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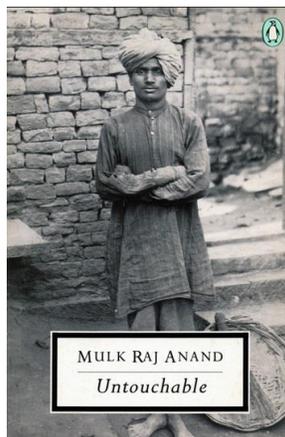
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## Social Order and the Dynamics of Hegemony: A Study of *Untouchable*

Himanshu Parmar, Ph.D.

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Power as the Governing Factor

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Himanshu Parmar, Ph.D.

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Power is invariably the oldest and the most dominating factor that has governed and determined the fates of nations and civilizations in human history. Historically it has been defined as the factor that made things the way they are and not otherwise. What is more astounding is that it has rarely been given the space, in life or politics, which is due to it as the governing factor. On the contrary, power has largely been garbed in different forms and ways thereby making it invisible and at times even non-existent. This garb has been religious, constitutional, political and intellectual as well. Power, hence, is rarely exhibited in its naked form, but it is largely in the former ways that it manifests itself.

This leads to the two major ways in which power operates in any order: the brute form of raw force and in its subtle manifestations. There have been various names offered to these manifestations by critics like Althusser and Gramsci but basically they revolve around two basic ideas: Exercise of power by remaining anti and exercise of power by remaining pro to the ones on whom it is being exercised.

### **Literature – A Mode to Exercise Power**

Literature becomes one mode of exercising power, not only for those holding power but also for the ones at the receiving end. Power, in literature, is the “right of representation” and it defines the ‘self’ who occupy space and a voice in the narrative, and the ‘other’, the marginalized and the negated. Here, as in life, “the right of representation” works at two levels, the coerced and the agreeable. However, in either way, the idea is to promote the superiority of the ‘self’ against the inferiority of the ‘other’.

The ‘othering’, as Spivak calls it, is a mutual process where the ‘self’ needs someone subordinate to be ‘othered’ and is defined as “the process by which the imperial discourse creates its ‘others’” (Ashcroft, 171). Hence, the ‘self’ needs the presence of the ‘other’ for its survival, and consequently, the equation of exercising power becomes tricky and hence complicated. While the ‘self’ cannot annihilate the ‘other’ it also cannot allow them ‘undue’ space in their territory. Moreover, for the former it is a mode to reflect their superiority and for the latter it is a strategy to survival in the midst of oppressive forces. The ‘other’ desires a position of power that allows them to overhaul the prevailing system and hence it tries to manifest ‘its power’ and work on it.

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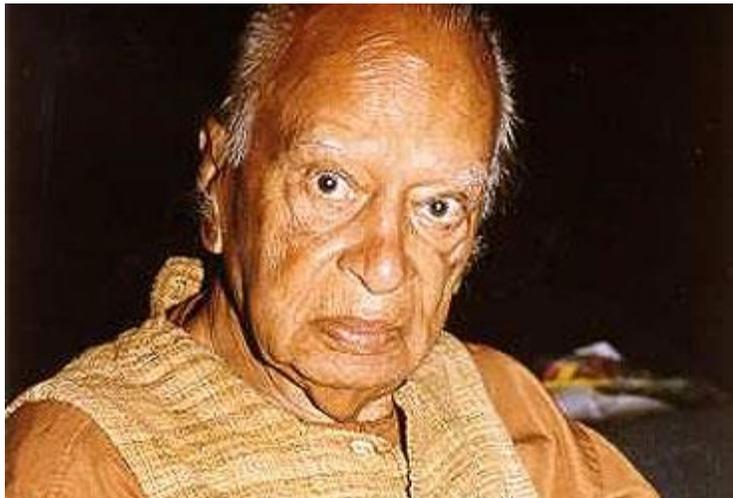
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Literature, then, is a place where the dialectical system works with the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ at loggerheads over the power of representation and trying to put ‘their’ truths in the narrative.

### **Use of Dialectic Power in the Text**

This dialectic of power involves the text in all its aspects namely thematic, formal, contextual and authorial. In other words, the dialectic is complete with the interplay of the themes, characters, language, the social context and also the author who composes the work. All these put together offer an insight into the power of representation in a text and highlight which way power is manifested in it.

### ***Untouchable* - Creating Empathy for the Downtrodden and Oppressed**



Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004)

Courtesy: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?232018>

One text where power holds a critical space is Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*. Composed in 1935, the text is believed, traditionally, to be a representation of the plight of those relegated to the lowest in the Hindu social and caste hierarchy, the outcastes. The text offers the power of representation to these people, oppressed for centuries as the *avarnas* in the Hindu caste structure.

As Dulai convincingly opines, “Given its subject, the plight of the outcastes in the Indian society, the book was fraught with the danger of deteriorating into a sociological tract. As it turned

out, Anand produced a beautiful work of art, winning from the reader heartfelt sympathy for the casteless wretched of India, who for centuries have been denied the right to be human. *Untouchable* stands as the most moving book in the entire corpus of Anand's writing" (190).

### **The Conventional Interpretation of *Untouchable***

On the whole, it is asserted with a lot of conviction that Anand, in his *Untouchable*, did something that was not done naturally in traditional and conventional literature: he took power from the socially powerful and gave it to the untouchables, thereby creating a discourse that turned the entire idea of the 'self' and the 'other' on its head by giving yet another aspect to the hegemonic or imperial structures of power: the shifting structure, where the powerful willingly offers space to the 'other' and represents it. This interpretation and analysis of the text was constructed around the fact that it placed an outcaste, Bakha, at the helm and represented a day in his life. This was crowned with the words of none other than Mahatma Gandhi reassuring Bakha by calling him *Harijan*.

### **Novel as a Carnival and *Untouchable***

However, with the advent of the idea of a novel being a carnival, a conglomeration of voices, the ways of assessing a novel underwent a drastic change. Bakhtin opines in "Discourse in the Novel", "The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (261). Consequently, a novel needs to be assessed by its quality of being a carnival. A novel, ideally, perceives Bakhtin, is an artistic genre that represents a heteroglossia of languages, one that is socially and generically determined.

In other words, a novel is a collection of voices, reflected through "languages", within a text. Moreover, in the midst of these 'voices' the voice of the author ceases to be 'the one' and gets distributed amongst the characters. Hence, any interpretation of the novel needs, "real ideologically saturated "language consciousness", one that participates in actual heteroglossia and multi-linguagedness..." (Bakhtin, 274). What is best is that a scrutiny of a text in this light brings to the fore wholly, the intentions in a text and that of its author, thereby laying bare the power discourse in it.

## Two Distinct Voices and Their Functional Roles

The characters in *Untouchable* that form the action in the narrative can be broadly categorized as the Upper castes and the Lower castes and implicitly, the novel, according to the standards of Bakhtin, should carry at least two distinct 'voices', one of either section. In the narrative, however, looking at the delineation of language, a very pertinent factor emerges, and that is the domination of a single voice and language and that is Class Oriented language rather than caste oriented. In other words, the only voice and the generic language that emerge in the narrative belong to the upper class, and are racial.

There are numerous instances where the voices, instead of being bifurcated and diverse are singly concentrated. At one place it says,

'I [Bakha] will look like a sahib,' he had secretly told himself. 'And I shall walk like them. Just as they do, in twos, with Chota as my companion. But I have no money to buy things.' (*Untouchable*, 14).

He was, after buying some 'English' clothes, called "Pilpali Sahib" by his friends but in his heart he knew "that except for his English clothes there was nothing English in his life" (ibid, 14). Bakha's desires and dreams don't revolve around a raise in the caste structure but in the class and race structure. He wants to be seen as distinct from the likes of his caste and the other low castes and desires, not to be like the pundit, but like the British sahib. Even with the scoldings of his father, his major grudge is, "he (Lakha) doesn't know anything of the sahibs" (*Untouchable*, 15). His routine, of working in the latrines and then in the streets at times, does not irk him so much as his father's chiding, asking him to wake up early for work and not wasting time playing with his friends. The language used in the narrative reflects a child's, that Bakha is, reluctance to wake up early and work instead of playing. The caste conflict goes into the background and is nowhere responsible for his plight. Even his dream for the future is:

"... and there reappeared before him the vague form of a Bakha clad in a superior military uniform, cleaning the commodes of the sahibs in the British barracks. 'Yes, much rather,' he said to himself to confirm

the picture”. (*Untouchable*, 87).

### **Class Character**

Bakha, then, is delineated along class lines and his aspirations likewise. He is a person who aspires for a class and racial rise but sticks to his task of an outcaste. This is also something that E. M. Forster affirms in his “Preface” to the text when he says, “...they [Indians] have evolved...the belief that the products are ritually unclean as well as physically unpleasant, and that those who carry them away or otherwise help to dispose them are outcastes from society” (“Foreword”, *Untouchable*, 8). In spite of the use of the word ‘outcastes’ he talks of an ideology that the outcastes are dirt because they clean dirt. In other words it means that because one cleans dirt is he an outcaste. But a caste definition, on the contrary, is that because they are outcastes they clean dirt. The focus in the narrative then, as asserted by Forster, is not on highlighting the plight of the outcastes, but on playing down any possibility of voices of dissent about the caste ill-treatment of the outcastes.

### **Caste Removed to the Background**

An incident in the narrative assumes a totally different light in the wake of this. Charat Singh, the Hockey player, scolds Bakha for not having cleaned the latrines in the morning. But immediately after that, as he sees Bakha working, he says to him, “You are becoming a “gentleman”, oh Bakhya! Where did you get that uniform?’ ...’Come this afternoon, Bakhe. I shall give you a hockey stick” (*Untouchable*, 19). Though Charat Singh’s body gesture is recorded as, “...he did not relax the grin which symbolized two thousand years of racial and caste superiority” (ibid), it is amply evident that caste takes a backseat in this incident and the scolding is more a result of a lapse of work rather than being casteist. This is further affirmed when Charat Singh gives him a new hockey stick just as he gave one to the “babu’s son”. This negates any casteist possibilities in the incident of his scolding Bakha and turns it into a reprimand for neglecting ones work.

### **Social Construction of Language**

The social construction of language through the character is of utmost importance, as asserted by Bakhtin, “...the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the

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object, makes the facets of the image sparkle” (277). The reference of Bakha as a “gentleman” by Charat Singh summarizes the way his “image” sparkles in the narrative. He further says for Bakha:

“He worked away earnestly, quickly, without a loss of effort. Brisk, yet steady, his capacity for active application to the task he had in hand seemed to flow like constant water from a natural spring. Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass...he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity...’What a dexterous workman!’ the onlooker would have said. And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean...’A bit superior to his job,’ one would have said...he looked intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean”. (*Untouchable*, 18-19).

The language here clearly signifies its hierarchy as being of a character belonging to an upper section of the social order, one who is ‘bright’. The last reference of “a rule” to the lower castes bears enough testimony to it. However, all this is attributed, not to any upper caste, but to Bakha, the scavenger. Terms like ‘earnestly, honestly, dexterous, alacrity, intelligent, sensitive and dignity’ have remained in the upper echelons of literature and its characters, rarely ever travelling down the order to refer to the ‘other’, but here, all the praises are attached to an *avarna*, the lowest in the Hindu caste hierarchy. This seepage of language to those at the receiving end of the order has won *Untouchable* the credit of being a pro-outcaste work.

### **“Exception to the Rule” Excuse and Justification**

Here, however, is more than meets the eye. There is a ‘bettering’ of Bakha as compared to his peers and fellows of his caste through this. He is an exception to the “rule” and unlike his friends and fellows physically, intellectually and skill wise. His status, is a direct misfit to the norm of being “uncouth and unclean” and Bakha, in addition to being better than his equals also carries a conscience much more refined than that of other of his caste, including his father. Both, his father and his friends, sympathize with him in his mental turmoil that the events of the day have posed before him. They are also exposed to the ‘mis-events’ but it does not raise a mental struggle as it

does in him. “He was feeling quite detached from the human world, bathed in a sort of unadulterated melancholy” (*Untouchable*, 103).

Bakha’s character’s superiority also reflects in the language of the Romantic genre associated with him. Far from being ‘survivalistic’ and sympathetic in nature, it projects him at a higher plane. When Ram Charan’s sister is to be married, Anand talks of Bakha’s thoughts for her, “During the dreary hours of his routine work at the latrines, subsequently, he had often heard the delicate strain of that elfin music...something in him secretly led him towards the sylph-like form which he could have squeezed in his embrace...” (*Untouchable*, 98). The fantastic and romantic in the language clearly lifts Bakha above the “rules” of language belonging to his caste centering on oppression and survival. Bakha’s superiority makes him the best amongst the outcastes. His happy state and minor focus on his caste makes him a kind of spokesperson to the following masses of the lower castes. By appeasing him the untouchables are appeased into a willing submission, also called hegemony which is defined as, “power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. Domination is thus exerted, not by force...but by...state apparatuses such as education and media...and thus comes to be taken for granted” (Ashcroft, 116).

### **Persuasion to Remain within the Hindu Hierarchy?**

In other words, through a sympathetic representation and negation of the caste issue, the lower castes are convinced, through consent, to remain within the Hindu caste hierarchy and follow its principles. *Untouchable*, instead of putting power in the hands of the outcastes, it, as Marxists opine, hegemonically strives to sustain power with the ‘self’, in this case the upper caste Hindu.

The power principle works on the idea of making the leader submit. The reason is quite evident: it is his ideology and way of approaching life that will be adopted by the others. At the same time, suppressing him will ensure that the others, the lesser ones, toe the line. More so, if the submission is not coerced but willed then it is all the more easier to control the masses. The character of Bakha asserts the same. His superiority amidst the people of his caste makes him a kind of leader, the better among equals. He is the one who, then, represents the caste of the untouchables.

However, his 'superior' stature as compared to his fellow beings, still, at no place makes him equal to the upper castes. Anand says at one place, "... it wanted the force and vivacity of thought to transmute his vague sense into the superior instinct of the self-conscious man" (*Untouchable*, 106). Bakha, then, is in a no man's land, neither like the scavengers nor like the *varnas*. Pacifying him within the folds of Hindu caste structure and keeping his status lower to the Caste Hindus makes it inevitable that the crowd of the lower castes will continue in submission.

### **What is the Motive, here?**

In this light, an assessment of the caste events that are interspersed in the narrative raises a question: are these being projected to highlight his plight or are they being showcased for a motive altogether different? There are four major incidents in the narrative that highlight the caste inequality. The cheating by the sweet vendor, ill-treatment of Bakha at the hands of the person he touches, the throwing of the bread by the lady and the ill-treatment of Sohini by the Pundit. What is very interesting to note is that the physical strength that is attributed to Bakha in the narrative is all redundant when it comes to these incidents. "...he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because on push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies...but a moral one" (*Untouchable*, 54). This moral barrier is attributed to him by the author.

### **Taking the Position: Fault of the Practitioner, Not the Fault of Religion**

However, what is pertinent is that none of the casteist incidents here make him hate his caste and profession. He still is satisfied to be a scavenger who desires to become a *sahib*. This is the intention of the author as well and this comes to the fore when he says satirically for the person who slaps Bakha, "...for the first time for many years he had had an occasion to display his strength" (*Untouchable*, 56). This vileness in the character of the tyrant is projected as a practitioner of Hinduism at fault rather than the religion. This correctness and validity of Hinduism as a religion is what Gandhi also asserts: "If therefore, the Hindus oppress them, they should understand that the fault does not lie in the Hindu religion, but in those who profess it" (*Untouchable*, 165). This is also acceded to by Lakha who opines that "the religion which was good enough for his forefathers was good enough for him" (*ibid*, 138) too.

## Melodrama

In addition, the plight that emerges from these incidents is projected in the language of the melodramatic genre.

“He stood aghast. Then his whole countenance lit with fire and his hands were no more joined. Tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. The cumulated strength of his giant body glistened in him with the desire for revenge, while horror, rage, indignation swept over his fame” (*Untouchable*, 57).

‘Countenance, giant body, fame’ are terms that give that melodramatic impact to his agony of being ill-treated by upper castes. However, what makes it more melodramatic is the goodness from the upper castes that follow the ‘misdeeds’. After being slapped on the street he is taken in kindly by the Mohammedan and after the lady throws bread at him, another one talks kindly to him. Moreover, in the incident of Sohini’s ill-treatment by the pundit, she says, “‘That man, that man,’ she said, ‘that man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled’” (*Untouchable*, 70).

## Male Domination versus Caste Domination

This ill-treatment of Sohini seems a caste attack on the untouchables. However, there are two aspects to it. First, it is more a case of a male trying to subjugate the female who seems to be under his authority, religious in this case. Caste becomes the manifestation of power as Sohini belongs to the lower caste. Secondly, and more importantly, looking at Sohini’s description in the narrative raises questions at the authorial intention. Anand says,

She had a sylph-like form, not thin but full-bodied within the limits of her graceful frame, well-rounded on the hips, with an arched narrow waist from which descended the folds of her salwars and above which were her full, round, globular breasts, jerking slightly, for lack of a bodice, under her transparent muslin shirt” (*Untouchable*, 26).

The ‘sylph with arched narrow waist and visible globular breasts’ explicitly presents her as a seductress more than anything else. So attractive is she that even her brother Bakha is proud of her in a way “not altogether that of a brother of a sister” (*Untouchable*, 26). This, projects Sohini, more than as a poverty stricken girl, as a seductress ‘capable’ of enticing men. The pundit’s attempt at Sohini, then, is to be seen through the lens of this description and herein the blame gets spread to both the victimized and the victimizer.

### **Dilution of the Untouchables’ Plight**

Keeping in mind the class and racial issues, Bakha’s desire of being a *sahib*, the benevolent upper castes and the physical attributes offered to Sohini, it becomes evident that the caste plights of the untouchables are not only diluted but also assumed secondary in the narrative. It, hence, appears that the author, through all these is trying to project the satisfaction of the lower castes, the untouchables, within the folds of the Hindu caste structure. In addition, it also reflects the basic ‘goodness’ of the caste structure, thereby negating the need to overhaul the Hindu caste system. The language, on the whole, instead of being socially determined and “variform”, as Bakhtin calls it, is monologic in nature.

### **Explicit versus Implicit Designs**

A study of the power dialectics in the narrative, then, reflects a situation where the explicit design and the implicit designs are at loggerheads. While the explicit design is to highlight the plight of the outcastes, which is done through the interspersed incidents of ill-treatment; the implicit design is to hegemonically appease the untouchables and the lower castes. This is done through the delineation of the character of Bakha who desires a change of class and not caste, by placing the caste issue at the backdrop of class and race issues and by keeping the caste incidents interspersed and diluted, thereby not giving them enough significance. The hegemonic forces of Caste Hinduism at work here ensure the presence of a single ‘voice’ in the narrative. There is no attempt to offer a ‘voice’ to the outcastes, on the contrary it firmly keeps the voice to the upper section only. On the whole, Bakha, through hegemony, is suppressed, and through him the masses.

### **In Poison and Nectar Relationship: Caste and Nation**

The question then arises that why this hegemonic representation of the untouchables in the narrative? The answer lies in the context where the text is produced as it gives it a valid meaning. Looking at this idea, it is extremely significant to realize that a nation, conventionally, rests on the idea of homogeneity and caste, in this parameter, is a large threat to the idea of a nation. As Premchand himself says, ““Who does not know that caste distinctions and nationhood are opposed to each other like poison and nectar?”” (Qtd. in Prashad, 551).

So, as per the traditional notions of the Indian nation, and one at its peak in the India of the 1930s owing to the freedom struggle, caste oriented ideology was a threat to the Idea of an Independent and united India. Hence, the power dialectics had to ensure that the marginals are pacified through willed submission and hence their plights are explored in such a diluted way to show their troubles but simultaneously take away the casteist sheen from them.

### **Historical Context of the Writing and Publication of *Untouchable***

*Untouchable* was produced at a time when the Independence movement was under the ‘pan-Indian banner’ of the Indian National Congress that was working under the leadership of Gandhi. However, this status of the Congress was facing a threat from the Muslim League, the missionaries trying to convert the outcastes into their religion and the raising awareness of the outcastes themselves about their ‘use’ by the upper caste Hindus and the Congress Party.

As Prashad says, “On August 19, 1921, the *chamar* panchayat of Delhi passed a resolution denouncing the tyranny of high castes. Swaraj, they felt, would only increase their tyranny, since *chamar* interests were not identical with 'national' interests. In fact, from November 1921 to January 1922 the *chamars* ran an anti-swaraj campaign...” (552). Hence, it was of utmost importance to maintain this ‘pan-Indian status’ of the movement and ensuring the unity of the Hindu structure and sustaining the status quo was paramount. *Untouchable* touches this aspect of the national movement and hence the novel is an attempt to use power upheld by the upper castes to sustain the lower castes under their umbrella.

### **The Goal: Change of Class, not Caste**

That the hegemony in this power dialectics was achieved is evident. Firstly, the class dominated narrative makes the untouchable experience, such as it is showcased, strive for a change of class and not caste. Moreover, towards the end of the novel, Bakha is willed into staying a scavenger:

‘Did he [Gandhi] mean, then, that I should go on scavenging?’ Bakha asked himself. ‘Yes,’ came the *forceful* (emphasis mine) answer. ‘Yes,’ said Bakha, ‘I shall go on doing what Gandhi says.’ ‘But shall I never be able to leave the latrines?’ came the disturbing thought. ‘But I can. Did not that poet say there is a machine which can do my work?’ (*Untouchable*, 175-176).

### **Re-constructed Regime of *Varnashramdharma***

The power dialectics is complete with Bakha willing to work in the latrines. Prashad, in “The Untouchable Question”, sums up the kind of hegemonic power-play at display here: “The liberation of the untouchables relies upon a reconstructed regime of castes (*varnashramdharma*) in which the un-touchables are urged to continue with their menial occupations...” (551). The Flush System, offered as a solution, however, will not raise him either as he is not an outcaste because he cleans latrines but he cleans latrines because he is an outcaste. Hence, leaving cleaning latrines will not change his caste and Michael B. Schwartz opines the same, “While the social identity of groups is to a certain extent determined by their functions, the experience of the Untouchable shows that functions may shift without a parallel shift in identity. Flush toilets (see M.R. Anand's novel *Untouchable*, 1935) will not solve the problem of Untouchables” (139). Bakha, then, has been subdued willfully through a lucrative promise of a bright life in an unknown future. Bakha says, “I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us...” (*Untouchable*, 175). The outcastes, in the narrative, have been appeased through a classic use of hegemony thereby ensuring their stay within Hinduism, one that has some ‘casteist aspects’, to be set “right ere long”, as Tennyson says, but on the whole worth sticking to.

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Himanshu Parmar  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
BPS Mahila Vishwavidyalaya  
Khanpur Kalan  
Sonipat0131305  
Haryana  
[himanshuparmar16@gmail.com](mailto:himanshuparmar16@gmail.com)