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Caste and Resistance: A Comparative Study of *Untouchable* and *Lagaan*

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Abstract- This paper explores the representation of caste discrimination and subaltern consciousness in Mulk Raj Anand's seminal novel *Untouchable* (1935) and Ashutosh Gowariker's Bollywood film *Lagaan* (2001). Through a humanistic lens, the study analyzes how both texts critique the entrenched caste hierarchies of Indian society. Drawing on subaltern theory and postcolonial frameworks, the paper argues that while *Untouchable* presents a direct and emotionally charged portrayal of Dalit oppression, *Lagaan* uses metaphor and cinematic spectacle to raise subtle questions about caste, unity, and resistance under colonial rule.

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Caste and Resistance: A Comparative Study of *Untouchable* and *Lagaan*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India, deeply rooted in religious and social codes, has perpetuated systemic marginalization of lower castes for centuries. Literature and cinema have often served as media to critique this hierarchical structure. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is a pioneering work that delves into the daily humiliations faced by Bakha, a young Dalit boy. In contrast, *Lagaan*, though primarily a historical sports drama, embeds subtle commentary on caste discrimination through the character of Kachra, an untouchable recruited to play cricket against British colonizers. This paper examines how both texts articulate caste consciousness and the potential for resistance.

The significance of this study lies in its comparative approach. By bringing together a modernist novel and a mainstream Bollywood film, the analysis demonstrates how different cultural forms—literature and cinema—respond to the question of caste. While *Untouchable* directly foregrounds the Dalit condition with unflinching realism, *Lagaan* employs allegory and popular storytelling to address caste indirectly. The juxtaposition provides insight into the continuities and differences in how caste is represented across time, genre, and medium.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a humanistic and subaltern perspective to analyze the texts. Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak's seminal question, "Can the subaltern speak?" underscores the challenge of representing marginalized voices within dominant discourse. Spivak cautions that even when attempts are made to represent the subaltern, these voices are often mediated by dominant narratives and thus risk distortion. This dilemma is evident in both texts under study: Bakha's story is mediated through Anand's humanist lens, while the film's nationalist rhetoric overshadows Kachra's voice.

Similarly, Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony sheds light on how ruling ideologies perpetuate caste-based oppression. In colonial India, the British not only exercised political power but also reinforced existing social hierarchies, sometimes exploiting caste divisions for governance. Both Anand and Gowariker reveal how hegemony operates—through religion, tradition, or nationalism—while also hinting at forms of resistance.

B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste provides an essential framework for this analysis. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar denounces the Hindu caste system as an inhumane and rigid institution that curtails human dignity. His arguments resonate with Bakha's experience and underscore the urgency of dismantling caste structures. In cinematic terms, *Lagaan* gestures toward Ambedkarite ideals by momentarily elevating Kachra's role, though it ultimately does not center him. This tension underscores Spivak's warning about the silencing of subaltern voices.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical scholarship has long recognized Mulk Raj Anand's commitment to foregrounding the lives and struggles of subaltern characters. In various studies, Anand's protagonists—especially Bakha in *Untouchable*—have been praised for their role in disrupting literary silence around caste oppression. Writers such as B.R. Agarwal interpret Anand's work as both an artistic expression and a socio-political intervention, blending fiction with a reformist zeal.

Scholars like Dr. Sharmenaz Bano and Dr. Shaistha Maseeh emphasize the broader significance of Dalit literature in capturing the lived experiences of historically oppressed communities. Their research suggests that Dalit narratives are not merely testimonials but also vital forms of resistance and self-assertion. Dalit writing thus emerges as both literature and activism, blurring the boundary between art and politics.

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In film studies, *Lagaan* has received attention primarily for its nationalist themes, but some critics, such as Britt Crossman, have explored the film's more profound implications regarding caste. They argue that the film's inclusion of a Dalit character within a nationalist framework complicates its message and opens room for a nuanced reading of social hierarchy in colonial India. Others, however, critique the film for tokenism, noting that Kachra remains marginal even in the narrative of resistance.

Comparative scholarship across literature and cinema remains sparse. Most analyses of *Untouchable* stay within literary studies, while *Lagaan* is usually treated as a cultural or cinematic text. By placing them side by side, this paper highlights how different media construct caste identity—whether through realism or allegory—and how both reveal the persistence of caste even within narratives of resistance.

IV. MAIN ARGUMENT

a) Caste in *Untouchable*

Anand's *Untouchable* vividly depicts the systemic dehumanization of Dalits. Bakha's daily life revolves around cleaning latrines—a task deemed polluting by orthodox Hindu society. The novel portrays Bakha as intelligent and sensitive, yet perpetually humiliated by high-caste Hindus. A pivotal moment occurs when a priest falsely accuses Bakha of defilement after sexually harassing his sister. This scene encapsulates the intersection of caste and gender oppression, exposing the hypocrisy of the so-called guardians of religious purity.

Anand uses a stream-of-consciousness narrative to highlight Bakha's internal struggle and desire for dignity. His admiration for British efficiency and the hope placed in new sanitation technologies suggest a critique of traditionalism and a call for modernization. The novel also raises the question of whether technology—like the flush toilet—can serve as a liberatory force, or whether true emancipation requires deeper social reform. Anand's critique is unambiguous: caste is an outdated and brutal construct that must be dismantled.

Bakha's characterization anticipates later debates in subaltern studies. His silence in crucial moments, his inability to retaliate despite humiliation, reflects Spivak's concern about the subaltern's inability to "speak" within dominant structures. At the same time, Bakha embodies resilience and latent resistance, symbolizing the potential for social change.

b) Caste in *Lagaan*

Lagaan, while primarily a tale of colonial resistance expressed through cricket, integrates subtle but significant commentary on caste dynamics. The character of Kachra, an untouchable with a physical

disability, symbolizes systemic exclusion within the village community. Initially marginalized by the other villagers, Kachra is only accepted after showcasing exceptional skill. His inclusion by Bhuvan—who defies local caste norms—momentarily challenges the hierarchical order.

However, the film's treatment of caste is not without criticism. Kachra's character remains largely underdeveloped, functioning more as a narrative tool than a fully realized individual. While his talent is indispensable to the team's success, the film shifts focus to Bhuvan's leadership and heroism, thereby sidelining the more profound critique of caste. This narrative choice reflects Bollywood's tendency to foreground the upper-caste hero while relegating marginalized figures to supporting roles.

Moreover, the symbolic resonance of Kachra's name—literally meaning "trash" in Hindi—further underscores his stigmatization. His role raises questions about whether inclusion based on utility truly challenges caste ideology or simply reaffirms it in new forms. The film's nationalist message tends to subsume caste conflict under the larger narrative of anti-colonial struggle, thereby diluting its potential radicalism.

Despite these narrative limitations, *Lagaan* subtly questions the rigidity of caste-based discrimination. Through metaphor and gesture, it hints at the possibility of social inclusion, though it does not explicitly advocate for structural change. The cricket match becomes a symbolic space where hierarchies are briefly suspended, yet once the game ends, the permanence of social reform remains ambiguous. In this sense, *Lagaan* provides a cinematic allegory of resistance while stopping short of genuine caste critique.

V. CONCLUSION

Both *Untouchable* and *Lagaan* offer critical insights into the operation of caste in Indian society. *Untouchable* provides a raw, unfiltered account of Dalit life, making visible the daily indignities imposed by caste. Anand's work is pioneering in its empathy for the marginalized and its call for structural change. *Lagaan*, though more allegorical and restrained, challenges viewers to question caste-based exclusion within a nationalist framework, even as it leaves certain contradictions unresolved.

Taken together, these works illustrate how different cultural forms approach the issue of caste: the novel through direct, realist representation, and the film through allegory and spectacle. Both reveal the persistence of caste oppression across time and underscore the need for continuous resistance. The comparative analysis confirms that caste is not merely a social category of the past, but a persistent structure of inequality that warrants urgent critique.

Future scholarship could expand this inquiry by comparing other literary and cinematic texts or by integrating Ambedkarite or feminist perspectives more explicitly. The intersection of caste with gender, disability, and class also deserves further study, as both Untouchable and Lagaan only partially address these dimensions. Ultimately, the dismantling of caste requires both cultural representation and material change, a struggle in which literature and cinema continue to play a vital role.

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