

Interrogating Injustice : An Analysis of Social Evils Depicted in Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable"

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ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand is undeniably a towering figure in the realm of Indian English literature, celebrated for the authenticity with which he paints his characters. This is largely due to his personal familiarity with the environments and circumstances that his novels so vividly depict. One of his most renowned works, "Untouchable," has garnered acclaim worldwide. It delivers a raw, unfiltered snapshot of Indian society prior to its independence, where the state of the socially ostracized 'untouchables' or subalterns, was heart-wrenching due to their marginalized existence.

Anand has earned a reputation as a storyteller for the forsaken and overlooked. In "Untouchable," he lays bare the anguish and torment of Bakha, a protagonist of low societal standing, who constantly endures mistreatment and humiliation at the hands of the self-proclaimed custodians of Indian society. This novel has the power to stir the consciousness of discerning readers, vividly illustrating the horrific social disease that plagued the colonial era and subsequent decades. It spins a tale of sorrow, masterfully orchestrated by societal factors, experienced by the oppressed in Indian society.

Keywords : Untouchable, Injustice, Humility, Marginalised, Forster

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a place of pride among the Indian English writers . He has a peculiar ability to capture the depressing and hopeless situation of the lower classes in a realistic manner. His books are replete with empathetic thoughts on the people and places he has personal experience with. He has a keen sense of realism and a sensitive, imaginative understanding of Indian society in all of its manifestations. Since his novels paint a true image of

rural India, they are accurate records of the modern social structure. As a lover of humanity, he writes stories that highlight his duty to society, particularly to the downtrodden, marginalized, and underprivileged people who suffer at the hands of colonial rulers and the purported higher class members of traditional Hindu society. His accurate description and realistic portrayal of the dominant orthodox Hindu society are very helpful in changing the community for the better.

In addition to being Mulk Raj Anand's debut novel, *Untouchable* is a ground breaking Indo-Anglican literary piece that has remained popular due to its creative fusion. Most people agree that Anand's most concise and creatively fulfilling novel is *Untouchable*. The fundamental topic of Anand's work *Untouchable* is the heinous evil of untouchability, which is deeply established in Hindu society. For generations, the scourge of untouchability has hampered the healthy growth of a significant segment of the Indian population. They are denied their fundamental right to develop into respectable citizens, and Anand is extremely disturbed by the inhumane treatment of untouchables in society. He is a firm believer in the equality of all people. The plight of the untouchables is shown eloquently and convincingly in *Untouchable*. In caste-ridden Hindu society, the very existence of untouchables is challenging. A noted Indian critic, Pramod Kumar Singh rightly comments, "Anand has deep concern for the low caste people of India and his novels throw light on the existing sorrows and sufferings of the downtrodden. His novels reflect close pictures of the traditional Hindu society with special focus on the miserable condition of the have-nots" (Singh 23)

The evil of untouchability has been underscored by showing what happens to Bakha's soul. Bakha is therefore a metaphorical person, a universal figure who represents a significant portion of Indian society destined to stagnation and disgrace. The work is titled *Untouchable* to emphasize the universality of the issue. In other words, it is the narrative of the untouchables as a class, not of Bakha's suffering alone. *Untouchable* tells the tale of a single day in the life of Bakha, the novel's principal character and a sweeper lad of eighteen. Bakha's day begins with torture from his father and an encounter with high-caste individuals who cannot stand the sight of him. He executes his task gladly and neatly, and he has unconsciously adopted the concept of commitment to his duty. He is robust and well-built as a result of his hard work. He is a wonderful guy, but since he is

untouchable, he suffers much. Society only provides him hurt, insult, or a combination of the two. His father, Lakha, the sweepers' Jamadar, first mistreats him by sending him out in the early hours of the frigid morning to clean latrines. Lakha shouts:

"Get up, ohe you Bakhiya, ohe son of a pig!"

...Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoy's will be angry." (p.15)

Bakha leaps out of bed and grabs his broom and basket to get to work. He is responsible for three rows of latrines, yet Bakha is surprisingly efficient at cleaning them. He is fatigued from his morning tour of cleaning latrines, but at the request of his father, he goes out to sweep the main road and the temple courtyard. He observes a colorful display of fruit kiosks, sweet-meat stalls, betel-leaf stores, and so on.

Then there's the well scene, which is both heart breaking and sad. Sohini, Bakha's sister, travels to the well with a pitcher on her head to get water so she may make tea for her father, who is dying of hunger. And she needs to wait since she is an outcaste and cannot get water until the upper caste members have had their fill.

Bakha visits a store to purchase a pack of 'Red Lamp' cigarettes. He scribbles an anna on the board. The shopkeeper washes the coin with water before picking it up and tossing it into the counter. He hurls the cigarette package at Bakha as "a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop." This is an insult, but Bakha ignores it since he wants to smoke. Bakha is in a same embarrassing position. When he gets to the main street, he stops in front of a Bengali sweet seller and requests for jilebies for four annas. The shopkeeper is disgusted with Bakha's bad taste. He quickly weighs jilebies and hurls the packet at Bakha.. Anand mentions :

He caught the jalebies which the confectioner threw at him like a cricket ball, placed four nickel coins on the shoe-board for the confectioner's assistant who stood ready to splash some water on them, and walked away, embarrassed yet happy (p.51)

Bakha is now content with the sweetmeat in his hand. He hurriedly opens the packet and pops a piece into his lips. He is satisfied and delighted by the flavor of the warm and sweet syrup. He tackles the packer with tremendous zeal and continues to wander along the road, chewing and taking in the scenery. As a result, he forgets to call out. "Posh, posh, sweeper coming".

He suddenly hears someone shouting at him...

"Keep to the side of the road, he low-caste vermin!".

"Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cockeyed 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.53)

Bakha stood transfixed and ashamed. He was stupid and deaf. His senses went numb. His spirit was filled only with fear—fear of humility and subservience. He was accustomed to harsh speech. But he had rarely been caught off guard like this. Now he showed more of the peculiar humble grin that usually lingered on his lips when he was with high-caste guys. Even though his eyes were lowered, he raised his face to face the man across from him. Then he shot the man a quick glance. The man had a fiery gaze. Someone shouted:

'Swie, dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach!' He shouted as he met Bakha's eyes. 'Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!'"(p.53)

The "polluted" Lalla keeps attacking Bakha with insults. Men who have gathered to find out what the commotion is about soon surround him. There is not a single person in the throng who feels sorry for him. The Lalla delivers the helpless Bakha a clear, hard smack in retaliation for his "damned impudence" after growing weary of his tirade.

Bakha realizes his social standing with a start. It lights up his mind's inner boundaries. He comes to the realization that, although having a mind, heart, and flesh and blood like any other person, he is seen as

untouchable by the outside world. All it exposes is the terrible 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!" (pp. 58-59)

Then conscious of his position without failing he shouts aloud the warning words to announce his approach: 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming".

As he continues to walk he sees something strange in contrast to what has happened to him. Anand describes:

A Huge, Big-Humped, Small-Horned, Spotted old brahminee bull was ruminating with half-closed eyes near him. The stink from its mouth as it belched, strangely unlike any odour which had assaulted Bakha's nostrils that day, was nauseating. And the liquid dung which the bull had excreted and which Bakha knew it was his duty to sweep off sickened him. But presently he saw a well-dressed, wrinkled old Hindu, wearing, like a rich man, a muslin scarf over his left shoulder, advance to the place where the bull was enjoying its siesta and touched the animal with his forefingers.(p.60)

He quickly sees the immorality of the culture he is placed in, which views touching a dirty bull like the one he just saw as blessing and regards touching a human person like him as a malediction.

He pauses for a little moment before starting off again and yelling, "Posh, posh, sweeper coming!" He arrives in the temple courtyard quickly. He starts sweeping the surroundings. Abruptly, he is interested to observe what's going on inside the temple. His inner instinct guides him through the temple stairs and toward the temple entry door with an unwavering feeling of direction. He suddenly hears a booming sound and a loud shout, "polluted, polluted, polluted!" Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our

temple! Now we will have to pay for the pacificatory ceremony, Get down, get away, dog! (p.67)

Believing that the sacred sanctuary has been tainted by the presence of the untouchables, the multitude responds to the priest's appeal. Now, a different priest yells from close to the temple that he has also been more badly contaminated due to touch with Bakha's sister Sohini. Sohini is successfully removed from the courtyard of the temple by Bakha. She informs Bakha that while she was cleaning the latrine, the priest had given her inappropriate advice. Here, Anand exposes the hypocrisy and lustfulness of arrogant Pandit Kali Nath, a so-called priest, who has deep sexual desires for the untouchable Sohini and feels that the touch of an untouchable pollutes him. Bakha is furious that the Brahmin dog should be vile enough to accuse his sister of polluting him when he had actually tried to seduce her. He feels like going and killing the Priest, but Sohini restrains him and persuades him to get out quietly from there. Anand comments: "While the cowardly crowd takes to its heels, Gods remain secure in their respective places, perhaps rebuking Bakha for his interferences." . Here Anand exposes religious hypocrisy, superstition and bigotry. Such humiliation is common for untouchables and they have accepted as it is age old tradition. Bakha returns home desperately and tells his father Lakha about his insult and Sohini's molestation by the Pandit. He bursts out "...They think we are mere dirt, Because we clean their dirt." (p. 89)

On listening his son's grief, Lakha narrates him a nasty experience of his own life. It brings Bakha back to his senses.

Bakha's existence seems to consist solely of insults. He visits the silversmith colony to get food for the family after sending his sister home. When the housewife sees Bakha at the door, she gets enraged and tells him to "perish and die" since he has ruined her home. Bakha apologises and requests some food, which is tossed to him like a street dog. It is heartbreaking to see Bakha pick up his chapatti, which is tossed by a woman from an elite caste in Hindu culture.

Hutchinson's explanation that Christ welcomes all people and that Yessuh Messih does not distinguish between Brahmins and Bhangi may help him become a Christian. However, Bakha becomes confused by the missionary's discourse of "sin" and "confession" and his inability to define Christ precisely. The second option is for him to wait till the public's social consciousness is awakened, finding solace in Gandhiji's criticism of Hindu caste system members. This leads to the third possibility, which is that he should trust the water closet. It is worth quoting here the historic statement made by E.M.Forster in this regard in his preface to *Untouchable*:

..It is prosaic, straightforward, and considered in the light of what has gone before in the book, it is convincing. No god is needed to rescue the untouchables, no vows of self-sacrifice and abnegation on the part of more fortunate Indians but simply and solely – the flush system. Introduce water-closets and main-drainage throughout India, and all this wicked rubbish about untouchability will disappear ...(10)

Anand aspires to arouse the subjugated, repressed, downtrodden, and dehumanized social classes. He consequently critiques personal quirks, societal ills, and human hypocrisies. He has called attention to societal injustices and conflicts that he had seen and experienced. Anand has the spirit of a reformer; his passion to free society from all ills led him to use his novels as a platform for protest. Being a writer, he has also been extremely sensitive to cruelty and injustice, therefore his conscience would not allow him to stand by and watch injustice take place. Out of all the Indian writers who expressed social protest, he is the most exceptional novelist.

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