Like his fourth novel, *The Tamarind Tree*, Romen Basu's *Outcast* (1986) stands out as a novel of social purpose. Set in rural West Bengal, the novel deals with the lonely war that Sambal, an untouchable, wages against an unjust and oppressive society and his estrangement from individuals and groups---Putki the girl who loves him, Parashar, the progressive teacher who supports him and the Communists who want to make use of him. The novel presents a vivid picture of a Bengali village, Basuli, and the divisions that split not only the high-caste from the low, but the various gradations of the untouchables which prevent them from coming together to fight oppression. It is an effective expose of the complexities of political organizing in rural India. While *The Tamarind Tree* ends on a note of hope, *Outcast* ends in gloom and despair.

The novel is set mainly in the sixties and the seventies during the United Front Governments. Paramesh Ganguli, the zamindar, reigns supreme in the village on all issues, including education and police, marriage and worship. The novel opens with Sambal's father, Mahanta, a corpse-burner by caste, entering the Kali temple and making an offering, thereby outraging the people of the high-caste. Mahanta wanted to ask for a boon that he could kill Haripada, a gatherer of animal hides, who looked down
on Mahanta and spurned him when he asked help for his (Mahanta's) wife's delivery. Led by the Zemindar, the high-caste people proceed to beat Mahanta and send him to the police station. The progressive school master, Parashar Ghose, bails him out. After watching his father broken in body and spirit, Sambal is filled with the idea of revenge on an unjust society headed by the Zemindar. Mastermoshai (Parashar) continues to support the cause of the low-castes in spite of the Zemindar's threat to fire him from his job. Several instances of humiliation and discrimination harden Sambal's heart. A Jubak Sangha is formed to challenge the Zemindar.

The confrontation between the low-castes and the zemindar takes on political overtones when the Congress Party and Communists vie with each other to bring 'progress' to the village by promoting one or the other faction according to what would serve their political ends best. A Gram panchayat is formed and the announcement of elections sets off political activity in the village. Manmatha Babu, who represents the communists in the novel, advises the low-caste people to elect Biresh and Sambal to Gram Panchayat. Mastermoshai supports the idea and insists on non-violence in resisting the zemindar. He is dismissed from job for supporting the low-caste people. They are attacked and Sambal is stabbed. Sambal joins the Communists. He is denied support by some castes for being a 'chandal'. Parashar goes to live in Calcutta. The low-caste people offer non-co-operation to Paramesh Babu under Sambal's leadership. Meanwhile, differences set in
between Sambal and Manmatha on the issue of the need for Pujas. A Shiva temple owned by Paramesh Babu is renovated for use by the untouchables. The low-caste Bagdis dominate others in taking over the management of the temple with the support of Paramesh Babu and Manmatha. Sambal fails to bring the Bagdis and Muchis closer. Sambal breaks away from the Communists and challenges the Bagdis in temple. He is beaten and jailed with the connivence of the corrupt. Mastermoshai comes to his rescue and gets him released. Parashar returns to Basuli to set things right. The attempts of Putki and Parashar to bring moderation in Sambal's attitude fail. Sambal decides on use of force on Bagdis to forge equality among untouchables. He collects explosives to blow down the Shiva temple. As he refuses to marry Putki, she commits suicide by drowning herself in the village pond.

Outcast has a taut plot-construction. It has a dramatic opening with the unjust punishment meted out to Mahanta. The author carefully arranges incidents so as to unfold the titanic conflict between the upper castes and the untouchables. While the formation of Gram Panchayat is a take-off point to the plot, the issue of temple management forms the crisis of the novel. Parashar's attempts at uniting Sambal and Manmatha may be termed as denouement while the end shows Sambal in self-isolation and the death of Putki in desolation. A reviewer refers to the "contrived and rather semi-comic tragedy of the drowning with the aid of a brass water jar in a village pond." 1 It may be said with

justification that Putki's death by suicide is a logical conclusion and it symbolizes Sambal's irretrievable isolation.

Further, Romen Basu makes use of a series of episodes tucked into the plot to throw light on the human suffering caused by the rigid and oppressive caste system. The episode of the beautiful widow, Saraju Bala Dasi, in chapter 13 shows how she is insulted by the Gram Panchayat alleging her with immoral connections with some men. She is insulted for not wearing a widow's dress. She is fined ten rupees and ordered not to have any visitor for three months and not to talk to any man for six months. Saraju's case "had opened Putki's eyes to what to expect from the Gram Panchayat. Women had to be strong and fight alongside men, that was the only way their situation would improve."² Sambal persuades Saraju to join the Communists. She is asked to lead women to picket the toddy shop and wean their husbands from habitual drinking towards a responsible way of living. "Saraju now saw a sense of purpose in her life." (p. 127). Thus Saraju's episode is woven into the thematic texture of the novel.

Similarly, the episode of Ganga (Putki's friend) in chapter 16 is aimed at giving a picture of women in Basuli. She is burnt alive by her suspicious husband. Putki manages to admit her to hospital and saves her. Still, Ganga bears no ill-will for

2. Romen Basu, Outcast (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1986), pp. 123-124. All further references are to this edition and the page numbers will be given parenthetically at the end of quotations.
her husband. Male chauvinism coupled with ignorance is a curse upon faithful women like Ganga. This is followed by Tagar's episode in chapter 17. She is killed by her brother for talking to Doulat, a school teacher, secretly.

The episode of the two families of snake charmers in chapter 14 shows how caste barriers have become unbreakable. The two families are drummed out of the village because the daughter of the snake charmer has fallen in love with a young man from a Mahasya family. Thus, they are "sacrificed to spare the feelings of community." (p. 133). The episode of Karanga, an animal castrator, in the same chapter shows 'how inhuman people could be in the name of caste superiority.' One day he is bitten by a poisonous snake but "no amount of money or outcry in the name of humanity would persuade the palanquin bearers to carry a man from a caste lower than themselves." (p. 136). Finally, when he is taken to a snake charmer, he is declared dead. Though all the four episodes have thematic value, they seem to prevent scenes from following in quick succession.

The novel is 'full of people.' "Most of the characters come alive in the book but that of Sambal has been well drawn out, rounded and reasonably growing, from small boy to young man, full of idealism and raw vigour. He has never known fear and remains a living dynamite sparked into explosion several times, causing blood to flow from his body as well as from others."³ His father's humiliation makes Sambal, even as boy, permanently

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embittered and he grows up to be an angry man. Even Putki's love cannot assuage his rebelliousness.

Sambal's evolution as a revolutionary may be studied in three stages—first, his career till the Gram Panchayat is formed, second, his association with Communists and the subsequent disillusionment with them, and third, the phase of his self-isolation. Sambal is the symbol of resistance against casteism. He is obsessed with the idea of revenge on an unjust society. As he grows, his motive for revenge transforms into fiery idealism. Parashar, Manmatha and Putki are attracted towards him by this spark of idealism. Sambal "took a vow that one day I would open the Kali temple door to everyone. No more would anyone fear a thrashing for being born untouchable." (p. 26). Parashar appreciates Sambal's idea that the opening of the temple would unite the low-caste people. He "had taught him to make it his life's mission to work among his own people." (p. 28). He exhorts him 'never fear to speak the truth.' "He had helped him understand that speaking the truth was the strongest weapon against injustice." (p. 28). The cruelty of casteism has left no faith in God. Sambal tells Putki: "Don't mention God to me, there is no such protector. Give up your misguided faith." (p. 81).

Sambal realizes that his revenge on Paramesh and on the caste system is possible only by galvanizing his people against Paramesh Babu's exploitation and oppression. He resists casteism everywhere. He protests strongly to the President of the Basuli
Football Club that he should keep Timpu, the sweeper's son, in the team. He is on the verge of picking up a quarrel with a fish-vendor for refusing to sell fish on caste grounds. When a sweets-vendor refuses to sell him sweets, it leads to a scuffle and Sambal is badly beaten. He leaves his father's occupation and takes up making furniture.

The events following the formation of 'Gram Panchayat' lead Sambal to the fold of Communists. Speaking for the candidature of Sambal and Biresh, Manmatha throws light on their character: "Sambal has courage, he is incorruptible." (p. 65). Biresh and Sambal "had both been victims of discrimination and know how to fight for the rights of the majority." (p. 51). "They were men of influence, courageous, capable of standing up to the landowners and anxious to see some change." (p. 52). Sambal is thrilled to know that the Communists could get Kanai 'Goonda,' who stabbed him, arrested. He tells Putki: "As soon as I am well enough to get out of the house, I will go straight to Manmatha and ask him to enlist in the Communist Party. I will become a revolutionary." (p. 81). He and Manmatha agree that their "first task is to unite the untouchable communities." (p. 83). That is the 'hardest part' of reformation.

From now on, Sambal concentrates on uniting the untouchables cutting across their caste differences and preparing an organization. He refuses to take part in election as he looks upon Gram Panchayat as only a way of legitimising the mistakes of the high-caste people. In consultation with Manmatha, he plans
checking of deserters, forming teams of fifty to hundred strong men to guard every hamlet, training women to earn money by making baskets and growing cash crops. He learns to organize cells and recruit volunteers. On the other hand, he takes interest in hapless victims like Saraju, Ganga and Tagar. With Manmatha's co-operation he provides financial assistance when labourers non-co-operate with Paramesh. He weans Santhals from working in Paramesh's fields and succeeds in getting their support. Putki notices that in spite of Sambal's spirited work, "not one among the lower castes had agreed to join hands. It was futile for Sambal to knock his head against such solid resistance.... Sambal is liked as a well-meaning do-gooder, but they feel he is totally misled by that red banner waver." (p. 134). To his dismay and despair, Sambal fails to obliterate the caste differences:

While they appreciated all the help they had received, all the communities agreed there could be no tampering with religion and caste. The Communist workers should stop insisting there were no caste differences among untouchables.... If the price for higher pay, an improved road, or tube wells in every para was to be paid for by social intercourse among the castes, they preferred to live as they were. (p. 140).

Sambal is further disillusioned by Manmatha's change of stance as directed by the Communist party. Manmatha defers the issue of forging equality among the untouchables. He wishes to allow 'pujas' to continue to satisfy the sentiments of the low-caste people. Manmatha wants to use 'pujas' as a weapon
against Paramesh. He tells Sambal: "Pujas will become increasingly a public affair, needing less of him (Paramesh). With Paramesh's influence gone, we can pretty much do what we want and without violence. (p. 145). Sambal accuses Manmatha of hypocrisy:

You talked big about equality and justice, you spoke against religion, now you want to hide behind party orders. Let me tell you, I don't take orders from your party and I will fight anyone I have to. (p. 142).

The issue of temple management is a challenge to Sambal's idealism even while the idea of a temple for the untouchables is a significant achievement of his relentless struggle. The Bagdis admit it:

We have to thank that bastard. Without Sambal agitating to open the doors of the Kali temple to the lower castes, we might never have offered a hibiscus to Lord Shiva for another hundred years. (p. 184).

The Bagdis refuse Sambal's plea to share the powers with other untouchables so that the temple becomes an expression of equality among them. The nexus of the Bagdis, the zemindar and the communists scuttles Sambal's plans. "In these manoeuvrings, Sambal, whose idealism sees only black and white and no shades in between, is a misfit." Sambal is angered by the opportunism of

the Bagdis and their insulting the Muchis. In a rage, he loses tact. He rejects Muchi leader's plan to manage to get the Bagdis to come to him (the leader) and ask for the co-operation of the Muchis in real politeness. The leader tells him: "you are against reasonableness. Is n't that why even those who like you cannot get along with you?" (p. 190). Sambal thinks that redeeming the honour of the Muchis against the Bagdis is more important. The leader rightly tells him: "You don't really care about the temple. All you care about is revenge. I have to think of the consequences for my people." (p. 190). Sambal accuses the Bagdi leader in the temple:

You are as corrupt as the upper castes. Like them, you want your share of domination and spoils. You are determined to keep us divided by your claim of caste superiority. You are generating hatred among us all. (p. 200).

Sambal is bashed up and imprisoned for speaking the truth.

The phase of self-isolation in Sambal's career begins after his release from jail. He turns down Parashar's plea for reconciliation with Manmatha because, he tells Manmatha, "the heartache, the misery of the minority, are of no concern to your party. The arty is catering to the majority to spread its influence." (p. 226). While Manmatha insists on persuasion, Sambal wants to use force against Bagdis to take control of the temple and to bring equality among untouchables. He tells Manmatha:

You have to give me an assurance that if soft
The next important character in the novel is Parashar who is respectfully called Mastermoshai. He is the teacher in the primary school. He is the only person to have a Master's degree in the village. He stands for justice and the only ray of hope for the wronged. "Any victim of the Zemindar's disfavour came to him for advice." (p. 7). People go to him because they believe that "a teacher's duty is to teach right from wrong." (p. 18). The inspector tells him: "With you gone, there will be no one to mention the word 'justice.'" (p. 9). He pleads for social equality: "Parameshbabu, in a small community like ours, the welfare of each and everyone becomes the business of all. It cannot be avoided when one hears of the misfortune of another human being." (p. 18). He lives in Basuli in spite of many warnings and has suppressed conscience many times. He feels that the cruelty shown to Mahanta is 'positively intolerable.' He gets Mahanta released in spite of personal risk. He tells Parameshbabu to change his ways: "The Kali temple has been a source of hostility for too long. The lower classes feel increasingly that the social climate in the nation is changing." (p. 12).

Like Mohamaya in Romen Basu's _The Tamarind Tree_, Parashar plays the role of a catalyst for social change in Basuli village. He finds the right instrument of such social change in Sambal. He speaks of this later: "I once had a dream for this village. I ought to help Sambal fulfil that dream." (p. 218). He is the moral force behind Sambal. He tells Sambal that he should be a voice for the untouchables in the Gram Panchayat. He is not
soaping does not work, we will use force. I want the temple management changed first, but that is not all. You have to agree to go beyond that and insist on a plan of social intercourse, even marriage between the lower castes. Are you prepared to do that? (p. 237)

He "will organise a group like a Naxalbari to achieve quick result." (p. 235). Mastermoshai says that Sambal is only 'bent on self-destruction' if he demands this 'iron-clad understanding' by forming his own group. "Sambal tells Putki that he wants to blow up the Shiva temple:

Once the temple is reduced to rubble, all the lower castes will understand what I am protesting about so intensely. (p. 244).

He even refuses to marry Putki. He tells her: "If I think revenge is the only way to redeem one's honour, you think the opposite. You will be a stone around my neck." (p. 240). Thus, by the end of the novel, Sambal's 'fire in belly' or the fire of revenge acquires self-consuming proportions. One agrees with Parashar that "if Sambal had been properly guided, he would have turned into a true leader." (p. 217). It has been pointed out that "Sambal is more interested in his fight against the higher castes and his (Parameshbabu's) cronies who assist him. This does not seem very plausible. Why must matrimony obstruct social agitation?" But, having set his objective above his own life and personal pleasures, Sambal cannot act otherwise.

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really in favour of the interference of the Communists in the affairs of the village and even warns Sambal to be careful with them. But when the magistrate becomes helpless in coming to the rescue of the oppressed because of the Zemindar's political influence, Parashar inclines to take the help of Communists. He has formed the opinion that "if the oppressed labourers had any chance of success, it could be with the help of Manmatha and his men. He wanted to avoid violence." (p. 105). At the same time, he does not hesitate to tell Manmatha 'not to think for a moment that our people are too gullible." (p. 105).

The social reformer in Parashar does not rest even when he goes to live in Kaibati. "The village remembered him for a long time as a man who wanted to be a part of the community." (p. 210). It is reported to Putki that 'he was too radical for the likes of the villagers.' He was always taking the side of the women and children. He interfered in family matters and scolded if any father raised his hands against his children. He agitated constantly for sending girls to school.

Parashar returns from Calcutta to Basuli 'to pick up where he had left off.' The marriage of Putki and Sambal is a part of his ambition. He tries his best to bring Manmatha and Sambal to a common course of action. He agrees with Sambal's accusation of the Communists with opportunism. He tells Manmatha:

We expect from you a hands-off policy. Don't let any caste try to curry favour with you. Let us give it a try the way we did before your Party entered. (p. 228).
He tells Manmatha to convince his leaders that it is not necessary to cater to the majority to spread the Party's influence. At the same time, he approves of Manmatha's proposal to approach different communists among untouchables to set aside their caste differences. He suggests that Sambal should marry Putki and move to the Muslim locality. Even when Sambal refuses to marry and vows to work on his own, he does not lose hope on him. He tells Putki that "he was certain that Sambal would return and apologise. He was a man of honour and would soon admit his mistake." (p. 242).

Stretching the comparison with Mohamaya a little further, it may be said that while Mohamaya succeeds in her mission, Parashar fails because he has set limitations to his work and also because Sambal slips into self-isolation.

The character of Manmatha may be studied as a contrast to that of Sambal. Unlike Sambal, he is educated and wellversed with the theory of the Communist Party. He is also an experienced worker, having worked successfully in the neighbouring villages of Bistrupur. Another striking difference is that while Manmatha keeps cool even when he is provoked, Sambal is highly emotional and flares up easily. Further, Manmatha is no less important than Sambal in bringing social change in Basuli. But in this, he works as an instrument of the Party, and cannot work as an individual like Sambal. Persuasion is Manmatha's method in getting things done. After Sambal is stabbed, he brings Communists who are experienced in exploiting discontent. He comes out with the slogan that his Party is 'committed to finding a better life for all.'
calls for non-co-operation of "those who wash their (people of high-castes) clothes, clean their latrines, deliver coal, firewood and all." (p. 80). While Sambal hopes to bring unity among the low-castes in resisting Paramesh with the help of Communists, Manmatha wants to make use of Sambal for the purpose of influence of his party. They succeed only partially in uniting the low-castes. Manmatha attempts to bring the barbers and washermen together but does not succeed. He also fails in getting the support of the barbers for Sambal's candidature for Gram Panchayat. Instances like this make him feel that it is not possible to forge unity among the low-castes. He wants Sambal to realise this:

In so many ways I have tried to make you understand that the village social order is far more complex than simple minds would believe. Zemindars are gone, but even so we have not been able to uproot the evils of caste order because the change affects every individual. Even in Bardwan they practise caste superiority. It is better that you don't talk about something about which you know so little. (p. 237).

He proposes to work for unity, by persuasion but Sambal dismisses it as 'soft soaping.' The novel ends in a dilemma as to what is going to happen to the intentions of Manmatha and Sambal.

On the other side, the former zemindar, Paramesh Ganguli, symbolizes the social and economic exploitation of the low-caste people in Basuli village. He dictates all matters concerning the village though he has lost most of his land to government and
lives on selling the jewellery and gold he has inherited. He is the embodiment of social bigotry and resentment for the low-caste people. Their children are not allowed in school. They should not use tube wells. Medicine is denied to them in the dispensary. On hearing that Mahanta has entered the Kali temple, he exclaims: "I cannot believe what I hear, that untouchable entered our temple and polluted our Kalima. What curse will we have to bear for this?" (p. 4). He gets the police inspector transferred with his political influence for having let Mahanta out on bail. He dismisses Parashar but lies to the magistrate that he has resigned his job. He sends a message to the Home Secretary to write to the magistrate "to stop meddling in the affairs of Basuli." (p. 100). He is not bothered by the case filed against him for getting Sambal stabbed. "Let there be a hundred cases for all I care. I will silence them with the rod every time" (p. 75), he boasts.

Further, the low-caste people are subjected to economic exploitation. "The Zemindar paid the lowest daily rate in the district." (p. 4). Anyone who demands better wages is beaten ruthlessly. He had forcibly occupied hundreds of acres of land which belonged to poor peasants. Labourers are squeezed to starvation.

Paramesh welcomes the formation of 'Gram Panchayat' but he resents the rights of the untouchables. He succeeds in eliminating Sambal from the elections. He employs labourers from the neighbouring villages when the low-caste people refuse to work in his fields demanding better wages. He divides them by paying
better wages to the Mahasya labourers. He forces the farm
labourers to pay tax debts as they support Sambal.

While Paramesh has a low-caste rival in Sambal, he
finds a high-caste rival in Khagen Dutta. The emergence of Khagen
Dutta dilutes the authority of Paramesh in the village. He
dislodges Paramesh's eldest son as the President of the school.
He uses the Communist Party to remind the villagers how Paramesh
treated the poor. His decision to conduct Durga Puja makes
Paramesh revive his own Puja ceremony after a gap of fifteen years
in spite of his dwindling economic position. Paramesh makes use
of the renovation of the temple to counter both Khagen and the low-
castes at the same time. He expects to gain popularity and weaken
Khagen by giving the temple to the low-caste people. On the
other hand, he is "satisfied that the temple would check all sorts
of reckless demands by the peasants." (p. 185). He creates caste
feuds by supporting the Bagdis against the Muchis.

The news that Paramesh Ganguli is suffering from
pancreatic cancer is too sudden to be convincing. It appears to be
one more device to underplay the role of Paramesh in the later
part of the novel. Sambal thinks that it is time now to use force
on Bagdis to achieve quick results in taming the monster of
caste-feuds before its creator, Paramesh, dies.

Among the women characters in the novel, the most
notable character is Putki. She appears from the beginning to the
end of the novel. She is Sambal's neighbour and a playmate. She
is the daughter of Haripada who collects animal hides. Caste comes in her friendship with Sambal:

Resistance to their friendship had grown stronger over the years from both communities. There were clear warnings that neither side would tolerate any suggestion of marriage. Mastermoshai's support did not count. (pp. 132-133).

Fearlessness marks the character of Putki. Though her only desire is to get married to Sambal, she never hesitates to correct his attitudes. She tells Sambal: "I don't want to see you turned into an angry man with nothing but revenge in your heart." (p. 82). Like Mastermoshai, she shuns violence. She weans him from quarrelling with the fish-vendor and the sweets-vendor. She takes an assurance from him that he "won't do anything that will separate them." She corrects Sambal's opinion that all the high-caste people look down upon the untouchables. She refers to Bibhuti's family who look upon her as a member of their family. Initially, she tells him: "I believe you can do so much for our people, but since you chose to join hands with the communists, you have given up reason." (p. 110). But later she decides to work with him. She is inspired by his idealism. Sambal wants her to carry message from one worker to another. She saves the life of Ganga who is set on fire by her husband. She tells Shefali not to think of herself only as a housewife. "You can also help break into the course of superstition and prejudice," she tells her.
In spite of his strong desire to marry her, Sambal keeps revenge before personal happiness. It often leads to altercation between them:

"You have only one thought, marriage. I am not ready for it just now."

"You want your revenge first."

"Yes."

"I won't let you go through this madness."

"No one can stop me, no one." (p. 153).

Parashar tells Putki's mother:

Sambal, like any other idealist, sometimes neglects his private life. You should not take it as callousness. I know he wants to marry her and will do everything to make her happy.

(p. 229).

Putki overcomes her limitations when she faces a crisis and herein we see the development in her character. When Sambal is arrested, Putki goes on a mission of courage to the magistrate and manages to meet him. She proceeds to Calcutta to seek Parashar's help to release Sambal. But, the events following his release only confirm her fears that Sambal has gone insane with revenge, and has reached a point of no return:

If he could make Mastermoshai his enemy, where would she find any hope of saving him from his disastrous course, she thought. (p. 240).

She is certain that Sambal will not come back to her. Though a
"palmist had seen self-destruction in his hands" (p. 242), she visits his hide-out. She tells him:

You have no control over your actions any more.
Please listen to me, give up this madness. (p. 244)

Sambal replies:

"If there is one person I don't want to listen to, it is you. I feel your betrayal deeply." (p. 244);

Putki loses all hope of reforming him but continues to adore him. Hence, even before going to drown herself, she prostrates herself before the steps of his house in farewell.

Interestingly, it has been pointed out that Putki's characterization suffers credibility when she, as a village girl, reports on Paramesh's disease of pancreatic cancer to Sambal. A reviewer says:

Some of the characterizations seem radical. For an untravelled and unlettered village girl, Putki's fears and uncertainties in Calcutta could be genuine enough; but then for the same girl to discuss Paramesh Ganguli's medical report showing him to be suffering from Pancreatic cancer is hardly credible. 6

Another reviewer points out:

The trouble about the book is that neither

characters nor situations are handled with any imagination. The characters are stereotypes, the happenings unpredictable.7

But, a close look at the important characters in the novel testifies to the view that they have 'consistency' in reacting to the events of the novel. They also register some growth in thinking and in their attitudes as the novel moves on.

The author uses both 'showing' or dramatic method and 'telling' method in presenting the characters and also as a part of his narrative technique. The novel opens with a dramatic account of Mahanta in jail being interrogated by the sub-inspector and a mob of young men yelling for a lynching. After the mob has left the place, Mahanta's entry into the Kali temple is narrated in flashback technique. Using the same technique, the author narrates Parashar's activities in Kaibati village in chapter 24. The author chiefly employs the third-person point of view and at times intrudes into the novel. For instance, Parashar Ghose, the school master, is introduced by the author himself on P. 7. A glaring example can be seen on P. 66 where Deben is introduced with a brief account of his life from childhood. Similarly, Saraju Bala Desi is introduced in an authorial way on P. 120 while Ganga's episode is narrated in a dramatic mode on p. 146.

The author also makes use of memory technique to narrate the past events linked to the present. For instance, on P. 16 Paramesh recalls how Parashar had opposed him in two

instances -- first, in supporting Mahanta not to shift his residence and second, in admitting a sweeper's son to the school. Similarly, Shefali recollects the episode of Karanga, the animal castrator, who died of snake-bite to drive home the point of caste discrimination.

At times, the author probes the thoughts of characters to throw light on events and characters and their reactions. For instance, when Deben, the Congress Party Secretary, speaks of using force to silence the low-caste people, Nelo, the washerman thinks of him as his jaw hardens:

This obstinate Brahmin was one of the main instigators of hatred in the village. He never spoke to any of the low castes without wrinkling his forehead and raising his voice. It is time for the Brahmins to learn a lesson, he thought.

(p. 69)

Similarly, as Sambal and Putki are crossing the river by boat, Sambal calls her his 'bride' and 'a torrent of emotion fills her heart.'

It was the first time he had said something like that since they had argued about their future. A spasm of grief followed. She did not understand why Sambal could not see that the Communists were being clever .... How long would it take before Sambal could see that eventually he would be betrayed? (p. 152).
In another context, when Sambal agrees to speak to Mastermoshai, the author records the thoughts of Putki and Sambal simultaneously:

A deep sigh of relief showed Putki held some hope ... She knew what he was worth. If only he could learn to live without constantly thinking about what had happened to his father, there was a fair chance of happiness. Sambal reflected on how his father would have agreed with Putki's views. His father and he had been unjustly put behind bars as criminals. The man was responsible was about to die. If he could not settle scores with him, the monsters he had created must be tamed. Basuli should not have caste conflicts, that was all he wanted. Putki could find peace with her simple demands, but for him peace meant something quite different.

(p.231).

At the end of the novel, as Putki goes to commit suicide, the author records her thoughts of dejection:

She had loved him so deeply, it was not the fear of castigation that had pulled them further apart. She could live with him under any conditions, if he cared to be reasonable and gentle with her. He did not want her any more, she was convinced. If she meant anything to him, he would never go ahead with his plan, knowing they could never be together.

(pp. 244-245)

We may say that, like Mulk Raj Anand's first three novels -- Untouchable, Coolie and Two leaves and a Bud -- Basu's
novel abounds in social realism. A reviewer says:

The novel is cast just after India won her independence; but surprisingly writing in 1986, Romen Basu manages to capture the present-day life and the ethos in which the untouchable still lives today. The untouchable is still scared of the upper caste; he still lives in humiliation; and he ekes out a miserable existence at the mercy of the upper caste.

The novel is a fine sympathetic portrayal of Indian reality in terms of the lives of the dispossessed. The author incorporates many instances of social, economic, political and religious exploitation of the low-castes in the course of the narrative and one feels that a gloomy and sinister picture is painted. The social system, as presented in the novel, is afflicted with inhuman division and distorted values. As a reviewer rightly observes, the details and many instances of the harassment of harijans that the author brings out in Outcast and the sentimentality with which he etches the souls of his characters are commendable. His characters may not be real, but their harassment and misery are definitely true to life. While Basu runs through the gamut of human emotions, the book lays stress on the negative emotions like loneliness, forlornness, agony, disharmony and unfulfilled love.

9. Ibid.
On the other hand, the low-castes seem most reluctant to be rid of their misery. There are walls within walls even among the low-castes and the only obsession of the sub-castes is to maintain an illusory ascendency over the others as evidenced in the issue of temple management. In the words of Shakuntala Narasimhan, Basu offers excellent insights into the labyrinthine logics that dictate human responses rooted in deep-seated prejudices.10

Further, the rural milieu of Basuli comes alive in Basu's hands in Outcast. The description of the locality of poor Muslims, for instance, smacks of rural atmosphere:

Palm leaf roofs were too expensive for them, so they had to make do with scraps of metal and burlap. In times of heavy rain, those dwellers had to cover their heads with gunny sacks inside the house. (p. 138).

This picture of poverty pales into insignificance when compared to the squalor in Calcutta as witnessed by Putki:

Underneath the arches of the thoroughfare she saw rows of impoverished shelters built with rags, cardboard and scrap metal, where scores of men, women and children made their homes. Putki had not seen such degrading human existence before. It was a mind-boggling experience to see women on the street burning newspapers and naked children competing with dogs to salvage food from garbage bins. She covered her nose and walked hurriedly along with

the masses of humanity overflowing from the pavement on to the road. (p. 212).

Similarly, the detailed account of 'Durga Puja' (from p. 166 to p. 171) and the description of 'puja' on the opening day of the Shiva temple in chapter 22 speak of the author's eye for vividness and lend a realistic touch to the narration.

The author's reference to certain beliefs and customs is also aimed at giving a glimpse of rural Indian society. For instance, references are made to pre-destiny and palmistry. A widow like Saraju is considered a liability to community. Girls should be married when they are thirteen and married women are identified by the sindhur they wear in the hair. Further, there is reference to Hindu deities like Lord Shiva, His wife Parvathi, their children Kartik and Ganesh, Saraswati and Lakshmi. There is a mythological reference that "Goddess Kali wanted to destroy the earth, because her father had spoken poorly of her husband, our Lord" (p. 185). There is also a reference to Bhim Puja. He is worshipped because he 'protected their fish and crop.'

An important aspect of Basu's use of language in the novel is the employment of Bengali terms. The number of terms is so large that he author gives a list of such words along with their English equivalents. They give local colour or 'regional flavour' to the novel. Like Anand, the author takes the native idiom and expresses it in English to give a native touch. The following sentences may be cited.
"You will be a stone around my neck." (p. 240)
"You are as rare a sight these days as the fig flower" (p. 130).
"He realised that it was not worth a coconut tree to pursue status." (p. 150).
"Why does Haripada treat me like a 'pig in the sewer'?" (p. 3).

There are certain descriptions in the novel which speak of the author's felicity of expression. For instance, Saraju does not want to be tempted to become a communist worker. The author says: "She did not wish to be sparked, then burnt to death." (p. 124).

At another instance, the author paints a verbal picture of a calm, starry night:

The brightest star in the sky, as clear as a piece of flawless crystal stood out among millions of other stars scattered like diamond chips in the heavens. Leaves rustling in the refreshing gentle breeze made the evening one of absolute serenity. (p. 125).

A discerning reader can see apt comparisons as in this sentence: "The sight of water made Sambal look like a camel yards away from an oasis." (p. 113).

Basu's use of language in Outcast has come in for a good deal of criticism. As a reviewer points out, Basu's language is too artificial and sophisticated to carry conviction and is entirely at odds with the rural setting of the novel. Basu is an
experienced novelist and a good craftsman but as in his previous novels, he works from outside his material and lacks genuine involvement with it.11

Another reviewer veers round to this view when he says that "the use of English is clearly 'babuish, full of cliches and tight-fist, to say the least." To prove his point he quotes a few sentences:

"The confession inflamed the zemindar." (p. 5)

"Mahanta's body stiffened, the air he breathed felt like hot steam." (p. 21).

"My rod will not be spared on anyone who dares to speak against my marrying whoever I choose." (p.239)

However, barring such limitations, Romen Basu's use of language in the novel is on the whole effective in conveying different ideas, emotions and feelings.

Conflict, contrast and symbolism are the chief aspects of Romen Basu's technique in the novel. He presents multidimensional conflict in the novel. Obviously, there is conflict between the low-castes and high-castes. It, in turn, takes the shape of conflict among the sub-sects of low-castes--the Muchis and Bagdis and so on. Similarly, all high-castes are not inimical towards the low-castes. There are some landlords who are aware of the economic exploitation of the low-castes and sympathize with them. But they do not dare to defy the zemindar. Just as there is

conflict between Mahanta and Haripada, there is also conflict between Paramesh and Parashar. While Paramesh supports Haripada, Parashar supports Mahanta.

The author presents contrast of character. As has been stated earlier, Sambal and Manmatha are contrasted with each other. There is also contrast between Tarapada and his father. While Tarapada disapproves of the caste system, his father believes that "giving privileges to those who had not had them in their forefather's time was to invite trouble." (p. 14).

The author also makes use of symbolism. As Manmatha goes through the dwelling area of low-castes, a pond choked with hyacinth catches his attention. The unused flowers of hyacinths look like untouchables for him. He hopes for better days to come, symbolically for the untouchables too.

Why was it that flowers of hyacinths were treated like untouchables, not fit for the vase or as offerings, he wondered. Some day this flower would find its place to the centrepiece and perhaps even to the tray in front of the altar, he thought. (p. 60).

Secondly, for Sambal, the entry of untouchables into the Kali temple is symbolic of equality of all castes. When the Shiva temple is renovated, he hopes that it will stand as a symbol of the unity of low-castes. But, when the Bagdis take hold over the temple, Sambal finds the temple a symbol of disunity and hence he decides to explode it.
Like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* Romen Basu's novel seems to have been written with a purpose. It is "to warn against the perpetuation of caste system to its logical extreme, and the inevitable disaster." The relevance of the novel lies in its plea for social change. Thus, in *Outcast* Basu has put together "a diverse set of characters and woven a story that reads well, sounds very true to life, invites compassion for the dispossessed and deprived, and makes its point with telling effect."  
