

## A Critical Analysis of the Novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand

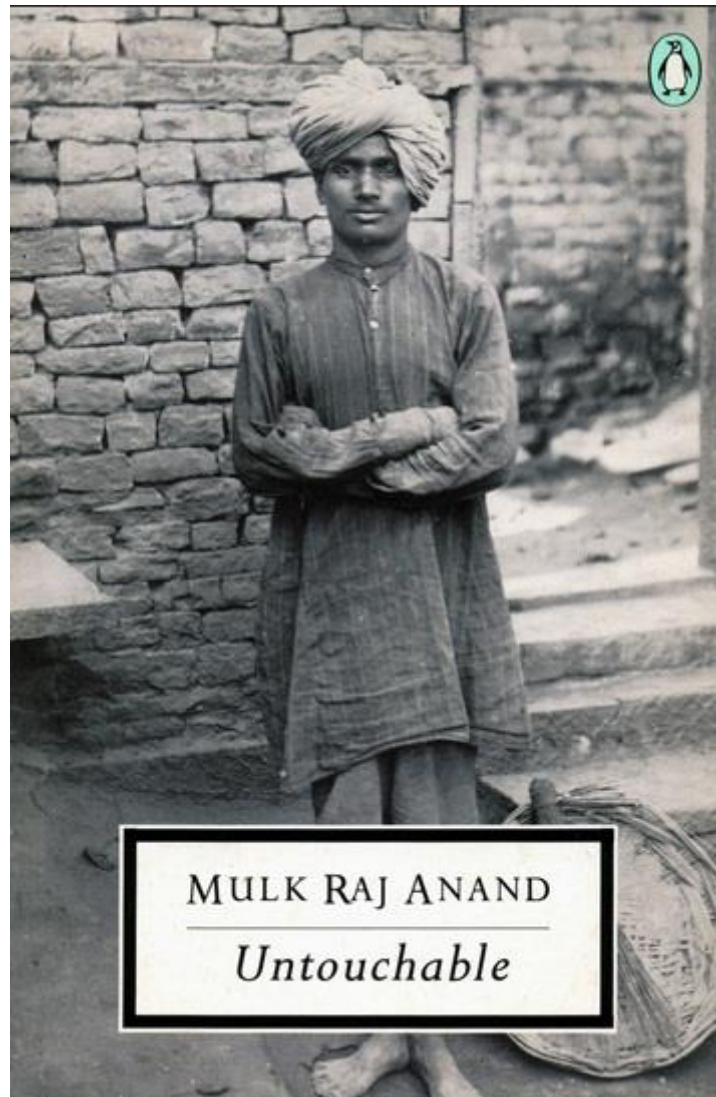
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### Abstract

Having been firmly planted in Indian society for thousands of years, untouchability has been one of the worst dehumanizing forms of social discrimination practiced in it. As a result, vast sections of humanity are inhumanly segregated as outcastes, suppressed and

condemned to live in poverty, squalor and degradation, all their potentialities for growth neutralized.

Expressing his faith in ‘humanism’ which does not depend on any divine sanction, and at which he had arrived after much thought and deliberation, Anand says that as a writer he became conscious of the need to help raise the untouchables, the peasants, the serfs, the coolies and the other suppressed members of society, to human dignity and self-awareness in lieu of the abjectness, apathy and despair to which they have been condemned. This paper attempts to look at the unique way in which the characters and situations are handled by the author, Mulk Raj Anand.

**Key words:** Untouchability, Dehumanizing, Social Discrimination, Suppressed Members, Human Dignity, Self-awareness

### **Bakha, the Protagonist**

Bakha, the protagonist, is introduced as a resident of the foul-smelling sweeper colony, as well as the sweeper officially in charge of the three rows of public latrines of the colony. He occupies the center of the stage throughout the novel. While Anand presents him with great sympathy, with real insight into his nature responding to every little change in his mind, he does not idealize him or turn him into a martyr. Bakha is presented as being at once a type and an individual. While he is one of these millions of suffering and exploited untouchables who have been living for thousands of years, anonymously, condemned to a sub-human existence, he is also seen to be an individual, combining in himself qualities which his creator both approves and disapproves.

### **Moral Qualities**

Early in the novel Bakha exhibits such “moral-physical qualities” as simplicity, stamina, innocence, earnestness and ambition. Further the novelist establishes his “special attributes of alacrity, dexterity, cleanliness, dignity and native intelligence by making him display them at the least expected time – that is, while Bakha is working at the latrines”. Anand intends to contrast his innate nobility with the sub-human status imposed on him and his community for centuries.

Having finished his day's work at the public latrines of the colony, Bakha sets out to the town to sweep the roads on his father's behalf, glad to be going there because all that he has to do there is to lift cow-dung and horse-dung with a shovel and sweep the dust of the road with a broom with a sense of duty and principles, and is a champion at all kinds of games, hockey in particular; and he is also eager to learn to read and write, be educated. But this burning desire has been frustrated:

He had argued and cried to be allowed to go to school. But then his father had told him that schools were meant for the *babus*, not for the *bhangis* --- He was a sweeper's son and could never be a *babu*. --- There was no school which would admit him, because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of a sweeper's son.

### **Humiliating Experiences**

However, on this particular morning as he walks towards the town with his broom and basket, there is music in his heart because of the prospect of a game of hockey with his friends in the afternoon as well as of a lesson in reading promised to be given by one of the *babu's* sons. How could he ever know that before the noon is over, he will have to go through three horribly humiliating experiences one after another?

### **First Episode**

The first of those experiences is Bakha's touching unwittingly and accidentally one member of a higher caste at the market-place and as a consequence getting slapped by him in the presence of the gathering crowd which jeers, teases, insults and calls him names, without a shadow of pity. Viewed by itself, his touching someone is a totally trivial occurrence which does not deserve to be taken note of at all. But in the context of a society built on rigid caste discriminations, it assumes monstrous proportions. So sudden and shocking is this experience to Bakha that it becomes traumatic.

Bakha approaches the town with his customary caution as an untouchable, even though there is "in his heart a song as happy as lark's". While buying a packet of Red Lamp cigarettes, he takes care to put the coin at the precise spot pointed to by the petty shopkeeper, and picks up the packet carelessly thrown to him as a butcher might throw a bone to an

insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop. He lights his cigarette hesitantly from the piece of coal from the clay fire-pot of a Muhammadan barber, even though he permits him readily to do so. With a childlike sense of inquisitiveness and wonder he walks through the main street of the town fascinated by the sights and sounds of the crowded bazaar. His felicity reaches its climax as he enjoys the taste of the *jilebis* he bought with his hard earned money, and thinks of the English lesson he has arranged to get from the babu's son. He does not know at all that he has touched a high caste man, a Lallaji who suddenly shouts at him:

Keep to the side of the road, the low-caste vermin | Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach | Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion | Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning. p.45

Bakha knows that even though he can easily break-through the barrier of the skeleton-like bodies of the onlookers with one push of his broad shoulders, he still would not attempt it because he would "defile" a great many more people. The barrier he faces is both "moral" and "physical". So in spite of the totally false accusation made by the urchin, he apologises to the Lalla.

The indignant and impatient Lalla is not satisfied by this unqualified apology. Emboldened by the support of the surrounding crowd he gives Bakha "a sharp, clear slap" on his face. The joy that Bakha was looking forward to and the packet of sweets in his hand, both bite the dust. He stands aghast. His countenance is lit with fire, even as tears well up in his eyes. For once he forgets his customary docility and humility: "The cumulated strength of his giant body glistened in him with the desire for revenge, while horror, rage, indignation swept over him". The only word of comfort comes from the Muhammadan tongawallah (horse-cart driver), who restrains him from losing his temper.

## Second Episode

Wearied in spirit, ruffled and agitated in mind, Bakha, who is always mindful of his duty, goes to the temple to sweep its courtyard, where another mortifying experience awaits him, because he and his community are condemned as polluting untouchables. This

experience has a sharper personal edge for Bakha, since his sister Sohini is made the victim of barbaric discrimination and sexual abuse. Both brother and sister are made to suffer ignominy and shame for no fault of theirs.

The episode at the temple also brings to light a most perplexing aspect of the discrimination practiced against the untouchables, not stressed so far in the novel. It is that, while they are included in the hierarchy of Hindu religion and allowed to pray to the several gods from the outside, they are forbidden from entering the temples lest they should defile the gods inside. As Bakha enters the temple precincts, his childlike curiosity is roused by the numerous gods worshiped there. His curiosity is particularly roused by the deity in the inner shrine of the temple, which he is forbidden to enter. He knows that an Untouchable going into a temple polluted it beyond purification.

### **Third Episode**

But the edge of his curiosity becomes so intense that he hurries boldly towards the stairs. However, because of the dead weight of years of habitual bending caste on him. He becomes once again “the humble, oppressed underdog that he (is) by birth, afraid of everything creeping slowly up, in a curiously hesitant, cringing movement. He mounts the first two steps, but feeling completely demoralized with fear, he retreats to the place he started from. The novelist marvelously recreates the instinctive urge felt by Bakha to free himself from the shackles of centuries degradation and the psychological damage done to him and his community by the exploitation of upper caste people.

In spite of these fears and misgivings the urge to see the deities in the inner recesses of the dark sanctum becomes so overwhelming that Bakha by means of “sudden onslaught” “captures” the flight of steps that lead to the door of the temple. Bakha catches just a glimpse of the images in the sanctuary and the priests in front of them offering ritual worship to them. Anand describes faithfully and precisely how child-like Bakha responds spontaneously to the worship, as he listens to the flourish of the conch notes, the ritualistic chanting of the priests and the singing of the worshipers:

Bakha was profoundly moved. He was affected by the rhythm of the song.

His blood had coursed along the balanced melodic line to the final note of

strength with such sheer vigour that his hands joined unconsciously, and his head hung in the worship of the unknown god. P66

### **The Cunning and Hypocritical Priest**

Ironically, at this moment of spontaneous adoration, Bakha is rudely knocked out by the sharp, ringing and unnerving cry, “polluted!” It is actually raised by Kali Nath, the temple priest, who had virtually commanded Bakha’s sister Sohini that morning to come to clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. Neither suspecting his intentions nor free to disobey a holy priest, she turns up at his house, just about the time Bakha is at the temple. When the priest misbehaves with her, she screams to fend him off. To extricate himself from this nasty corner he had got into by his own indecent designs, the priest raises shouts of pollution. Immediately a crowd gathers, as it always does on such occasions. They all mercilessly shout abominable abuses at Sohini, and the girl cringes and quietly walks away.

The crowd naturally sympathizes with the hypocritical priest. Bakha at the beginning feels guilty and unnerved as he is on the steps of the temple. He also fears for his sister who stands there speechless. When he gets to know from her that she is guiltless and that the lecherous priest had used her helplessness as an untouchable and the privileges of his caste to his advantage, Bakha’s instinctive reaction is to take revenge on him. His fist clenched, his eyes wild and red with indignation, and his teeth grinding between them a challenge, he advances in giant strides. He even exclaims: “Brahmin dog | I will go and kill him”. But his wild desire to retaliate for the ignominy done to his sister, he realizes, is to no avail. The novelist comments:

A superb specimen of humanity he seemed whenever he made the high resolve to say something, to go and do something, his fine form rising like a tiger at bay. And yet there was futility written on his face. He could not overstep the barriers which the conventions of his superiors had built up to protect their weakness against him. He could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody, especially by a low-caste man. So in the highest moment of his strength, the slave in him asserted itself, and he lapsed back. p71

Helpless Bakha can only bite his lips, ruminating his grievances. On the earlier occasion when he was slapped by the Lalle, he could only feel an impotent rage. Bakha in “his almost physical inability to revolt, his submission, his habitual sub service to superiors who insult him, he is one with the vast majority of the outcastes”, who are left with few resources after centuries of oppression have done their work upon them. Bakha is cowed down by the yoke of caste system and ancestral serfdom.

### **Internal Critical Analysis of Gandhi’s Views**

When Gandhi calls upon the untouchables to purify their lives, cultivate the habits of cleanliness, and rid themselves of the evil habits like drinking liquor and eating carrion Bakha feels confused and cannot agree with him. But soon he feels lifted up when Gandhi calls upon them not to accept from caste Hindus leavings from their plates, and receive from them only good grain if it is courteously offered. The Mahatma implies that the untouchables should not compromise their self-respect; he also points to the caste people to be more charitable and kind to the untouchable. At the close of his speech he censures the caste Hindus for their ignorance of their religion and urges them to declare open all public wells, temples, roads, schools, sanatoriums to the untouchables, and carry on propaganda against untouchability. To drive home his point to the gathering, apparently to show how serious a matter is untouchability, he lectures on this social evil and the urgent need to root it out.

### **Atrocities Faced by a Sensitive Young Man**

As a special comment on the novelist’s style, his handling of Bakha, the protagonist, can hardly be bettered. With particular reference to the theme of untouchability, a most heinous form of social discrimination, Anand projects it as experienced by a sensitive and basically intelligent young man, who has inherited centuries of old burden and has suffered enormous damage by it.

### **Skillful and Passionate Portrayal**

The undoubted success of the novel is due to the edged economy with which the material is selected and organized. so as to keep the focus unremittingly on Bakha’s mind which is the scene of a deepening tension as well as emerging (however confusedly) awareness. Anand’s understanding of the psychology of the untouchable as well as the caste Hindu is penetrating, and he presents a balanced and objective picture of their relationship in

this novel. While he certainly desires that this form of barbaric social discrimination should be rooted out, he does not overstate his case.

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