Broken Lives: Politics and Affect in the Semiotics of Untouchability

Sofia Cavalcanti

Abstract

In August 2019, on the occasion of Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary, the end of "Clean India" campaign promoted by president Modi was celebrated. Over the last five years, millions of toilets have been built and sewerage networks have been expanded across the country not only to develop sanitary awareness among Indians, but also to put an end to social inequalities linked to the practice of manual scavenging by Dalits. However, are changes in the infrastructural and institutional landscape viable solutions to dismantle the structure of untouchability? Can the precarity of the untouchables' lives, both in terms of individual safety and caste discrimination, be challenged once and for all? In my paper, I will discuss the effects of the installation of advanced sanitation technology both on the untouchables' daily lives and the national imaginary of untouchability. Starting from a reading of Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Untouchable* (1935), through the perspective of Affect Theory, I will compare the past and present conditions of Indian sanitation workers. I will think of the new infrastructure and technology of waste as semiotic structures which are unable to act on an affective level and, consequently, inapt to cure the "wound of the soul" (Anand 1981) of "broken subjects," the Dalits. Finally, I will argue that the irreducible otherness of the untouchables as well as the vulnerability of their condition can be revised only through a "political subjectivity" (Berlant 2011) inasmuch as the shame of discrimination is located corporeally and psychologically as much as socially. In conclusion, "salvation by machinery" (Aguiar 2011) is a much too optimistic approach to make untouchability a thing of the past. The implementation of infrastructure can lay the groundwork for a shared and inclusive idea of society, but in order to put an end to the trauma of excrementalized subjectivities, a revision of what is meant by the political is necessary, thus engaging its notion with emotional, affective, and embodied experiences.

Keywords: Affect Theory, Dalit, Subjectivity, Trauma, Untouchable

1. Introduction

According to a Western ideal, which took shape during the imperialist period, specific nations

or races are associated with specific types of filth. While images of and references to Africa, for instance, repeatedly appeared in advertisements for soap at the beginning of the nineteenth century – suggesting that the African body is an unclean body – the West has historically associated the Indian body with excrement. As William Kupinse has noted, nineteenth-century British accounts stress the colonizers' disgust towards Indians' hygienic codes and excretory practices[1]. The Nobel Prize winner Vidiadhar S. Naipaul, in his book, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), reports that, still during the twentieth and twenty-first century,

> Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets.[2]

The idea of the abject body, the desire for distance from what is thought to be a disgusting body, considered as dirty and polluting, and should therefore be 'radically excluded'[3] and confined to a place of banishment, constitutes 'a formative aspect of modern industrial imperialism'[4], as Anne McClintock has argued in her study of the cultural policing of dirt during the Age of the Empire. However, dirt and poor sanitary conditions in India are not a mere invention of colonizers to justify their superiority over a non-white colonized subject. In India, both poor sanitary conditions and actual dirt, as well as how dirt has been thought of, have objectively represented a major social problem, especially throughout the postcolonial period. More specifically, as Susan E. Chaplin[5] underlines in the introduction to her book, *The Politics of Sanitation in India* (2011), India's central government failed to implement a modern

[1] William Kupinse, 'The Indian Subject of Colonial Hygiene', in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 250–76 (p. 254).
[2] Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: A. Deutsch, 1964), p. 74.
[3] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2. All subsequent references to this book: (Kristeva, 1982).
[4] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 72.
[5] Susan E. Chaplin, *The Politics of Sanitation in India. Cities, Services and the State* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2011), 'Introduction'. Kindle Edition.

and equitable sanitation infrastructure in the post-British period due to its inability to face developmental problems arising from urban growth and, consequently, to provide adequate public funds to local authorities.

A document issued by the Sulabh International Social Service Organization in 2015[6] pointed out that in India only 929 towns out of 7,935 have sewerage systems and UNICEF data[7], updated in 2016, show that nearly half the Indian population still defecates in the open. It is within this context that on 15 August 2014, India's Independence Day, India's Prime Minister Modi announced the biggest toilet campaign in the nation's history: the 'Swachh Bharat' or 'The Clean India Campaign'[8]. The Prime Minister launched the challenge that by 2019 a hundred million toilets would be built in order to make India a country free of open defecation. According to Modi, however, meeting this goal could perhaps help in reaching another important goal, which would be the elimination of the professions of manual scavengers and sweepers – which is to say the elimination of the caste of the untouchables, the Dalits[9] – made up of all those who constitute the sanitation workforce in India. According to the most recent updates, as of October 2019, about 100 million household toilets have been built since 2014, which corresponds to 100% of the total envisaged by Prime Minister Modi[10]. Hence there has been a success with regard to building flush toilets and a modernized sewage system, but what impact has this had on eliminating the problem of 'untouchability'?

In 2013, the Indian state had already intervened in this matter by issuing the *Prohibition*

[6] Sulabh International Social Service Organization, *National Conference On 'Fulfilling the Dream of Hon'ble Prime Minister to Provide Toilet in Each Household by 2019 – Challenges and the Way Ahead' and Celebrating the World Toilet Day.* (New Delhi: Sulabh, 2015).

[7] Unicef Press Centre, *"Team Swachh" uses cricket to take on open defecation in India* (press release) (15 March 2016) <https://www.unicef.org/media/media_90465.html> [Accessed 27 August 2020].

[8] Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, *Swachh Bharat Mission* (n.d.) <https://swachhbharatmission.gov.in/sbmcms/index.htm> [Accessed 1 September 2020].

[9] The word Dalit, which means oppressed or broken, refers to the people within Hindu society who belong to those castes that the Hindu religion considers to be polluting by virtue of hereditary occupation. For further information, see John C.B. Webster, 'Who is a Dalit?' in *Untouchable. Dalits in Modern India*, ed. by S.M. Michael (Boulder: Lynne Rienne Publishers, 1999), pp. 11–22.

[10] Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, *Swachh Bharat Mission* (n.d.), <https://swachhbharatmission.gov.in/sbmcms/index.htm> [Accessed 1 September 2020].

of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act[11]. The law promulgated by the Ministry of Law and Justice establishes that the manual handling of human excreta by untouchables is a historical injustice and their rehabilitation in society can only be achieved through the collaboration with local authorities and the implementation of modern sanitation technology. The failure of this law, however, demonstrated that tackling untouchability as a mere hygienic problem – as if its roots were in sanitary awareness instead of social awareness – is not an effective way to follow. As it happens, even though the logical premises of untouchability have been condemned by the State, caste continues to exert force in everyday social life. Therefore, in this paper I aim at answering questions such as: are the installation of flush toilets and the modernization of sanitation infrastructure viable solutions to dismantle the structure of untouchability, both as a caste and as an idea? Is mechanization the only alternative to the heinous practice of manual scavenging? Can untouchables' subjectivities be cleaned up simply by retreating from the excremental?

In light of Modi's campaign success in terms of number of toilets built, these questions might seem self-evident, but they are actually deeply relevant if considered in relation to the Indian social and religious context. The Hindu caste system represents the most striking example of a social, moral, and religious system based on the opposition between pollution and purification, the pure and the impure. According to this view, anything related to that which is polluted is part of a system of signs which forms a code of repulsion and abjection in relation to the polluted, and this system is kept in place in order to preserve the identity of being one of the clean. This ideology is very well explained by Rabindranath Tagore who, with sharp objectivity, describes the Indian society as follows:

[11] Ministry of Law and Justice, *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act,* 2013.
<http://socialjustice.nic.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/manualsca-act19913635738516382444610.pdf> [Accessed 28 August 2020].

> The world that we live in is narrow and too familiar. All its affairs and inner currents have rotated year after year, generations after generations, in unchanging circles. The prejudices and superstitions of our life have accumulated solidly around them. The construction of our peculiar world has been completed by the hard bricks and stones of those prejudices and superstitions.[12]

In this paper, I will argue that the change towards a more secular approach to filth through the new sanitation infrastructure, free from the prejudices and superstitions mentioned by Tagore, is only apparent as it is still ideologically related to pollution and defilement. Therefore, the same rules of abjection apply to that technology and those who work with it.

In the next section, I am going to show how caste operates semiotically by examining the past and present conditions of Dalits. Starting from a reading of Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* (1935)[13], I will demonstrate that flush toilets simply replace an old sign system with a new semiotic related to filth. Therefore, the abject status of untouchables due to their proximity to the excrement they have to clean up is confirmed. Then, I will explore the concept of political subjectivity and claim that if the institutional intervention against untouchability wants to be effective, it needs to take into account not only the sanitary aspect, but also the historical, moral, and affective underpinnings of this social plague. Finally, I will conclude that the pressure of caste, which makes the Dalits at one with the excrement they have to clean up, cannot be alleviated merely by investing in machines, but by revising the semiotics of filth on which the Indian belief is ingrained.

2. The Semiotics of Untouchability

According to the social and religious imaginary on which the Indian caste system is based, the

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[12] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Rabindra Nath Tagore, Centenary Edition) (Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 1961), volume 13, p. 209.

[13] Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014) (original work published in 1935). All subsequent references to this book: (Anand, 2014).

bodies of untouchables signify dirt, disgust, and repugnance. They become abject, i.e. physically rejected or expelled, like the bodily substances we want to separate ourselves from, and consequently, they are placed beyond an exclusionary border which protects the Indian society from filth.

The abject condition of untouchables – who are considered as 'out-castes' – is related to their proximity to the dirt they have to clean up daily either as sweepers or as manual scavengers. As Sara Ahmed points out in her essay, 'Happy Objects'[14], certain objects – or substances – have an affective value which influences us and our orientation in the world. In this respect, she claims:

> [I]n rejecting the proximity of certain objects, we define the places that we know we do not wish to go to, the things we do not wish to have, touch, taste, hear, feel, see, those things we do not want to keep within reach.[15]

In other words, we instinctively move away from the things we do not like or which are socially considered as bad. This affective value is arbitrary and is preserved over time through habit and history to the extent that certain feelings (either good or bad) remain stuck to certain objects and, consequently, to the people who circulate around them. The bodily substances that we produce – which are both familiar and uncanny, alien to us – can be included in the category of abject things, that is, those things which we tend to be distant from or which we fling away from ourselves. As Julia Kristeva explains in her book, *Powers of Horror* (1982), subjectivity is founded on the de-identification from the abject through the creation of a border. According to her view, filth is not a quality in itself, but relates to a boundary and represents 'the object

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[14] Sara Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Loc. 390–731. Kindle Edition. All subsequent references to this essay: (Ahmed, 2010).

[15] Ahmed, 2010, loc. 432.

jettisoned out of … a margin'[16]. For instance, matter issuing from the orifices of our bodies is marginal stuff which traverses the boundary of the body. Hence, Kristeva claims, '[i]t is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules'[17]. Following this logic, as the 'I' can only become clean (and, therefore, survive) by performing a series of expulsions, in the same way the Indian society can only be clean by expelling the abject – embodied by untouchables – from within itself, thus placing them beyond the border of caste. Barbara Creed explains the abject marginal status by claiming that

> the abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self.[18]

The presence of this border, albeit imaginary, within the Indian society is palpable and influences tangibly people's social life to such an extent that caste can be considered a sensuous entity, felt through signs involving all the human senses. Instances of this condition can be found both in the past – when untouchables did not have a social nor political status whatsoever – and in the present – when they have formally acquired the status of citizens but still experience substantial forms of exclusion.

2.1. Signs of Abjection in the Past

An eloquent example which shows clearly the idea of exclusion as well as the strict hierarchical division on which the Indian society is based is represented by the incipit of Anand's novel

[16] Kristeva, 1982, p. 69.
[17] Kristeva, 1982, p. 4.
[18] Barbara Creed, *Horror and The Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 65.

Untouchable:

> The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from the Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of the dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, …. The absence of the drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony and the ugliness, the squalor, and the misery which lay within it, made it an "uncongenial" place to live in. (3)

The non-discursive signs included in this passage – e.g., the location of the colony outside the borders of the town, the daily view and contact with the filth of the public latrines, the smell of the quarter, the ugliness and squalor of the landscape – are marked by a strict hierarchy. The description of the untouchables' spatial abjection also points out how ideology is conveyed through visual, tactile, and olfactory signs. In this respect, Joel Lee claims that 'it is our fingertips, nostrils, eardrums and pores that are our primary receptors of ideology'[19]. Moreover, the reference to the dead carcasses of the tanners, the mutation of the brook from fresh to squalid waters, and the description of how the lack of proper drainage ditches and a succession of rains led to a fetid marshy mixture surrounding and running through the area suggests the inevitability of this condition as a permanent force in everyday life. It is within this context that

[19] Joel Lee, *Recognition and its Shadows: Dalits and the Politics of Religion in India*. (Columbia University: 2015), p. 47. All subsequent references to this work: (Lee, 2015).

untouchables lose their individuality and become mere signifiers of dirt as well as an embodied threat to the clean selves of others. Kristeva argues that this idea underpins any exclusionary society[20], as is also confirmed by Mary Douglas who claims that 'pollution is a type of danger which is likely to occur where the lines of structure are clearly defined'[21]. The dividing lines within the Indian society aim at excluding untouchables because of a fear of defilement, as if the untouchables' physical proximity to excrement could contaminate their own subjectivity as well, thus making it polluted and impure. According to this view, it may be claimed that Dalits have developed excrementalized subjectivities, that is, compromised subjectivities in a permanent state of abjection. In this respect, Kristeva talks about individuals who interiorize impurity, thus living with a 'sense of the abject'[22] as blank subjects who have to cope with fear, emptiness, and shame. This would suggest the possibility that untouchability is a fact of the body as much as of the mind. Tagore described untouchables as 'nameless people … the beasts of burden who have no time to become men'. He comments on their condition saying:

> They grow up on the leavings of society's wealth, with the least food, least clothes and least education, and they serve the rest. They toil most, yet theirs is the largest measure of indignity. At the least excuse they starve and are humiliated by their superiors. They are deprived of everything that makes life worth living. They are like a lamp stand bearing the lamp of civilization on their heads: the people above receive light while they are smeared with the trickling oil. [23]

In the light of this condition, a step further should be taken in order to understand more thoroughly the complex phenomenon of caste discrimination. More specifically, a third

[20] Kristeva, 1982, p.65.
[21] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1969), p. 113.
[22] Kristeva, 1982, p.6.
[23] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Rabindra Nath Tagore, Centenary Edition) (Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 1961), volume 10, p. 675.

dimension needs to be added to the physical and mental premises of the hierarchical division of the Indian society, that is, the affective dimension.

As William Miller argues, for ‘an account of class rank, or social hierarchy’ to be thick, it must be ‘accompanied by an account of the passions and sentiments that sustain it’[24]. The passions and sentiments referred to by Miller can be included in the term ‘affect’, which I will use with the meaning it has been attributed in psychoanalysis, one of the main fields of application of this concept. In *The Fabric of Affect* (1999), the psychoanalyst André Green defines ‘affect’ as a categorical term, related to the sphere of feelings, grouping together ‘the qualifying subjective aspects of the emotional life in a broad sense’[25]. He also adds that the ‘affects’, whether they are produced from outside or from within, ‘belong to that contrasted domain of the states and of pleasure and pain, which form, in a way, the psychical matrices’[26]. In other words, affect refers to the sphere of feeling and the emotional including a series of different states which are part both of our psychological and social life. Mulk Raj Anand’s novel, *Untouchable,* provides an in-depth representation of the extent to which untouchability is a condition which is not merely experienced at the level of the conscious and the unconscious, but it is a state deeply rooted in one’s affective sphere. In other words, he depicts untouchability as a ‘wound of the soul’[27] inflicted by emotional, affective, and embodied experiences of irreducible otherness. He focuses his narrative on a single day, as experienced in the life of its main character, Bakha, a young boy from the sweeper caste. The story is set in a cantonment town in the Himalayan foothills and sees Bakha in relation to the ritually polluting profession he has inherited from his forefathers. Although he tries very hard to keep a certain kind of dignity – by dressing like an Englishman and maintaining his body as clean

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[24] William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 245.
[25] André Green, *The Fabric of Affect in the Psychoanalytic Discourse*. Translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 8. All subsequent references to this book: (Green, 1999).
[26] Green, 1999, p. 4.
[27] Mulk Raj Anand, *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 24 (original work published in 1981).

as possible – he has to surrender to a life of abjection which had started long before his birth. On Bakha's attempt to resist history through little gestures such as wearing unusual clothes, M. R. Anand writes:

> On this [a pair of ammunition boots] and other strange and exotic items of dress he had built up a new world, which was commendable, if for nothing else, because it represented a change from the old, ossified order and the stagnating conventions of the life to which he was born. (66)

The boy's form of resistance might be interpreted as a reaction against a feeling which dominates every aspect of untouchables' lives: shame. This affect, explored by Anand in his novel, highlights the bond between the semiotics of caste – lived corporeally and experienced through the vulnerability of the body – and the affective sphere. As emerges from Eve Kosofski Sedgwick's study, shame is a powerful affect 'integral to and residual in the processes by which identity is formed'[28]. As a keystone affect to self-psychology, shame defines a space wherein a sense of self develops. Such space, as represented in Anand's work, is first of all physical, as is evident from the following description which shows a group of Dalits who take a moment to rest:

> As they sat or stood in the sun, showing their dark hands and feet, they had a curiously lackadaisical, lazy, lousy look about them. It seemed their insides were concentrated in the act of emergence, of a new birth, as it were, from the raw, bleak wintry feeling in their souls to the world of warmth. The taint of the dark, narrow, dingy little prison cells of their one-roomed homes lurked in them, however, even in the outdoor air. They were silent as if the act of liberation was too much for them to bear. The great life-giver had

[28] Eve Kosofski Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 63. All subsequent references to this book: (Sedgwick, 2003).

> cut the inscrutable knots that tied them up in themselves. (27)

As the quotation suggests, these people's spatial abjection has an impact on their most inner beings, which are enclosed as within the little prison cells of their homes. This passage – describing a quite exceptional moment compared to the usual untouchables' routine – also evokes the very physical effect of shame, that is, hiding oneself from the rest of the world. The word 'shame', as Elspeth Probyn writes in her essay, 'Writing Shame', etymologically comes from the Goth word *scham*, which literally means to cover the face[29]. The whole scene is about describing how, for a brief moment, the 'knots' that have tied these people in themselves are loosened by the warmth of the sun. The same happens to Bakha while he is walking out of his cantonment towards the town:

> He sniffed at the clean, fresh air around the flat stretch of land before him and vaguely sensed a difference between the odorous, smoky world of refuse and the open, radiant world of the sun. He wanted … the warmth to get behind the scales of the dry, powdery surface that had formed in his fingers. (25)

The sensuous side of caste is very well conveyed by the visual, olfactory, and tactile experiences lived within the outcastes' colony. Shame, then, enters the bodies of untouchables through the places they live in and physically shapes them:

> He [Bakha] seemed a true child of the outcaste colony, where there are no drains, no light, no water; of the marshland where people live among the latrines of the townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere; of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night pitch-dark. (71–72)

[29] Elspeth Probyn, 'Writing Shame", in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), loc. 997–1280 (loc. 1019). Kindle Edition.

It is within this type of environment that shame develops and becomes part of the body to such an extent that it starts affecting social interactions. A self-effacing attitude has grown within Bakha as a result of the series of abuses he receives every day as a member of the lowest caste among the outcastes. Anand writes: '[S]ome deep instinct told him that as a sweeper-lad he should show himself in people's presences as little as possible' (33). He feels he is a burden on society as people have to bear his presence through a series of purification rituals which make them waste time and patience. For instance, when Bakha stops at a betel-leaf shop to buy some cigarettes, he has to put his money on a specific board, then

> the betel-leaf-seller [dashes] some water over it …. Having thus purified it he [picks] up the nickel piece and [throws] it into the counter. Then he [flings] a packet of "Red-Lamp" cigarettes at Bakha, as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop. (33)

Low-caste men and women's dignity is constantly at stake as they experience abuse and humiliation on a daily basis, even in the most common circumstances. Indeed,

> shopkeepers always deceived the sweepers and the poor people, charging them much bigger prices, as if to compensate themselves for the pollution they courted by dealing with the outcastes. (36)

However, abuses can go well beyond this subtle form of discrimination and become deeply traumatizing experiences for these people, thus contributing to increase their servility and humility. The main event in the novel happens when Bakha is walking along a street and inadvertently touches a man who is passing by. He ends up being insulted and risks being lynched by the crowd:

> 'Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin!' … . 'Why don't you call, you swine,

> and announce your approach! Do you know you have defiled me, you cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now, I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. …' [H]e realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier,…but a moral one. (37– 39)

This passage shows how untouchables are not seen as individuals in their own right, but as signifiers of dirt, even when they are not doing abject actions. Moreover, the fact that they are supposed to announce that they are approaching is a further example of how caste and hierarchy are not based on discursive premises but on a system of non-discursive signs – in this case represented by the sound they must emit while walking. While Bakha is going to the village, for instance, he suddenly remembers his warning call:

> 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming.' The undertone, 'Untouchable, Untouchable,' was in his heart; the warning shout, 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming!' was in his mouth. (42–43)

Once shame has literally entered the body of the Dalits through spatial abjection and an abject sensory environment, it roots itself in the self, as a state of being, leaving its mark on the soul. Indeed, shame cannot be reduced to the physical management of excreta, but becomes an integral part of subjectivity, felt at the unconscious level. As Anand describes, Bakha

> worked unconsciously. This forgetfulness or emptiness persisted in him over long periods. It was a sort of insensitivity created in him by the kind of work he had to do, a tough skin which must be a shield against all the most awful sensations. (13)

Resignation and numbness become forms of instinctive self-defense against the intoxicating environment in which Dalits are condemned to live. The psychologist of affect Silvan S. Tomkins, in fact, places shame at the opposite end of interest by claiming that shame may disenable the ability to be interested in the world and is responsible for the reduction of interest

or joy[30]. It is impossible for Bakha to rationally understand the reason for his sad condition:

> He was a sweeper, he knew, but he could not consciously accept that fact. He had begun to work at the latrines at the age of six and resigned himself to the hereditary life of the craft …. (30–31)

When a certain condition has been part of your life forever, it can easily become a mediator of identity, as Sedgwick claims in her book, *Touching Feeling* (2003). She also points out that

> the structuration of shame differs strongly between cultures, periods, forms of politics …, from one person to another within a given culture or time.[31]

In the Indian culture, for instance, shame plays a key role in the hierarchical division of society and for the marginalized it is the first – and remains a permanent – 'structuring fact of identity'[32]. Indeed, unlike guilt, which is related to something you have done or think you have done, shame attaches to the sense of what somebody thinks he or she is. This is very well conveyed by Anand's description of a moment of epiphany experienced by young Bakha, who suddenly realizes the true meaning of the word 'untouchable':

> 'For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!' Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that had happened to him traced his course up to this light and got the answer. (42)

He understands that the problem is not in something he has done, but in who he is according

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[30] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Negative Affects* (New York: Springer, 1963), vol. 2, p. 123.
[31] Sedgwick, 2003, p. 63.
[32] Sedgwick, 2003, p. 64.

to his religion. Untouchability is knitted into his psyche as part of his identity as if the stink was imbedded in the name 'untouchable'. In this respect, in his essay, 'Away from the Hindus', Babasaheb R. Ambedkar writes:

> The name 'Untouchable' is a bad name. It repels, forbids, and stinks. The social attitude of the Hindu towards the Untouchable is determined by the very name 'Untouchable' …. People have no mind to go into the individual merits of each Untouchable no matter how meritorious he is. All untouchables realize this ….[33]

The awareness of his stigmatized identity, judged by society independently of his personal qualities and values, makes Bakha feel ashamed and affects every interpersonal contact he has in his everyday life. For instance, when he goes to visit one of the few people who are kind to him – an upper-caste soldier – and arrives in front of his place,

> [h]e walked past it, because he was embarrassed. He was always ashamed of being seen. He felt like a thief. Luckily for his self-consciousness, the door of the room was shut …. He was a sweeper and dared not to go within defiling distance of the veranda. (90)

Shame, then, manifests itself in a series of circumstances and behaviors which go from living in the dark – where untouchables' slums are built – to hiding or covering oneself, as Bakha instinctively does when he walks along the street.

The most dramatic aspect of it is that such condition of exclusion is permanent and immutable, as several passages of the book show. Bakha's father's words, for instance, resonate like a death sentence:

> 'You have got to work for them all your life, my son, after I die.' Bakha felt the keen

[33] Babasaheb R. Ambedkar, 'Away from the Hindus', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches,* compiled by Vasant Moon (Bombay: Education Department of Maharashtra, 1989), vol. V, pp. 403–421 (p. 419).

> edge of his sense of anticipation draw before his eyes the horrible prospect of all the future days of service in the town and the insults that would come with them. (65)

No dreams of becoming a *sahib*[34], learning to read and write in English, and being treated with respect are ever going to come true for Bakha. His body will be considered permanently abject and the cleaning work he is forced to do will be a constant reminder of that. As Bakha states, '"[t]hey think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt"' (67). According to this idea, dirt expresses a relation to social value. However, if excrement is attributed a social value, it stops being a merely private bodily act but becomes the objective correlative of moral impurity, shame, and abjection. The Indian system of power, principally based on caste and religion, establishes that there is no distance between one's subjectivity and bodily excrement, as Bakha's father tries to explain: '"We must realize that it is religion which prevents them from touching us"' (70). The coding of repulsion in relation to the other within the castes of India is the reason for social immobility. According to the rules of abjection, autonomous subjectivities lose their uniqueness and are condemned to a permanent state of exclusion. Bakha's most intimate part is aware of that: 'Somewhere in him he felt he could never get away from it, but to a greater part of him the place didn't exist. It has been effaced clean off the map of his being' (86). As a young boy, he cannot resign himself to be considered as the filth of India. On the other hand, he is aware of the limit between himself and the rest of the people, which is institutionalized through signs (e.g., the scavengers' brooms and baskets, their khaki garments, the sound of their voices while they are approaching, etc.), cathartic rites, and physical exclusion. As Anand explains,

> [t]here was an insuperable barrier between himself and the crowd, the barrier of caste.

[34] According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, *sahib* means sir, master, and is a term used especially among the native inhabitants of colonial India when addressing or speaking of a European of some social or official status.

> He was part of a consciousness which he could share and yet not understand. He had been lifted from the gutter, through the barriers of space to partake of a life which was his, and yet not his. He was in the midst of a humanity which included him in his folds and yet debarred him from entering into a sentient, living, quivering contact with it. (121)

This passage conveys the deepest meaning of untouchability by pointing out the logic of separation on which it is based as well as the lack of individuality experienced by the members of this social group. It also underlines the painful duality untouchables have to face, divided between a self they feel they have and a life which prevents them from developing it. To use Tagore's words, India's caste regulations divide society "into so many islands insulated from each other by a narrow sense of localism and driven by self-sufficient inertia"[35].

One of the main questions of the book is whether changing the context of dirt (i.e. from pre-modern latrines to modern sewage infrastructure) is the same as changing the cultural system itself. The author guides the readers towards an answer by showing that what is called the 'cultural system' is nothing more that the people's daily attitudes towards untouchables as well as their unconscious fear of defilement as a threat to their identity. Through Bakha's eyes, Anand represents the banal – and yet socially signifying – forms of abuse people carry out. After a day full of traumatizing events, Bakha, disheartened, complains: '"I only get abuse and derision wherever I go. Pollution, pollution, I do nothing else but pollute people. They all say that: 'Polluted! Polluted!"' (101). On the other hand, he feels incredulous in front of a man's kindness towards him, as if kindness and compassion were a privilege he could never dream to be granted:

'Drink it, drink the tea, you work hard; it will relieve your fatigue,' said Charat Singh.

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[35] Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Rabindra Nath Tagore, Centenary Edition) (Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, 1961), volume 13, p. 31.

> … 'Now what about a new hockey stick for you!' he said … . His [Bakha's] face was hot with tea, his teeth shone even in their slavish smile, his whole body and mind were tense with admiration and gratitude to his benefactor. (94)

What emerges from these rare moments of humanity in Bakha's life is that everything depends on the people's will to adopt certain beliefs and behaviors. Anand lets Gandhi speak in his place about this. At the end of the book, Gandhi, India's most influential man, goes to visit Bakha's village to speak against untouchability. At the beginning of his speech, he says that 'the fault does not lie in the Hindu religion, but in those who profess it' (130), thus claiming that discrimination is the material, tangible consequence of a voluntary behavior enacted by the people and not an abstract condition imposed by an external force. Gandhi, then, argues that it is necessary to purify Hinduism by purging it of the sin of untouchability. This view was also shared by another prominent Indian man of the time: Rabindranath Tagore. Although, unlike Gandhi, he criticized fiercely the Hindu religion for erecting hard walls between people, he believed that the issue of untouchability was less religious and political than social. In other words, according to his view, spiritual regeneration was the key to inclusive humanity and social harmony.

After listening carefully to Gandhi, Bakha's attention is caught by another man, a poet, who is speaking to the crowd. His main point is that a surer and swifter route than that suggested by Gandhi should be followed, that is, the adoption of the Western technology of the flush toilet. He claims:

> [India] has chosen to remain agricultural and has suffered for not accepting the machine. We must, of course, remedy that, I hate the machine. I loathe it. But I shall go against Gandhi there and accept it. And I am sure in time all will learn to love it. And we shall beat our own enslavers at their own game …. (134)

Although the technology of sanitation is associated with the British colonizers, it could represent a solution to eliminate the profession of sweepers and manual scavengers. The poet adds:

> 'When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine, will be to introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone having to handle it – the flush system.' (137)

According to this view, the shame attached to these humiliating practices, and consequently, to the people who were born to do them, will be eliminated at once. The underpinning of the poet's reasoning recalls a Western mentality according to which, as Aurobindo Ghose points out ironically, 'get the right kind of machine to work and everything can be done …'[36]. Bakha is extremely fascinated by this prospect and sees it as the solution he has been waiting for all his life. In fact, the very final passage of the book depicts the boy going back home with hope and optimism:

> 'I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us, … and all that the poet said. Perhaps I can find the poet some day and ask him about his machine.' And he proceeded homewards. (139)

As Lauren Berlant writes in her book, *Cruel Optimism*, 'even those you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism has left'[37]. However, more than eighty years after Bakha's story was told, we still read and talk about untouchability as an inescapable condition for Indian low castes.

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[36] Aurobindo Ghose, *War and Self-Determination* (Pondicherry, India: Aurobindo Sri Ashram, 1957), p. 3. All subsequent references to this book: (Ghose, 1957).

[37] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 10. All subsequent references to this book: (Berlant, 2011).

2.2. Signs of Abjection in the Present

After Modi's campaign, one of the most ambitious national campaigns ever led by the Indian government, it is possible to summarize and evaluate achievements as well as verify whether investments in technology – envisaged by the poet in Anand's novel – have actually changed the untouchables' lives. In other words, has the installation of flush toilets all over India contributed to eliminate the social stigma of untouchability and, consequently, to improve the Dalits' life conditions?

An analysis of the present conditions of the lowest caste highlights that the Dalits are still the ones who are usually employed in the sanitation workforce as they are those in charge of cleaning the sewage pipes of the septic tanks of the Indian towns. Despite the emphasis placed upon toilets, little effort has been made to ensure that modern waste management systems are in place. As a result, excrement is still cleaned manually from open drains, sewers, and septic tanks and Dalits are still surrounded and impregnated by a permanent olfactory environment which condemns them to an unavoidable contact with the smell of human abjection. Before the 'Clean India Campaign', sweepers were pervaded by the smell of dust and manual scavengers by the smell of human excreta; nowadays, sewer-men and drain cleaners are imbued with the smell of sewage, liquid waste, and toxic gases. Evidently, India's smell-scape is still hierarchically stratified. And the untouchables' tactile environment has not changed either, since they often have to be lowered into sewage pipes and tanks in order to fix them or free up blockages, as can be seen in the video *Lives Wasted in Gutters* (2011)[38], by the correspondent Kumar of the community news service 'India Unheard'. The bodies of the people who work in this sector are in contact with extremely corrosive substances which leave their marks on the skin, as if to remind them and the others who they are. The result is a high number of deaths

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[38] Jai Kumar, *Lives Wasted in Gutters*, online video recording, YouTube, 15 April 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7cF9883aH0&feature=share&has_verified=1> [Accessed 31 August 2020].

from accidents or debilitating ailments such as leptospirosis, viral hepatitis and typhoid, as S. Anand writes in his article, 'Life inside a Black Hole' (2007)[39]. As for the visual space which surrounds untouchables, Lee writes that scavengers usually live near public latrines, in slums and mud-walled houses. This is because the municipality either builds public latrines where sanitation workers already live or erects toilets and designates land for rubbish dumps on land which also designates adjacent plots for sanitation employees to build upon[40]. This way of thinking signifies an underlying order of things, a persisting condition of spatial abjection which the new sanitation system has not managed to improve. The lives of Dalits continue to be precarious, vulnerable, and endangered by one of the country's deadliest jobs and most insidious forms of caste discrimination. Official estimates say that one worker every five days dies while cleaning sewers or septic tanks, but campaigners maintain that this is just the tip of the iceberg as many deaths go unreported.

On 27 March 2014, the Indian Supreme Court held that India's constitution requires state intervention to end manual scavenging and 'rehabilitate' all people engaged in the practice. This meant not only ending the practice but also ending the abuses faced by communities engaged in manual scavenging. However, when manual scavengers manage to leave this profession, they frequently have to face social discrimination and isolation. For instance, in an interview published on the website of Human Rights Watch in 2018, an 18-year-old boy belonging to the caste of Dalits said: 'We don't get any other job no matter where we go. I have tried. I know this is discrimination, but what can I do?'[41]. Not only are Dalits denied social inclusion through work, but they also face injustice in terms of access to the most basic resources. While the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) prohibits obstructing access to water

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[39] S. Anand, 'Life inside a black hole'. *Tehelka Magazine*, Volume 4, Issue 47, December 2007.
[40] Lee, 2015, p. 74.
[41] Jayshree Bajoria, 'Swachh Bharat Should Also Eliminate Caste Discrimination'. *Human Rights Watch* 26 September 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/26/swachh-bharat-should-also-eliminate-caste-discrimination> [Accessed 31 August 2020].

sources on the basis of untouchability, people working as manual scavengers and who have worked as scavengers but no longer do are often excluded from water sources in their communities. As Sunita, who left manual scavenging in 2002, explained, '[w]hile doing dirt-cleaning work, I was not allowed to fill water from the well. I am still not allowed to fill water from the well'[42]. On a practical note, those who practice manual scavenging are routinely denied access to communal water sources and public places of worship, prevented from purchasing goods and services, excluded from community religious and cultural events, and subjected to private discrimination from upper-caste community members. Children of manual scavengers also confront discrimination within schools from both teachers and classmates, resulting in particularly high dropout rates[43]. As the research carried out by Shikha S. Bhattarjee shows[44], parents from a Dalit community in Ratanpur village, in Gujarat, confronted teachers at the government school after learning that their children were made to come to school early in order to clean toilets. Faced with these forms of discrimination, the government's commitment to modernize sanitation is just a feeble answer to the untouchables' social and emotional impasse.

Based on the examples above, two observations can be made. First, the modernization of the sanitation infrastructure envisaged by Prime Minister Modi has changed the location of filth from pre-modern latrines to a more modern sewage system, but has not dismantled the premises of social exclusion of Dalits. In fact, social hierarchy is still encoded in the sensory environment which, for untouchables, remains a place of abjection. Second, a process of rehabilitation at the level of the affective is necessary not only for those who experience or

[42] Shikha Silliman Bhattacharjee, 'Cleaning Human Waste: "Manual Scavenging", Caste, and Discrimination in India'. *Human Rights Watch* 25 August 2014 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste/manual-scavenging-caste-and-discrimination-india> [Accessed 31 August 2020]. All subsequent references to this report: (Bhattarjee, 2014).
[43] Jan Sahas Social Development Society, *Socio Economic Status of Women Manual Scavengers: Baseline Study Report, 2014* (New Delhi: UN Women, Fund for Gender Equality, 2014).
[44] Bhattacharjee, 2014. [Accessed 29 August 2020].

have experienced untouchability, but also for the community as a whole. As Tagore also argued, civilized individuals are effective agents of social and cultural change and individual freedom can only be achieved within the harmony of the whole. Governmental programs, sanitation, and rehabilitation schemes should be supported by a new way of dealing with politics as something experienced in the sphere of feelings as well as in the daily practical life. In other words, forms of recognition through which individuals gain voice should be imbued with an emotional and ethical dimension, thus engendering processes of political subjectification.

3. Political Subjectivity

The analysis of both the past conditions of untouchables – through the close reading of Anand's novel – and their present conditions after the conclusion of the 'Clean India Campaign' has shown that sound, smell, space, sight, etc. provide the atmosphere or, to use Berlant's word, the ambience in which people develop their individualities, and consequently, their sense of citizenship. Hence, it is by acting on these informal elements that it is possible to make a real difference in the way certain people live. Berlant points out that 'citizenship is … a mode of belonging … that circulates through and around the political in formal and informal ways, with an affective, emotional, economic and juridical force that is at once clarifying and diffuse'[45]. Consequently, aiming at creating an 'ambient citizenship', as she calls it, means to try to incite a conscience in people so that everyone can experience affectively the political. Ambient citizenship, as Berlant explains, raises questions of whose noise, space, olfactory and visual environment really matters. Although they might seem trivial aspects of people's social life, they are imbued with political meaning. Michel Thompson, in his book, *Rubbish Theory* (1979), has claimed that 'what goes on in certain regions of social life that we tend to exempt

[45] Berlant, 2011, p. 230.

from scrutiny is crucial for any understanding of society'[46]. Therefore, in cultures like that of the Indians, where even the most private aspects of an individual's life have a social impact, politics is responsible for the development of a political subjectivity. As Kristine Krause and Katharina Schramm have underlined in their article, 'Thinking through Political Subjectivity'[47], the concept of political subjectivity is closely connected with the notions of belonging and citizenship. They are based, respectively, on emotional attachment and legal incorporation, which are the basic conditions for social participation. According to this idea, political projects should engender processes of subjectification, thus allowing individuals or groups to gain a position which makes them recognizable as such. As is evident, an emotional as well as ethical dimension adds to the institutional discourse, which is consequently able to answer certain people's need to be seen and recognized as subjects.

Shifting this conceptual framework to the Indian context, it may be claimed that thinking of untouchability through political subjectivity can result in the formal recognition of an individual not only as a rights-bearing subject but also as an affective being who deserves to be included at the emotional and moral level, too. As Kalpana Kannabiran *et al.* argue, belonging 'is not just about rights and duties, but also about the emotions that such memberships evoke'[48]. Hence, social rehabilitation of Dalits – which consists of their identification as subjects – needs to be dealt with at the intersection of the personal, the political, and the moral. It is from this perspective that a revision of what is meant by the political – combining the institutional engagement with a more subjective dimension – is imperative. In other words, modern sanitation should be a demand coming from the population as much as the government and the change in the Indian ideological system should be enacted

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[46] Michel Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 4.
[47] Kristine Krause and Katharina Schramm, 'Thinking Through Political Subjectivity,' *African Diaspora,* 4 (2011): pp. 115–34.
[48] Kalpana Kannabiran *et al*., 'Introduction,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40 (2006): pp. 189–195 (p. 189).

by the community, in the first place. As Ahmed states in her essay, 'Affective Economies', emotions are not a private matter nor simply belong to individuals[49]. On the contrary, they bind subjects together by aligning individuals with communities. This confirms the idea, also expressed by Sadeq Rahimi[50], according to which there is a relationship between the subjective experience and the cultural, political, and historical paradigms in which the individual is embedded. In other words, private experience is shaped by collective structures, and as a result, it is within the political that the new subjectivity which Dalits deserve to develop needs to be conceptualized.

4. Conclusion

In my paper, I have shown how a thorough analysis of the semiotics of caste can shed new light on untouchability as an interplay of religion, politics, history, and subjectivity. Dealing with untouchability from the point of view of abjection and the abject has involved a focus on the most intimate side of life, such as bodily acts and the feelings related to them. This, however, has not meant to ignore larger political structures but enter them from an unexpected perspective: that of people's affective sphere.

First, the analysis of untouchability at the semiotic level has shown how caste is something felt, intrinsically corporeal, and related to physical repugnance and revulsion. It is from this perspective that it may be claimed that caste, namely that of the Dalits, operates corporeally through a system of non-discursive signs, such as sound, smell, touch, and sight. The sound of the broom on the street, for instance, immediately reveals the presence of a sweeper who is approaching so that everyone gets prepared to avoid him or her either by changing direction or by keeping a safe distance from them. At the same time, the examination

[49] Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies,' *Social Text*, 22 (2004): pp. 117-39 (p. 117).
[50] Sadeq Rahimi, *Meaning, Madness and Political Subjectivity A study of Schizophrenia and Culture in Turkey* (London: Routledge, 2015).

of the sensuousness of caste has highlighted the paradox on which it is based, that is, the capacity of making present what is not actually present. Brian Massumi's question summarizes quite effectively this paradox: 'How can a falsity have a superlatively real hold on experience?'[51]. In this respect, he makes the example of a false fire alarm. The alarm is an immediately performing sign, which despite asserting nothing, makes bodies take immediate action. In the same way, the preemptive power of the semiotics of caste has become a productive process and, thus, has enforced a series of discriminatory behaviors by people that condemn untouchables to a social and emotional impasse.

Second, the close reading of *Untouchable* has demonstrated that untouchability has deeper roots than the lack of sanitary awareness or effective sanitation infrastructure. Rather, it is the internalization of an abject marginal status encoded in the sensory environment. Hence, the installation of flush toilets and the modernization of the city space can lay the groundwork for a more inclusive idea of society but are not the ultimate solutions against excremental abjection. Politics, indeed, should also take care of the Dalits' 'wounds of the soul' inflicted by emotional, affective, and embodied experiences of irreducible otherness. The idea of 'salvation by machinery', expressed by Ghose[52], is part of a modern creed which the Indian culture is not ready or willing to embrace fully. Therefore, before acting at a material level, a deeper change should be enacted at the level of affect and emotional involvement of a whole citizenship. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that affects act in the nervous system not of persons, but of worlds[53], which means that they are not experienced individually but by community as a whole. Moreover, by referring to the nervous system of subjects, they also suggest that the emotional environments in which people find themselves are nervously

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[51] Brian Massumi, 'The Future Birth of the Affective Fact. The Political Ontology of Threat', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), loc. 732–997 (loc. 904). Kindle Edition.
[52] Ghose, 1957, p. 3.
[53] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Percept, Affect, and Concept', in *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 163–99.

compelling, thus eliciting a series of responses, either positive or negative. It is from this perspective that it may be concluded that any social change cannot be enacted through politics or economic investments alone, but principally through people's desires and decisions as affective beings.

In conclusion, the government should start working on a new semiotics of filth, separated from the concepts of caste or social hierarchy. Indeed, nobody is inherently dirty. What is dirty is the link between private bodily acts and a system of signs which regulate certain people's individual and social life. More specifically, the connection between excrement and the untouchables' subjectivity is totally arbitrary, like, in linguistics, the connection between the signifier and the signified. So far, Dalits have been considered as signifiers of pollution, containers of filth, metonymies of excrement. However, practically speaking, the contiguity between the container and the contained does not mean that they form one inseparable whole. On the contrary, they will always be two separate entities. In the same vein, the contiguity between untouchables and the dirt they clean up does not mean they constitute an indivisible unit. It is the pressure of caste that makes the Dalits at one with what they touch. Therefore, it is necessary to revise the belief ingrained in the Indian society according to which the proximity to filth means to be one with it. As this paper has demonstrated, such a link cannot be broken by politics' investment in machines – which are the means, not the end of a process of change – but rather through an affective involvement and rehabilitation of the whole community.

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