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Reflection on Caste System as Social Evil Prevalent in Indian Society through the novel of
Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

Abstract: The research paper is an attempt to reflect on social evil that is prevalent in Indian society through the novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand. It is true that Indian society has been afflicted with the caste ridden structure right from the Vedic time and has been justified by the dominant ideology. From the ancient period caste system has bestowed upon the society which has given birth to one of the most abhorrent social evil "Untouchability". It is the practice of segregating a group from the mainstream by social custom.

Before the emergence of the literary personality as Mulk Raj Anand, academicians, social and political thinkers have been spectacularly silent about the present issue. Mulk Raj Anand in his novel *Untouchable* and *Coolie* has portrayed the plight of exploited class by the privileged class of Indian society. Through the character of Bakha in *Untouchable* and an orphan Munoo in *Coolie* he has manifested the cruelty and exploitation which held India with its vicious grip. Anand's novels unveil the cold-hearted and remorseless attitude of the unsparing upper caste Hindus. Although leaders like Mahatama Gandhi tried to improve the situation of Dalit by renaming them as "Harijans" which means children of God but it didn't change their equation with high caste people.

Keywords: Untouchability, Caste, Subaltern, Varnasaram Dharma

The paper is to revisit to the subject matter of the caste system and annihilate the exploitative agency of the society which is too chronic to be uprooted from the accepted system and society.

Mulk Raj Anand's novels deal with evils present in the society of India before independence. Anand plotted his novels around the lowest strata of Indian society unlike novelist like Sarat Chandra or Prem chand. In the title of the novel *Untouchable* there is absence of the article "the" which symbolizes the tragic life of the oodles of Untouchables in India who are at the lowest grade of the caste ridden Hindu society and has fallen prey of social injustice. Caste system is really a pernicious sociological issue in the context of Indian society which has been accepted by people and land of the nation justifying the phrase 'Divide and Empera'. Communal homogenization has played such a foul card to introduce the concept of the prescription in the religious book imposed over 'Shudras'. The fundamental pursuit of the mechanism lies in the material gainment and make others slave which is totally artificial in structure and ideology. Because of the imposition of the caste system in India, Dalits have been still carrying it as a burden from two thousand years of the human civilization. From the ancient period caste system has been bestowed upon the society which has given birth to one of the most abhorrent social evil "Untouchability".

In literary and culture productions we come across many school of thoughts such as Aristotelian, Hegelian, French, Italian, Marxist school of thoughts regarding the negotiation and resolution of social evil prevalent in our society, they have never corresponded the subject matter of the caste system to the society and people. It can be also said that before the emergence of the literary personality as Mulk Raj Anand, Academicians, social and political thinkers have been spectacularly silent about the present issue. As a matter of fact it is a challenging task for the thinkers to have their academic discourses on this subject matter

because raising the issue of varnasaram dharma can be aspect of sin and one can be rewarded with impending danger. But the great humanitarian like Mulk Raj Anand took courage to bring subalterns particularly in the mainstream of the academic production. His work *Untouchable* has been introduced in different Universities of India and it is one of the most quoted novel in Indian writing in English whenever we get the issue of the caste and Untouchability. Mulk Raj Anand , in his novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie* has portrayed the plight of exploited class by the privileged class of Indian society. Through the character of *Bakha* an apprenticed laborer, Gangu in *Untouchable* and an orphan Munoo in *Coolie* he has manifested the cruelty and exploitation that held India in its vicious grip. Anand's novels unveil the cold-hearted and remorseless attitude of the unsparing upper caste Hindus. The country which claims "Vasudeva Kutumbakam" is nothing but a society diseased with inequality and hierarchy. Although leaders like "Mahatama Gandhi" tried to improve the situation of Dalit by renaming them as "Harijans" which means children of God but merely changing the name did not change their equation with high caste people.

According to Peter Burra, Munoo of *Coolie* "is a universal kind of figure.... The passion not only of India but of Mankind." And of course, so is Bakha of *Untouchable*. Anand gets a well-deserved recognition and status of a novelist because of these two books. The authenticity of human nature and Indian social scene is beautifully portrayed by Anand. In a famous preface, Forster is quick and forthright to admit that Anand has been able to accomplish that which he himself could not do in his *A Passage to India*. Stephen Spender in his review of *Two Leaves and a Bud* candidly recognize that Anand occupies "a leading position amongst contemporary, revolutionary novelist in England".

Mulk Raj Anand's novels are always described as a novel of deep social commitment. In his novel *Untouchable*, he has distinctly portrayed the miserable plight of the whole lot of unfortunate untouchables and has implied that if these men who are disgraced and out casted,

muster enough courage to live fearlessly and brazenly can be liberated from the restraint of plagued caste system and orthodox tradition only if men of higher stratum generate some affinity and sensitivity in their heart towards these underdog of the society. Anand has especially approached the horrendous evil of untouchability which has tormented the Hindu society before partition and even today, with reference to the caste- structure within Hindu society that has smothered successfully the growth of a considerable section of Indian community for ages in all the aspects, be it intellectual or spiritual.

The Cubbyhole in which Hindu society was getting divided, the brutal truth of caste system has been elegantly depicted by Anand in his novel *Untouchable*. E.M.Forster comments on this aspect of the novel in his preface to *Untouchable*.

“The sweeper (untouchable in this case) is worse off than a slave, for the slave may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born in to a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disquieting as well as a disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming. No wonder that the dirt enters in to his soul, and that he feels himself at moments to be what he is supposed to be”.

(*Untouchable*:1947: 7)

From the opening paragraph of the novel, the division between the untouchables and other resident communities of the town is made quite evident:

“The outcaste colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers,

the washer man, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass-cutter and other outcastes from Hindu society". (U:9)

The barbaric way in which Untouchables were being treated by superior caste- especially Brahmins or the so called "twice born" left Anand in a great consternation. Anand was a great devotee of self-respect and fairness for all the men despite of their caste, creed or religion. The deterioration and ignominy administered on the miserable sections of society is displayed through the oft repeated refrain of Bakha "posh, posh, sweeper coming". The unfortunate untouchables were not allowed to escalate the platform of "the caste-well" which was the only source of drinking water in the town of Bulashah. They were supposed to wait for hours together for some generous upper caste Hindu to pour water in their empty pitchers. These incidents shows that this social evil was deeply rooted in the Indian society.

Recalling the occasion of writing *Untouchable*, Anand says,

"One day I read an article by Gandhiji describing how he met Uka, a sweeper boy, finding him with torn clothes and hungry, he took him in to his Ashram." (Anand, M.R. 'Preface to two leaves and a bud.")

Bulashah is a fictional Indian town where Bakha lives with his family. *Untouchable* portrays a day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy, through series of events which take place and how it influences him. Bakha is the son of head of all Bulashah's Sweepers, Lakha. Numerous major and minor tragedies which occur over the course of his day leads Bakha to mature and contemplate his existence. There is mixture of character in Bakha. He is resourceful but innocent, courteous but trivial. Through the character of Bakha and the people inhabiting the young man's world, Mulk Raj Anand's crafted his argument to end untouchability on the account that it is a malicious, unfair system of despotism.

The eighteen year old Bakha, son of Jamadar Lakha starts his day with the yelling of his father to get out of bed and start his work of toilet-cleaning. The father and son share a constrained

relationship because of two reasons. First because of Bakha's obsession with the British and second due to the laziness of his father Lakha. Bakha even manages to get a pair of breeches from an English soldier and tries to be in "fassun" which infuriates his father. In the beginning of the day Bakha first tries to ignore the howling of his father to clean the latrines but at last he gets up in order to answer the call of upper caste man who wants to use the bathroom. This man is Charat Singh, a famous hockey player who screams at him first for neglecting his cleaning duties but later on changes his personality to the softer tone and commands Bakha to come and see him later in the day in order to gift him a hockey stick. Bakha is delighted with this prize and agrees to come back.

Thrilled with the promise of Charat Singh he quickly finishes his morning shift and rushes home, completely dehydrated. Sadly the water was finished by the time he reached there. Bakha's sister Sohini goes to village-well to fetch water but she had to wait along with other outcastes. Gulabo, mother of one of Bakha's friend and a skeptical woman was also present in the queue. She resented Sohini and was willing to strike her but stopped barely. Pundit Kalinath, the village priest of the temple, draws water to fill Sohini's pail as a special favor. He feels captivated to her beautiful body, commands her to come and clean the temple later in the day. So punditji has the authority to command her instead of requesting her just because he is a Brahmin. Sohini agrees as she has no choice and scoots home with the water.

Lakha pretends to be ill back at home so that Bakha would go to clean the town square and the temple courtyard and Lakha would spend his time idly. Bakha is aware of his father's shrewd way but could not object. He took this as an opportunity to buy cigarettes and candies from the town. All the duties which he has regarding sweeping and cleaning, does not permit him to wander in the town so he took all his cleaning supplies and takes advantage of the situation. A high caste man brushes against Bakha while he was relishing his jalebis. Bakha did not give

untouchable call as a result of which the high caste man touched him and infuriated at him beyond imagination.

“Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!” (U:39)

Bakha is completely taken aback and joins his hand immediately to apologize with his bent forehead, mumbling something. The touched man didn’t care with Bakha’s dumb humility. He abuses him again.

“Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig!” he shouted, his temper spluttering on his tongue and obstructing his speech, and the sense behind it, in its mad rush outwards. I.... I’ll have to go-oo.... And get washed –d-d.... I... I was going to business and now... now, on account of you, I’ll be late.”(U:39)

The yelling and screaming attracts a large crowd that shames Bakha publicly even more. The crowd is dislodged because of the arrival of a muslim vendor in a horse and buggy. Before leaving, the high caste touched man whacked bakha across the face for his audacity and scampered around. Aghast Bakha cries on the streets before collecting his things and hurrying off to the temple. This time, he does not forget the untouchable’s call.

A service was in the full swing at the temple. Bakha got curious to know about the happenings inside the temple so he mustered all his courage to peep inside. He was only standing there totally engrossed in “arti” when a loud commotion comes from behind him. It was Sohini, Bakha’s sister and pundit Kali Nath, who was accusing Sohini for polluting him.

“polluted, polluted, polluted!” (U:50)

One of the crowd struck out an individual note.

“Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog!”(U:51)

Bakha pulls away his sister away from the gathering crowd. She informs him crying that priest sexually assaulted her. Outraged Bakha tries to go back to confront the priest but Sohini forces him to leave as she knows nobody would believe the words of “Untouchables”. Bakha sends his sister home and decides to take over her duties in town for the rest of the days. The hypocrisy of society is clearly evident in this scenario that it was high caste Brahmin who held low caste girl by her breast and on top of that he was accusing her of polluting him. Here the victim was accused of committing the crime just because she belonged to lower caste.

Bakha was deeply distressed over the day’s event so for sometimes he strolls here and there to take his mind off from the morning temple incident. After an interval he goes to a set of homes to beg for his family’s daily bread. Nobody was there at home where he goes for begging so he curls up in front of the house and falls asleep. A sadhu comes and wakes him who had also come to beg for food. Hearing calls of sadhu the owner of the house comes out with food but when she sees Bakha slept in front of the house she starts yelling at him as Bakha had polluted her house by sleeping in her courtyard. She orders Bakha to clean the drain in exchange of bread. As Bakha cleans, the woman forces her young son to relieve himself in the drain where Bakha was cleaning so he can sweep that too. Bakha is so repelled by all this that he throws the broom and leaves for his house in the outcast colony. The aspects of untouchability is revealed here by Anand, the sadhu gets food and respect for doing nothing and Bakha gets humiliation and disgust for cleaning and maintaining hygiene of the society.

Back at home, Bakha finds only two of his family members, his father and his sister. His younger brother Rakha, was still out collecting food. Bakha tells his father that a high caste man slapped him on the streets but he did not utter a single word regarding sexual assault of

Sohini. Lakha could sense the anger of his son so in order to soothe him out, Lakha narrates him story of a doctor's kindness who had saved Bakha's life. Although Bakha was quite moved by the story but still his mood was foul. After a while Rakha comes with food which Bakha starts to eat but then is disgusted by the idea of eating the left overs of the high caste people.

“The picture of a sepoy washing his hands in his round brass tray, over the leavings of bread and salad, and then throwing them in Rakha's basket appeared before him.....

He had a queer warm feeling of water running under his tongue from across the sides of his mouth. He felt sick.”(U:70)

He leaves the food and informs his father that he was going to the wedding of his friend Ram Charan's sister where he was not even invited.

Bakha reaches his friend Ram Charan's house where he finds his other friend 'chota'. The two boys wait for Ram Charan to see them through the thicket of wedding revelers. Ram Charan eventually sees them and runs off with them despite of the protest of his mother. When these friends are alone, chota and Ram Charan sense that something is wrong with Bakha. They began enquiring about it. Bakha was at first reluctant but at last breaks down and narrates the whole story about the slap and Sohini's assault. Ram Charan was embarrassed by the tale but chota was quite furious and asks Bakha if he wants to take revenge but Bakha knows it would be futile. Chota then attempts to cheer Bakha by reminding him about the hockey game that they will play later. Bakha then remembers that he has to go to Charat Singh's house to get his gift of hockey stick.

Bakha goes to Charat Singh's house in the barrack but is not sure if anybody is there in home so instead of disturbing other inhabitants he decides to wait for him under a tree. After a while Singh comes out and invites Bakha to drink tea with him. For him Bakha was not untouchable, just a human being who deserves dignity just the way any other people do. Thus Bakha is overjoyed with Singh's conduct who gives him a brand new hockey stick.

Delirious about this upswing to his terrible day, Bakha goes in to the hockey game where he scores the first goal. Bakha's success angers goalie of the opposite team and out of fury he hits Bakha. Because of this, a brawl starts between the two team and player's younger brother gets hurt. Bakha picks up the young boy and rushes him home but even there the mother of the boy accuses him instead of being thankful. All joys was completely ruined, Bakha goes back home where his father is angry as he was out of the home the whole afternoon and banishes Bakha out from home asking him not to return back ever.

Bakha runs away and takes shelter under a tree far from home. The Chief of the local Salvation Army, a British man named Colonel Huthinson, comes up to him and convinces the sweeper to follow him to the church. Bakha is flattered by the kind gesture of the white man and agrees to follow him to the church but colonel's constant hymn singing bores him quickly. Before the two enter the church the colonel's wife comes and the sight of another "Blackie" disgusts her so she starts shouting and screaming. Although the language was alien to Bakha but a human heart can feel the humiliation in any language so he runs off again. Bakha runs towards the town and ends up at the train station. He notices people discussing about the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in Bulashah. He too joins the tide of people rushing to hear the Mahatma speak. Everybody settles down, Gandhi arrives and begins his speech. He talks about the plight of the untouchable and how it is his life's mission to see them emancipated.

"I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism"(U:119)

Gandhiji discussed that how as a child he was commanded not to touch or go near Uka, an untouchable who used to clean the latrines of his house by his mother. He was a very dutiful and obedient child so he obeyed his mother but in his heart he never considered physical contact with Uka sinful.

"While on my way to school, I used to touch the untouchables; and as I never would conceal the fact from my parents, my mother would tell me that the shortest cut to

purification after the unholy touch, was to cancel it by touching a Mussalman passing by. Therefore, simply out of reverence and regard for my mother, I often did so, but never did it believing it to be a religious obligation.” (U:119)

He ends his speech by beseeching those present to spread his message of ending untouchability. After the departure of Mahatma Gandhi a pair of educated men having a lively discussion about the content of the speech. One man named Bashir who was a lawyer by profession critiques most of Gandhiji's opinions and ideas. Another person, Sarshar, a poet, defends Mahatma passionately and convincingly. Most of the things that they were discussing about themselves went above Bakha's head because of their vocabulary and ideas. However, Bakha pays close attention to the poet Sarshar, who was mentioning about the arrival of flushing toilet in India, a machine that eradicates the need for human to handle refuse. This machine could mean the end of untouchability. With this piece of hope Bakha hurries home to share news of the Mahatma's speech with his father.

The demand of egalitarian notion is to establish a society based on equality, fraternity and liberty by rejecting the caste hierarchy prevalent in our society. It is hoped that there will be a change in the history of Indian society and justice and equality will be celebrated by untouchables as there are not others but social forces to construct the shape of the society.

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