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Reema Devi

Research Scholar

Department of English, FMeH, MRIIRS

Faridabad, Haryana, India

reemachaudhary@rediffmail.com

Dr Sujata

Associate Professor

Department of English, FMeH, MRIIRS

Faridabad, Haryana, India

The contemplation of barbarism of the Hindu society on Untouchables: Re-evaluation of  
Anand's debut novel *Untouchable*

Abstract

The paper aims at re-evaluating Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* to investigate the different angles of marginalization in Indian society. The problem of untouchability is still pervading in the society and the writer through his novel *Untouchable* has divulged the torments and sufferings of untouchables shoved by upper caste Hindus on them. The novel sketches the poignant and miserable condition of the *Dalit* sweeper, Bhaka. He and his sister Sohini, being untouchables, are humiliated and ill-treated by the so called superior castes. There are many happenings in the novel that expose the stark and naked realities of the society. The novel calls for justice and compassion by presenting the barbarities meted by untouchables. Through the delineation of the character Bakha, Anand has attempted to accentuate every big and minor detail to reveal the urges, needs and dreams of the poor and

pitiful untouchables, their savage treatment and exploitation in the dominated society. Anand unveils the inhumane and inequitable authority of Hindus over the poor underdogs.

The focal point of this paper is the problems and caste exploitation of the protagonist Bhakha in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. The novel is undeniably a mournful cry of the miserable conditions of the so called low caste and class people during colonial rule. The novel is also a serious allegation on the savagery and mendacity of the so called Hindu traditions that dehumanizes and oppresses a large section of its own people. Anand proposes a few solutions to the problem of untouchability in the denouement of the novel. This Paper will assess those solutions and make an effort to find out some practicable resolution to the same.

Key Words: Poignant, barbarities, savage, inequitable, mendacity, dehumanizes, denouement, practicable.

### Introduction

The age old issue of caste system is deep rooted in the Indian society and the practice of untouchability is still pervading all over the country. Untouchability is a blot on humankind. The issue of untouchability has been dealt by many Indian Social novelists like Sarat Chandra, Prem Chand and Mulk Raj Anand. The writer, M. R. Anand was a distinguished Indian author in English and renowned for his delineation of the underprivileged in the so called conventional Indian society. Saros Cowasjee remarks that Anand

“in his narratives presented a lot of new people who had rarely entered the sphere of literature.” (Cowasjee 40).

His debut novel, 'untouchable', allured massive recognition that provides realistic portrayal of the society when India was striving hard for Independence. Anand has written Untouchable under the deep influence of Mahatma Gandhi and very successfully exposed the injustice, suppression and ill treatment of the castaways in the society. In this novel, Mulk Raj Anand has sketched the character of a dalit boy, Bakha who represents the community of outcastes. The task of this community is to immaculate toilets and streets and keep them clean for the superior castes. The protagonist Bakha and other characters in the novel suffer as they belong to lower caste and status of the society. The elite caste hindus considered the sweepers filthy and the colony in which these untouchables live as a forbidden place just because they clean their dirt. Bakha is the symbol of exploitation and enslavement which has been the destiny of untouchables like him.

The novel 'Untouchable' presents the events of a single day in the life of the unfortunate outcast sweeper viz Bakha in the city of Bulashah. Almost all the pages of the novel are submerged in the protagonist's unnoticed tears who very meekly suffers the most embarrassing and depressing moments of his life in the story. Since morning he has to cope with bigotry, inequality, abhorrence and two-facedness. Bakha's daily work starts with his father's shower of abuses:

"Get up, ohe you Bakhya, you son of pig, (Anand 5) ..... Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten".(Anand -6)

He is confined and devoted to his degrading job as he has taken birth in low caste and down trodden class. His capabilities are restricted and shrunk before they can even germinate. Despite his fervent desire to go to school, he is not permitted to study in school just because the guardians of the superior class and caste felt that their children would get polluted by Bakha's touch as he belonged to low caste.

Mulk Raj Anand has tried to embody in Bakha a true person that interests the readers' attraction. As in the preface of *Untouchable*, E. M. Foster observes that

“Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometime weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive, we can recognize broad intelligent face, graceful torso ... as he does it nasty job or stumps out in artillery boots, in the hope of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in his hands” (Anand vii).

Anand with his marvellous adeptness delineates Bakha's helplessness, vexation, edginess and anguish. The untouchable leads a life totally dependent on the upper class. Even for the essential needs of human survival, the scavenger caste has to hinge on the sympathy of the so called Hindus. They were barred to draw water from a well and had to stand by for hours for the pity of the high caste people. The food was given to them by flinging it and if by accident they touch anybody, they were treated harshly. The so called upper class however didn't mind this untouchability when they molest the low caste females. Bakha's desires took him to a local temple and he became curious to have the glimpse of hidden secrets in the temple. While Bakha was peeking through the window he was intervened by the priest shouting

“Polluted, polluted, Polluted!” (Anand 53)

By the time the crowd assembled and shouted at him by saying:

“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!” (Anand 53)

As soon as Bakha reached the courtyard where his younger sister Sohini was waiting for him, he got another blow as the priest claimed,

“I have been defiled by contact.” ( Anand 53)

Sohini sobbingly spelled out the priest's claim saying:

“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”. (Anand 53)

Although Bakha got infuriated by this, he remained a voiceless ear witness. He desolately informs his father,

“They think we are mere dirt, because we clean their dirt.” (Anand 70)

Mulk Raj Anand has very efficiently exhibited how untouchables are not acceptable in the society & maltreated by the people of high castes. Bakha being a sweeper, identifies and accepts his social position. He discerns the barbarism of the society, which regards malediction touching a person like him and benediction touching a dirty bull.

The scavenger became accustomed to humiliation at each and every step of his life. Bakha desired to eat sweets and he requested the shop-owner to give him some jalebis for four annas. Bakha knew that the confectioner has cheated him but he could not complain. The shopkeeper hurled the packet upon him like a cricket ball and put the coins on the shoe-board so that he may splash some water on them and poor Bakha walked away in embarrassment. As he was relishing the sweet, he touched a man unconsciously. The touched person abused him, collected the crowd around him and reprimanded Bakha saying that he should have alerted him of his arrival as:

“Posh, Posh, sweeper coming” (Anand 42).

“Keep to the side of the road, you, 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 bowlegged scorpion! Now I have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!’ Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralyzed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear of humility and servility. He was used to being spoken to roughly. But he had seldom been taken so unawares.” (Anand 38)

When the ‘polluted’ lalla got tired of bombarding abuses and roaring at Bakha, he slapped him as a penalty. Later, he was accused of beating the children and Bakha struggled

to explain and exonerate himself from the charges that it was a false allegation but nobody supported him.

“To Bakha, every second seemed an endless age of woe and suffering. His whole demeanour was concentrated in humility, and in his heart there was a queer stirring.” (Anand 40)

After the harrowing incident of touching in the market, another incident; when Bakha was playing hockey was lined up to pierce his heart. A little boy was injured and as Bakha lifted the boy up, his vexed mother screamed – ‘Polluted, polluted’. He is utterly dejected and thinks that he is only a beast of burden in the eyes of the highly biased society. It is very scathing that even if he lends a helping hand to the society, it is not at all considerate to him. Anand is a philanthropist and his works demonstrate his consideration towards society, particularly those who are meagre, suppressed, and the subalterns who are agonised at the hands of the colonial masters and the so called agents of the superior class of the Hindu society. Rama Jha comments,

“Anand is the first Indian novelist to present in the novel the stigma of this evil which isolates a man from his own society” (Jha 59)

The incident, when Bakha went to the silversmith colony to collect food for the family is heart rending. The housewife became furious when she saw Bakha on the threshold of the house and reprimanded him, “perish and die” as he had defiled her house. Bakha begged his apology and pleaded for some food which was flung at him as if he was a street dog. Bakha returned home with only two chapattis and is perplexed whether to explain the situation to his father. His father accused and abused him good for nothing scoundrel. Bakha lied to his father that he had been invited to the marriage ceremony of Ram Charan’s sister whom he once wished to marry. But Ram Charan’s mother Gulabo, refused the proposal of Bakha as she considered her caste of washerwomen superior to Bakha’s caste even among the

outcastes. Humiliation and trauma seemed to be ceaseless and endless for Bakha who presents outcaste Hindus subjected to unspoken miseries. As M.K. Naik pertinently observes, “Weakness corrupts, and absolute weakness corrupts absolutely. Bakha is caught in the vicious circle from where there is no escape” (Naik 48).

In the end of the novel, Mulk Raj Anand has very successfully offered three probable solutions to the problem of untouchability like conversion to Christianity, the introduction of the flush system and Gandhi’s appeal to the Harijans to abstain from the bad habits and join the mainstream of India slowly but positively. Anand ends the novel with a note of conviction and idealism. As Bakha returned, his mind is elevated with the aspiration that soon the flush system would help the sweepers and people like him,

“Then the sweepers can be free from stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society.” (Anand 146)

Thus in the novel *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand has handled the problem of untouchability through Bakha and exhibited that he desires to have a casteless Indian society.

## Conclusion

The paper explores that all must manifest their serious concern towards this burning issue of Untouchability in the Indian society. Inequalities of birth and Caste system must be eradicated from Hindu society. Untouchables need no pity and sympathy but only their respect in the society. The caste-system made by human beings has expelled them out from the main stream of the society. They have been isolated and maltreated in the society. Objectivity, fairness and realism denotes Anand’s treatment of the theme of humiliation and injustice to the Untouchables. Anand holds the opinion that casteism is a crime against humanity and it is moral duty of everyone to actively participate in the elimination of it. Mulk Raj Anand opined in his book,

“What is needed is the big heartedness, the understanding, the generous, the wise heart, informed by passion and schooled by a knowledge born of love.” (Anand- Apology for Heroism-p.156)

The novel targets to abolish social barriers, established values and orthodoxies from the society. Anand is successful in exposing the suppression, injustice, exploitation of the outcastes in the country and bringing about a positive change in the society. Anand always dreamt for a strong, integrated, prosperous and peaceful nation. Towards the end of the novel, the writer propounded three solutions to the problem of untouchability- Christ, Gandhi and the flush system. The use of flush system is not the continuous and viable solution of Untouchability; as it is deeply embedded in our Indian psyche, we need to change our mindset towards it. The abolition of caste system is of utmost importance for the eradication of untouchability. It is necessary to strive and develop new attitudes in the people as well as create cultural and economic equality between the castes. Efforts should also be made at all levels to educate and emancipate the untouchables from their dirty occupations.

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