

## **“Untouchability is a blot on Hinduism” MulK Raj Anand’s Untouchable**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel *Untouchable* is a description of the action packed and ill fated day in the life Bakha, the protagonist who suffers at the hands of the caste Hindus due to the age old practice of untouchability. The action of the novel revolves around the poor boy who hails from the sweeper community. The novel is representative in nature and handles the theme of discrimination based on the caste system in the Indian context.

**Key Words :** Untouchable, Sweepter community, Caste system.

Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel *Untouchable* describes the pathetic conditions of the untouchables through the character Bakha, their immitigable hardships and physical and mental agonies almost with the meticulous skill of historical raconteur. In the words of Marlene Fisher:

Anand’s first novel, then, is at one and the same time a fine piece of creative work in terms of its own artistic integrity and an indication of its author’s humanistic commitments and future novelistic directions.

Untouchable is a faithful recordation and a transcription of the pathetic plight of untouchables who are subjected to immitigable social indignities, “only because of their lowly birth.” Anand depicted the miserable condition of the small family of Lakha, the jamadar of the sweepers. Anand not only throws light on their object poverty and suffering but also focuses its attention on their low-caste. As K.N. Sinha comments:

The novel has a tragic beauty of its own. The will to revolt and the sheer impossibility of successful doing so under the circumstances constitute the basic tension in the novel. The hero is simultaneously a rebel and victim. His anguish becomes our sorrow. But Bakha has no tragic status as scapegoat and a victim, tyrannized by a recalcitrant society. He is the lowest of the lowly whose destiny does not suffer any appreciable erosion.

Bakhahas to fight the enemies not from within but from without, and he is not as against any particular individual as against the whole hierarchical stiffness of the social custom. With this sense of alienation from the conglomerate humanity, he becomes much distressed when he comes to know that he is ostracized even before he is aware of it. Cleaning three rows of latrines in a single day and starting his routine work with his father’s cascade of abuses and unconcealed threats are the rituals he had to undergo umpteen times-

Get up, ohe, you Bakhya, ohe son of pig! ...Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten.

His day starts with endearing entreaties and downright abuses by his father and his encounter with the high-caste people, who can not put up with his very sight. His sturdy body, which could bear any physical labour, is drained of all the vestigial energy. He has to remain content with the pan cakes thrown at him, by the high caste Hindus, and is more than shocked when he is slapped by a caste-Hindu, for having 'polluted' him. Though he has the muscular strength to hit back, he keeps his cool, thus taking all the indignities to his stride. As Anand describes:

His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, for away from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the onlookers, but a moral one.

The action of the "touched man", polluted by the untouchable Bakha, is a deliberate one, which only reveals the pathetic predicament of the untouchables. As Bakha says:

All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it to...I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an untouchable!

The conditions which the untouchables are enforced in to are really shocking through one can share their aches and agonies. When Sohini goes to a community well to fetch water, she becomes embroiled in unsuspected caste recriminations. Their plight is so dire that even for the fulfillment of the basic needs like water and food; they have to depend on the mercy of high-caste Hindus. Sohini has to wait as well, for quite along time, to fetch a pot full of water, for her tired and thirsty brother, putting up with the lustful and ogling men. One of the Hindus, Pandit Kali Nath, draws water for her and calls her his house to clean the courtyard and tries to molest her. But when she shouts to protect herself, he cries out "polluted", "polluted". Bakha arrives at the scene only to remain a mute witness, though his first impulse was to beat him up. He desperately comes and tells his father.

...They think we are mere dirt, because We clean their dirt.

A double-edged dramatic irony operates through this scene. The defiant consciousness or the "faint stirrings of rebellion", which had germinated in Bakha by the slapping incident begins to take an articulate form. Bakha enters the temple courtyard apparently to clean it. The painful knowledge of the brand of untouchability which won him a slap on the face arouses in him contrary feelings –fear and curiosity hones up his determination to seek the cause of stigmata on him. Perhaps the object of mystery the crowds of the orthodox Hindus much more orthodox than the crowd in the bazaar are walking up the temple steps to worship is responsible for it. "What have these people come here to worship? He asked himself ". He advances towards the stairs "with a determined hurried step...A murderer might have advanced like that..."(p.64). But he soon loses his grace crippled by "the dead weight of years of habitual bending cast on him". He goes back to collect the heaps of rubbish. But he stops after a while to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Then he finds that the temple stood challengingly before him and it "seemed to advance towards him like a monster," the monstrous symbol of unrelenting authority that "murdered without a rite" the unfortunate victims thrown away from its fold. It might as well "envelop" him, throttle his freedom and dignity, and reduce, him to a helpless subhuman existence as the oppressive forces of authority did for centuries. But he is not to be deterred, he struggles. The struggle is with his own weak will and unseen forces of evil ultimately on a metaphysical plane: "He hesitated for a while. Then his will strengthened. With a sudden onslaught he had captured five steps of the fifteen that led to the door of the temple". He becomes a rebel in action. The rumbling of rebellion can perhaps, be heard only by the most sympathetic and imaginative ear. Bakha too impelled by sure sense of "inner impulse pushed him a step or two further up", but for a moment he loses his balance as though threatened by a power which is more than a match assault and reaches the top step. Now he has a glimpse of the "hidden mystery"- hidden from the "innermost recesses of the tall dark sanctum."

Anand's hero is not of the race, not of the time and the place, but exemplifies all humanity caught in contingencies of an antiquated social order that impedes his evaluation in to a self-consistent social life. Bakha is one of those millions who crawl and creep and exist almost anonymously.<sup>7</sup>

Anand in *Untouchable* deals with the outcastes engaged in an intense struggle with oppressive forces. Bakha has to struggle and suffer every minute because he is untouchable and he has no right to live like other upper caste.

By the character of Sohini, Anand tried to show the picture of Indian sweeper caste people especially the lower caste females. Sohini has to wait for water for hours because she is from downtrodden class. Anand is undoubtedly writing a message for his own culture in *Untouchable*; much of the novel contrasts the innate decency of Bakha with the gap between the protestation and practice of untouchability among caste Hindus in India. Chiefly in the hypocrisy of the priest who claims Bakha's sister has defiled him when he himself fondled the young girl's breasts, but also in other scenes where characters cut corners when it suits them. Sohini is the most important character in the novel *Untouchable* written by Anand because she is the passive sufferer. She is intelligent and beautiful but she has to wait for hours for drinking water on well. When Pandit Kali Nath tries to come close to Sohini she was not ready so Pandit himself spread rumors that she polluted him. Sohini tries to tell the truth but no one was ready to believe her. It is the real picture of the outcaste women. Bakha's story is set over one "eventful" day of his life. Anand beautifully describes the typical day in a small British town neighbouring the soldiers' barracks. The behaviour of the upper caste Hindus described in the book, churns your stomach. Even the so-called *sanyasis* are not free from the mentality of the caste-system. The opportunism displayed by the evangelist who has no aim of improving the untouchable's life except converting him to Christianity, the division amongst caste-lines even in the untouchables' colony is depicted realistically. Naturally, Bakha is attracted towards the soldiers who do not treat him as badly as the civilians. He dreams of being like one of those, because for him it is a ticket out of his terrible world.

But, it is Gandhiji's talk that reforms Bakha's thoughts to some extent. In the assembly, he overhears someone telling the people about modern toilets, where the human excreta will be flushed out automatically, thereby putting an end to this sub-human activity. He realises that the salvation of his community is not in any religious conversion or running away from there, but in modern technology. The story ends with Bakha pondering over this feature of technology, which is hailed as the saviour of his kind.

Mulk Raj Anand depicted the practice of untouchability as essentially a matter of pretentious religiosity and exploitation. by a very well worked out technique of dramatic irony. By juxtaposing the plight of Sohini with that of Bakha, the novelist has reinforced the representative character of the figure of the untouchable. Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* exposed the social realism in contemporary Hindu society.

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