

## **Social Realism in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: A Critical Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, beyond all shade of doubt, is one of the most virulent satires on Hinduism and its hypocritical practices. This is nothing but a reflection of the society. The theme of suffering caused by vicious circumstances in life has been realistically depicted, and the heroic struggle of the central figure elevates the novel to the lofty heights of a mini epic. Religious hypocrisy, feudal system, East-West encounter, the place of woman in the society, superstitions, poverty, hunger and exploitation are his common themes. Though the novel depicts single day activities of the protagonist, it also portrays the Indian society from 1930 to 1940 when poverty, slavery and the inhuman exploitation of the masses were at the peak. The theme of suffering caused by vicious circumstances in life has been graphically and realistically depicted, and the heroic struggle of the central figure raises the novel to the classic heights. Anand's first-hand knowledge of the low caste people and their pathetic lives made him voice their misery. He knew thoroughly what he was dealing with. Bakha is not simply an individual outcaste rather he represents the entire outcast community treated as untouchables. The consequences of suppression and humiliation most adversely affect the consciousness of children. Besides the ordeal of poverty and social suffering, children, in unconscious way, construct the psyche of aggression and rebellion.

**Keywords:** Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, Untouchability, religious bigotry, suffering, ossified social attitudes, deprivation, humiliation

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*Untouchable* is a novel with prime concern for society and inspired by a mission to eliminate the evils of casteism, hypocrisy and exploitation of the poor in the name of Pseudo-Supremacy. The caste Hindus used the untouchables as their personal property. The most poignant situation was that they had no right even to ask for justice. The novel vehemently condemns and criticizes the diabolical practice of casteism and savage treatment of the untouchables. It is the hypocrisy of the Hindu tradition which renders the untouchables as born from the feet of the Brahma.

In *Untouchable*, Anand reveals the most deplorable condition of untouchability, exploitation, child labour, social governance, customs, religious beliefs, prejudices, and the plight of the miserable masses. As early as 1930 the mindset of people in general was fixed and rigid and they took things for granted as they existed.

Anand's portrayal of the protagonist Bakha's inner life makes *Untouchable* the kind of novel that has great social as well as human significance and thus makes it part of the growing concern that Mulk Raj Anand himself was feeling for metaphoric untouchables. The entire story of *Untouchable* revolves around the basic question of untouchability, arising mainly from poverty, indifference and unconcern of the entire society. The entire action takes place within a period of less than twenty four hours (16 hours). Though the scene of the novel belongs to a small interior town of the Punjab, the happenings are Pan-Indian in character. Bulashah, a small town with an outcaste colony on the outskirts represents a normal Indian town found anywhere in India. Most of the action of the novel takes place at an outcaste colony and in the streets of the small town. The central theme is the problem of untouchability. *Untouchable* is not only a novel of enormous suffering, humiliation and deprivation but also the socially tragic life of Bakha. Anand has presented Bakha with all the strength and vigour of his mind and heart. In fact, Bakha is his brain-child, the breath of his being and the hero of his heart. He had known Bakha from his childhood and a sort of, adored him for his superb qualities. Rajvir Singh in this context says that: "Bakha is not a particular individual. He is a symbol, a protagonist of the depressed class, a feeling, thinking understanding and sensitive fellow in a society hide-bound in downright conservatism and ossified social attitudes." (26)

Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* is historic in the sense that he opened up a new and radical avenue in Indo-Anglian fiction by dwelling passionately and no less legitimately on the plight of untouchables long before the attainment of India's freedom. The theme of suffering caused by vicious circumstances in life has been graphically and realistically depicted, and the heroic struggle of the central figure raises the novel to the classic heights. Anand's first-hand knowledge of the low caste people and their pathetic lives made him voice their misery. He knew thoroughly what he was dealing with. Bakha is not simply an individual outcaste rather he represents the entire outcast community treated as untouchables. The consequences of suppression and humiliation most adversely affect the consciousness of children. Besides the ordeal of poverty and social suffering, children, in unconscious way, construct the psyche of aggression and rebellion.

Amudha in her article opines that: it

Economic Hardship and Emotional Humiliation in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, implies the notion about Bakha's individualistic manner; Bakha the central character of this novel, is the representative of all the down-trodden society in Pre-Independence India. He is a universal figure to show the oppression, injustice and humiliation done to the whole community of the outcastes in India. He symbolises the hardships and humiliation which has been the fate of untouchables. He suffers because of his caste (210)

Bakha, who had begun to work at the age of six, is duty minded and a responsible son and the way he is treated by the Tommies and his strong muscles tell that he was sincere in discharging his responsibility. Bakha right from the bed straight away joins the duty of latrine cleaning, he is duty minded and able bodied and an embodiment of hard work who has the habit of getting up early and skilful at his work. He wants to be fashionable and tries to imitate the Tommies. He is rebellious in nature and a symbol of struggling minds of millions of untouchables in India and he is the child of modern India. While others accept humiliation and tyranny as their divine fate in a servile manner, he violates the cruel tradition. Bakha discards the traditional uniform of sweeper to voice his sense of protest and revolt. He is conscious towards justice and equality among human beings. He waits for a radical change. Bakha's life is curious blend of mixed emotions as he swings between complete submission to traditional exploitation and a budding spirit of defiance.

Bakha's family consists of five members. They are Lakha, his father, Sohini, his sister, Rakha his brother and his mother who is no more but can be seen in Bakha's memory. Keen observation of each member of Bakha's family tells about the living conditions of the untouchables. The brief summary of the novel is as follows. Bakha starts his day welcomed by the abuses of his father and is forced to clean the latrines with a brush and a basket. His sister Sohini goes to fetch water from the caste well where she is compelled to wait for a caste Hindu to draw water which is again a routine for her life. Pandit Kali Nath fills her pitcher with water and summons her, with an ill intention to clean the temple courtyard. Bakha, on the request of his father rushes to the town to clean the roads. While walking through the streets of the town, a caste Hindu gets defiled by his touch to which he tries to apologize, joining his hands in humility, he stands deaf and dumb. The people gather around the scene and abuse Bakha. He pleads but no one feels pity for him. The defiled man gives a slap on Bakha's face and leaves the place. For the first time in his life Bakha is made aware of his status as an untouchable.

Bakha feels insolent and rushes to the courtyard of the temple announcing his arrival aloud. While roaming outside the temple he curiously looks into the temple. A Brahmin sees Bakha on the steps and shouts at him for polluting the temple. While climbing down the steps he finds his sister Sohini standing in the courtyard frightened and speechless. She tells Bakha about the priest's attempt to

molest her and she further tells him that she screamed out of fear and the priest came out shouting that he had been defiled by her. An enraged, Bakha decides to look for the priest but Sohini stops him. As both of them realize their helplessness due to the limitations of their caste, they decide to give up and Bakha sends Sohini home. In *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand focuses his lenses on the hypocrisy, the dual standards and the perfidy underlying the facade of purity and spirituality.

Hargunjot Kaur aptly opines in this context that:

Religious diplomacy and hypocrisy were real instruments to exploit exploit the untouchables. As in this incident, the priest (Brahmin), the so-called custodian of religion is on one hand ready to have physical relation with a beautiful untouchable girl, Sohini, and on the other hand, Bakha, Sohini's brother is not allowed even to touch the steps of the temple Anand tries to reveal such religious bigotry in his novel *Untouchable*." (152)

Now Bakha is on the streets again to collect food, one of the basic needs for which the untouchables have to depend on caste Hindus. Though Bakha works hard from morning to evening, he is paid nothing for the laborious work instead he receives abuse. He starts shouting for food, but nobody responds. Tired of the hectic schedule he sleeps on the wooden platform in front of a caste Hindu's house. A high caste woman comes out of the house on the call of a Sadhu and shouts at Bakha for polluting her house. She asks him to clean the drain to get a piece of bread. While he is cleaning the drain, the woman calls him saying: 'Vay, Bakhya, take this. Here's your bread coming down.' And she flung it at him." (65) This scene is enough to say how cruel and inhuman the treatment meted out to the untouchables by the caste Hindus. With all these bitter experiences, Bakha's cup of frustration is full.

Bakha shared with his father, all the humiliation that he underwent up to then. The father consoles his son and asked him not to be aggressive. He also advises him to give a warning of approach while going through a crowd. His father Lakha symbolizes the servile attitude of the last generation who cannot even think about the revolt. The feeling of revolt grows in Bakha's consciousness due to the bitter experience he has. He burst out saying: "But, father, what is the use? ... They would ill-treat us even if we shouted. They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt." (70). However this urge to revolt could never be materialized as it was practically not possible for an outcaste to revolt against the higher classes. This passivity or helplessness of Bakha is a true reflection of social reality in the then Indian society. The only difference that is found between Bakha and his father is that the idea of revolt infused in Bakha's mind can never ever be thought of, by his father. He advises Bakha to bear the injustice with patience and fortitude in order to be reborn into the higher caste. Because his father says the caste Hindus are their superiors and masters and they must respect the caste Hindus.

After spending some time with his friends, he goes to Havildar Charat Singh to collect a hockey stick. Bakha gets excited with his kind treatment and goes to the playground to play a hockey match. The son of a high caste Hindu is hurt in the quarrel that takes place after the match. When Bakha takes the wounded boy to his house, the boy's mother, instead of being thankful and grateful to him, shouts at Bakha for defiling her son and the house as well. As he returns home in the afternoon, his father welcomes him with abuses for bunking his afternoon latrine-cleaning work utterly given up to despair, he goes out and sits under a pipal tree cursing the day. Colonel Hutchinson, a priest from the church, finds him lonely and takes him to the church where he asks Bakha to confess his sin so that he can be converted to the Christian religion. The Colonel's wife shouts at him for bringing a 'bhangi' to her house and Bakha runs away from the church.

While wandering through the railway station he hears the news of Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in the town. He rushes to Golbhadra to hear Gandhi's speech. With the sight of Gandhi he forgets all the miseries of the whole day. In his long speech, Gandhi expresses his wish to be reborn as an untouchable. He calls them *Harijans* and the cleaners of Hindu religion. He also warns them against their bad habits and asks them to stop accepting the cooked food for their work. Through the conversation between the two pro-and anti-Gandhi groups (Bashir and Iqbal), Bakha comes to know that the only solution to eradicate untouchability is the use of machine or the flush system.

The novel relates some pathetic incidents which occurred in the life of Bakha and thus brings out the pathos and sufferings in the life of untouchables. But it is not an utterly pessimistic novel. There are moments of optimism which relieve the story of Bakha of its darkness and tragic overtones. The situations in this novel are not totally tragic. The scheme of Anand includes a ray of hope. The plight of untouchables can be ameliorated by love and compassion. There are characters in the novel that stand for these humanistic ideals. For instance, there is Charat Singh, the Havildar, who is free from the pollution complex. He is generous and benevolent who does not seem to have inherited the caste Hindu complex of pollution. He shares tea with Bakha and offers him a new brand hockey stick. He scolds him in the morning for not cleaning the latrine for him to use but he does appreciate generously for his unmatched dexterity.

Charat Singh gives Bakha a brand new hockey stick. He also asks him to bring pieces of coal for his chillum from the kitchen and gives him tea out of his tumbler. Bakha is impressed by his kind and compassionate behaviour. He feels: "For this man I would not mind being a sweeper all my life. I would do anything for him." (96) The attitude of Charat Singh is a solution for the abolition of untouchability. Bakha forgets all humiliation suffered during the day when he is offered a cup of tea by the Havildar. Havildar's first appearance where he scolds Bakha at latrine cleaning creates a kind of negative impression in the reader but later he is seen as an embodiment of humanism and his attitude is the first and the best solution for eradication of untouchability. Another instance is the other woman in the lane who consoles Bakha saying, "My child, you shouldn't sit on people's door steps like this." (63) Many a

time people are kind hearted but the rigid system does not allow them to show their kindness. The Hakim gets angry when he was touched by Lakha, Bakha's father, but when he realizes the seriousness of the situation when Bakha was seriously ill, he rushes to Lakha's hut and saves his child, Bakha.

Bakha experiences fleeting sensations of happiness. When the Babu's elder son agrees to teach him reading and writing, and when Bakha walks with a 'Red Lamp' cigarette between his lips, when he sees the European musical instruments in the bazaar and munches his hard earned jalebis, he does feel happy. The gift of a brand new hockey stick by Havildar Charat Singh at the barracks in the cantonment leaves Bakha with an overwhelming sense of happiness and gratitude.

Anand suggests three solutions to the age old problem of untouchability. First solution is the conversion to Christianity. As long as untouchables are concerned, Christianity has done so much for their upliftment. Jesus Christ makes no distinction between the poor and the rich, between the high caste Hindus and the low caste untouchables. It has brought new hope and light in their wretched lives. But in *Untouchable* the novelist ridicules priests and religions. He makes a mockery of the Christian missionary. The colonel is a lovable but pathetic figure who, in spite of his zeal, has had little success with conversion because of his broken Hindustani. When Bakha goes away after undergoing a lot of misery from bitter happenings, he meets Colonel Hutchinson. Colonel is a Salvationist missionary whose duty is to convert the people into Christianity. He welcomes Bakha and tries to preach him about Jesus. He realizes the plight of Bakha and tries to persuade him to embrace Christianity, which is the right answer to the problem of untouchability on the part of the social outcastes. After proposing the eradication of untouchability through Christianity, Anand makes it clear that it is not valid and practical. Bakha is touched by the sentiment that Christ loves and accepts all people; he has genuine doubts, and the missionary fails to convince him as to who Christ is. Bakha gets bored and runs away. Why is it not practically possible? They(untouchables) are part of the Hindu society and have to live with Hindus; mere changing the religion will not give them any comfort and in no way it will change the mindset of the caste Hindus.

It is apt to quote C.J. George in this context saying:

“He may become a Christian with the help of Hutchinson, the Salvation Army Missionary. He has been happy to hear from Hutchinson that Christ receives all men and that Yessuh Messiah makes no difference between the Brahmin and the Bhangi. But the missionary's talking of 'sin' and 'confession' and his failure to clearly tell who Christ is, confuses the mind of Bakha.” (79).

The second solution is that of Mahatma Gandhi's ideology. Anand was profoundly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi; the novel itself is amended in Gandhi's Ashram. Gandhi appears as a character to speak on untouchability. For him, untouchability is the greatest blot on Hinduism. He says that all

Indians are equal and states his stand on untouchability. Gandhi says, “Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the untouchables and the protection of the cow.” (140) Gandhi’s appearance in the novel stands for solution to the problem of untouchability. Gandhi quoted two boys in his speech one is Uka, a latrine cleaner at Gandhi’s house, a boy who was forbidden to touch. The other boy a Brahmin who cleans latrines though he is from Brahmin orthodoxy. Bakha is impressed by these two examples but he fails to understand Gandhi’s philosophy. The second solution is that he takes comfort in Gandhi’s chastisement of the caste Hindus and wait till the social conscience of the people is roused. Gandhi’s words ‘Harijan’ and ‘cleaners of Hindu religion’ replace his humiliation by pride. A little later, while listening to an address delivered by the Mahatma on the untouchables, “The Children of God”, Bakha’s warm heartedness responds to the personal eloquence of the speaker’s words. He wanted to break in and tell Gandhiji, “Now Mahatmaji, now you are talking.” (139) The privilege of being one in the crowd before the Mahatma is a great experience for Bakha. He is thrilled to hear Gandhi saying that he would like to be born as an outcaste and that he does scavenging as a labour of love. Bakha’s struggle to concentrate on Gandhi’s words, the fluctuating response to the parts that he grasps, and the multiple reactions of the crowd including some negative criticism of Gandhi and his outlook confused Bakha.

The third solution is the need for the machine or the introduction of the flush system. Iqbal emphasizes the need of machine to clean filth and latrines. This will free them from the stigma of untouchability. It is said Gandhi wants to purify the souls, but Iqbal wants physical change. If the ideologies of Gandhi and Iqbal materialize the society will become worth living. Iqbal is an educated social activist, poet and a social reformist through whom Anand wants to remind the social responsibility of a writer to awaken the downtrodden people to bring equality and to establish social justice.

Bakha walks home with a new willingness or consciousness to talk to his father about what he has seen and heard in the evening. He wants to tell his father that there is a new light of hope in him although there is still shade of despair by its side. He returns to his bed at night with more hope that he had set out with in the morning. But his hopes are not fulfilled even after sixty plus years of independence.

*Untouchable*’s plot construction is superb because it is closely knitted and compact. It discards all superfluity; every incident and every episode boosts the action ahead. One classic unity of time, place and action is aptly observed. Through *Untouchable* Anand inaugurated the literature of the oppressed. The very choice of the theme of untouchability suggests his concern for the people of the lowest strata of society. The condition of untouchables in those days was really heart-rending. They have a number of duties and hardly any rights for themselves. Anand believed in the dignity of labour and the fundamental rights of an individual irrespective of his religion, caste or community. Thus Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel *Untouchable* deals with a hegemonic structure peculiar to India-caste. The target of Anand’s

attack in this novel is the bigotry of Hindu orthodoxy and the contestation is launched from the subject-position of a member of the exploited group – the untouchables. He throws open a heterogeneous field where different kinds of exploitations are at work and different systems of dominations such as caste, class, gender and denial operate in crisscross manner. Bakha occupies a position of subalternity in more than one scheme of exploitations such as cast, class and colonial subjugation and Mulk Raj Anand conceptualizes the entire complexity of the colonialism by describing a day in the life of Bakha.

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