Under the Established Order, the one approved by the Manusmriti, “the work of lifting and removing dead cattle as well as doing the scavenger’s work is beneath the dignity of the Hindus” (Ambedkar 47). The untouchables were considered so because the Established Order suggests that “others would be polluted by their touch, even their shadows. To avoid such ‘pollution’ Dalits were segregated and denied access to many other community facilities – schools, temples, water, tanks, etc.” (Savita Bhatt 1).

Gopal Guru in the book *The Dalit History* contends “the ideology of purity-pollution which is the core of Brahmanism, forges Dalits to carry with them all the time a morally degrading meaning, even if some of them have moved out of defiling jobs such as scavenging and other sanitary works. Those Dalits who still find themselves chained to, remain repulsive objects of intolerance. The touchable caste pushes Dalits first into degraded/inhuman forms of jobs then uses the same dislocation and stigmatizes them” (8). The purity-pollution concept is a corollary to the idea of untouchability and the touchable and untouchable precept. The practice of untouchability eventually denotes the physical and moral segregation of Dalits in religious and social space *de facto*.

Untouchability should be understood in its totality. Untouchability has always been perceived in the lower status of an untouchable based on religious code and occupational revulsion appropriated by denial and confinement. Sundar Sarukkai’s “Phenomenology of Untouchability” proposes that “in the case of the untouchable, if the skin is what is defiled if the touch is defiled, then the impurity is not just in the body but it is the body itself. What the phenomenology of untouchability tells is that this unity of the body is what is lost to the untouchable when shunned by the touch of others” (172). This exposition of untouchability impinges on the codification of the Dalit body as inferior irrespective of its occupation, even in the perception of an untouchable. Thereby, the “natural dirt gets related to moral dirt” (174). And, “it is not that the untouchables cannot be touched but that they ought not to be touched” (185). This also characterizes the untouchability of the Brahmin, where “it is a mark of greater purity and not of greater impurity.

The difference in the phenomenology of untouchability of an untouchable and that of a touchable is that the former faces inhuman treatment and the attitude of the latter is valorized (195). This difference leads to the “notion of supplementation” (195) wherein to claim oneself as Brahmin – the synonym of purity, there needs to be someone to point to as impure – the Dalit. The imposition of impurity on the untouchables points to the

plausible purity of the touchable. "In the case of the untouchables, the untouchability of the Brahmins is outsourced to the Dalits who then carry that burden" (198). These concepts of the phenomenology of untouchability and logic of supplementation are analyzed in the Dalit fiction *Koogai* by Cho. Dharman.

*Koogai* (The Owl) is a gripping tale of the Pallar community in the Karisal region of Chitiraikudi village of Kovilpatti. It was originally published in Tamil in 2005 and was later translated into English by Vasantha Surya in 2015 published by Oxford University Press. Cho. Dharman hails from Kovilpatti, a town in the Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu. Cho. Dharman has written four novels and published two short story collections. Dharman's oeuvre of writing bemoans the marginalized lives of Dalits as well traces the rich culture of the Dalits; their ecology, language, and folk traditions. *Koogai* is set in post-independent India where the agricultural and industrial revolution was in vogue. Kovilpatti saw the mushrooming of the fireworks industry and the exodus of the marginalized mass towards these industries. The displacement of the people from Pallarkudi (the living space of the Pallars in the outskirts of the village) to the slums of Kovilpatti is also a seeming milieu of the novel. Untouchability was still prevalent in the region as in the novel where the Pallars are not allowed to wear their *thundu* (a small towel) tied around their head, usage of separate tumblers in the village tea shops for the untouchables, and denied access to fetch water from the wells used by the upper caste women.

The practice of untouchability constitutes two important functions one is to maintain the purity of the upper castes and the other to validate their purity with the impurity of the Dalits. Ambedkar archives an instance crucial to the functions of untouchability as found in the annals of *Writings and Speeches: Vol 5*. It was about a case filed in the Madras High Court against the leader of an upper-caste religious party by another leader belonging to a different upper caste in the year 1909. The strife between the two was regarding the right to take out a religious procession. Venkata Subha Reddy, the leader of the accused wanted to stop his opponent from taking the procession and he came up with a plan. He got a few untouchables and made them to stand on the road, which prevented the other party from taking out the procession. Ambedkar points to the "fact that the mere presence of the *Pariahs* was enough to drive the Hindus away" (28). The point to be noted is that it was not the untouchability of the untouchables which prevented them from taking up the procession but the untouchability of the Hindu upper caste. The fear of losing his purity caused him from taking part.

*Koogai* accounts for various incidents of untouchability both physical and moral. The very opening episode of the novel supports the inkling of the logic of supplementation. Muthukarruppan and Mookan of the Pallarkudi design a plan to feast in an eatery named "Nachiyaramma's 'club-shop'" (7). As planned, they enjoy a scrumptious meal in the club shop and get back to their hamlet and lie under the Banyan tree of the shrine of Koogai-Saami (The Owl God). Chockfull of the food they both stretch out their arms and legs, suddenly they feel a heavy kick from the village watchman Muthaiya Pandiyan and he shouts at them saying, "Big Lords! Washing your vaitis and shirts all white-and-bright, sitting on a bench just like others, and eating "club-food", no?" (11). It is crucial to notice that they had not been beaten up for eating but for sitting on the bench just like others. This refers to the term Commensality which is a practice of eating together as a social group, a form of symbolic action (Guha 50). The restraint on eating in the same place comes as a connotation of purity-pollution, where the untouchables are stopped from becoming their equal and also avoiding the sense of touch that is involved in such practice. In the words of Muthukaruppan and Mookan, "what they really felt wrong was our sitting on the bench and eating like their equals" (14). Here it is evident that Muthukarruppan and Mookaiyan are not beaten up by Brahmins but by an upper-caste member. This shows that untouchability operates as a social system corollary to the ritual or religious purity, not only by the brahmins but also religiously followed by the other upper-castes.

The sense of touch is a sign of intimacy where "various castes get artfully interlinked and coupled with each other in a manner such that the rights and privileges of the higher castes become causative reasons for the disadvantage and disability of the lower castes, particularly the untouchables" (Bhatt 45). The absence of touch is a symbolic action of this practice which is achieved by placing the untouchable at a distance to avoid their contact physically. One such instance in the novel narrates the usage of separate glass tumblers for the lower castes, "Shanmugham Pagadai...had a couple of drinks-from the glass tumbler used by the Pallar-Chakkiliyar-Paraiyar drinkers. It lay all by itself, beneath the bent-knead tangle of a casia bush close by" (14). The tumblers were used only by the untouchable castes, still, they are placed far off from the shop. This physical distance is a metaphor for the moral distance that operates within the social system. The idea of physical distance as a metaphor to the sense of touch is also visible in the lines where the untouchables who were threshing are visited by an upper-caste woman, "Nachiyaramma arrived with a potful of coffee. Halting the threshing, Iruli, Kuppandi, and Pulimootai each held up a half-coconut shell. And carefully, so as not to touch those coconut shells,

Naayakaramma poured coffee into them from way up above them" (24-25).

The purity-impurity concept of liturgy seeps deep into the social fabric and is supplemented by the concept of honour-shame. "Hindu culture and social organization was originally idealized as the way to promote the organic unity of society, but in practice the outcome was the supremacy of one class over the other" (Veer and Singh 57). The logic of supplementation as mentioned by Sarukkai proves the fact that to preserve the permanency of the purity state in the brahmins (in this the upper castes), the impurity of the lower castes is established and re-established through societal strictures. The power structure ideologized in the social space is a quintessential example of the status quo of the dominant castes. But Gopal Guru contends in "Archeology of Untouchability" (The Cracked Mirror) that "the need to remain socially superior has led the upper caste to convert the ecological into the sociological or the natural into the cultural" (207).

Taking a cue from the narrative on the caste atrocities of upper-castes on the Dalits proves that the practice of untouchability is enabled to ensure the dominance of the upper caste communities. In the novel, the episode that revolves around the death of "Pandi *Mama*[uncle]" (25) gives an understanding of how social superiority becomes the prime of upper-caste intention. The lot of spreading the death news of "Pandi *Mama*" falls on Subramanian, a Pallar folk, as its habitual that the Pallars, Chakliyers, and Parians form the part of funeral and burial ceremony. Subramanian who is appointed to disseminate the news heads towards Saaya-Malai. On his way, he is let into a cart by a group of people heading towards the same village. There is no sign of any problem for them with Subramanian until they find out that he belongs to the lower caste. Evident in the following lines,

Jumping down like one who has been stung by a scorpion, the man who had taken the note from his hand seized the brace-pole from the side of the cart. Death news he's come to give, Palla *thai-oli!* [a derogatory term] Listen to him talk so high and might!

They dragged Subramanian off the cart and thrashed him. Those who ran up to find out what the matter was stayed to deal out their share of blows. A man with an enormous moustache came rushing up. Those doing the beating as well as those standing around made way for him. He seized Subramanian's arm and

pulled him along. They tied him to a neem tree at the crossing of three paths, and each man hit him.

Subramanian's whole body throbbed with pain.... He pleaded, he howled, he clung to the tree with his head hanging down. Blood dripped from his cut lips. (28-29)

The people are not from the brahmin community, they are the people of the touchable caste. The very act throws light on why violent means of restraint are ensured to keep the Dalits within their limits. This shows more about the honour or rather the dominance of the upper caste which they would want to maintain by all means. To retain their superior position in the caste hierarchy, they supplement it with the inferior position of the lower castes and invoke it at all possible times which is the "materialistic extension of untouchability" (Veer and Singh 53). As Guha Proposes, "the dominance of the shod is visible through the presence of the barefoot" (17). The logic of supplementation which purports to argue that the purity of the upper caste lies in the impurity of the lower caste gets transformed into the social space as the dominance of the upper castes lies in the subservience of the Dalits. Ambedkar also criticizes that, "untouchability may be a misfortune to the untouchables. But there is no doubt that it is good fortune to the Hindus. It gives them a class which they can look down upon" (102).

In the novel, it is palpable that Nataraja Iyer, a brahmin allows the people from the Pallar community to work in his field and gives them half of what they reap from the fields. But the point of significance is that he allows them to work only in his absence as he plans to leave the city. He also lets Seeni, one of the protagonists of the novel to stay in his house in his absence. The practice of untouchability is still prevalent in the moral sense that Nataraja Iyer permits Seeni to stay in his house as a caretaker and that too in his absence. Though Nataraja Iyer intends to do good to the Pallar community still the dominant precept endures. The symbolic act of dominance and purity persists in the very nexus of thought. Nataraja Iyer is in conversation with Muthaya Pandian and Krishnasaami Reddiar – the upper caste folks, they express their apprehension over giving the landless labourers his lands. It is apparent that though he hands over the land to the Pallars, it is like patron-client commerce that resembles "the *jajmani* type (service relationship)" of relationship (Veer and Singh 54). Muthaiya perturbs, "You are telling us to come inside and planning to make us sit next to those stinking fellows?" (43). To which Nataraja Iyer replies, "They are sitting on the ground, aren't they? You come and sit beside me, on this

thinnaï" (43)

Thus, it could be understood that the practice of untouchability and the purity-pollution concept is religious and social, physical and moral. The phenomenology of untouchability as analyzed in the novel reveals that the purity-pollution concept once followed on religious accounts has diffused into the social scheme. Physical and moral untouchability is followed on the foundations of preserving one's purity of caste and as well to maintain their social status. The ritual purity is subtler and the social purity is obvious. It is not only the Brahmins who are the real untouchables (ritual untouchability) but also the upper-castes who go by the norms of social superiority.

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