

## **Realistic Pictures of Society in Anand's Untouchable**

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**Abstract**

*Mulk Raj Anand has published Untouchable with the colors of social realism. The novel is a hard-core reality of the Indian society of the early decades of the twentieth century. Mulk Raj Anand's commitment to reveal the deep-rooted social malice in the Indian society made him to create Bakha. He is basically a champion of down-trodden and underprivileged people. The novel describes the sufferings of the protagonist and records the miseries felt by him. The novel has occupied a special place in Indian literature. Untouchable gives a voice to the predicament of the mute humanity's invincible circumstances. The sufferings are not caused by fate but by fellow human beings and the social surroundings from which the sufferers still have great and immortal hopes for the betterment of life. Untouchable is the saga of the sufferings of the protagonist aka. Anand refuses to be bound by state custom and orthodoxy. In fact, his novels convey emotional truth as well as social realities and interpretation of social problems and of corrupt practices in Untouchable.*

**Keywords:** *converge, vicissitudes, disintegration.*

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Mulk Raj Anand has been described as a novelist with a deep social commitment. A close of his works shows that he juxtaposes the social evils against the mindsets of individuals and some privileged sections of the society. In *Untouchable* (1935), he has chiefly dealt with the ghastly evil of untouchability afflicting the Hindu society of the pre-Partition era, in the larger backdrop of the caste-configurations within the Hindu, society that has successfully stifled the healthy growth of the considerable sections of Indian community for centuries.

Like Premchand, Anand too is a serious novelist, passionate reformer and critic of life. He traces the roots of social injustice and moral degradation to the disruption based on cooperation and brotherhood and the growth of inequality and tyranny based on caste and class scruples. Just as no writer before Dickens had handled the English people, similarly no Indo-English writer before Anand had devoted so sustained and sympathetic attention to the poor masses, outcastes and the neglected lot of the society. In his novels, he portrays the doomed lives of the oppressed and the downtrodden. His protagonists – a sweeper, a coolie, a peasant – all are victims of exploitation, class-hatred and inhuman cruelty. Over the years, Anand has become a vigorous champion of the oppressed and the downtrodden. *Untouchable* is a powerful novel that can be regarded as quintessential Anand since it projects most of his characteristic concerns and fundamental issues of life. The main theme of the novel is untouchability as a problem in Hindu society.

Anand with his remarkable skill portrays Bakha's helpless frustration, anxiety and agony to the degree that he has become embodiment of his own creation or in other words, the creator. And the creation co-mingles at one point. Through the character untouchable Bakha, Anand highlights the condition of inhumanity faced by such people in the society. *Untouchables* is a chilling exposé of the day-to-day life of a member of India's untouchable caste. The novel focuses attention on contemporary social beliefs, customs, traditions and social evils of Hindu society in 1932, particularly the curse of the caste and class system. It throws light on the sorrows and sufferings that caste Hindus inflict on the untouchable and the outcastes- the scavengers the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers the grass cutters, and so on. It registers a strong protest against social injustice meted out to untouchables. The novel portrays a typical day in the life of an untouchable mixed with hunger, hope, small pleasures, insults and setbacks.

Anand has vividly depicted in the novel *Untouchable* a miserable lot of the unfortunate untouchables and suggested that they can be freed from the shackles of killing orthodoxy and tradition only if men infuse into their own hearts some sympathy

and tenderness and if the men who are humiliated as pariahs, muster enough courage to live boldly and healthily.

Anand, very artistically, has portrayed the harsh social reality of the Hindu society which was getting divided into various pigeonholes. 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 change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations 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 into his soul, and that he feels himself at moments to be what he is supposed to be. (Untouchable 6-7)

It is to be noted that untouchability is one of the greatest evils of India where the untouchable have been bearing the brunt of social persecution from the time immemorial. In the "Manusmriti", the law book of Hindu social code and domestic life, we find the dismal plight of the untouchable who are deprived of getting knowledge, especially the Vedic knowledge. According to this book, an untouchable has no right to read and study the language Sanskrit which is supposed to be the richest language in the world. And this resulted in the deterioration of the Sanskrit language which has come to almost a standstill these days. Thus, it can be said that, in a way, the disease of untouchability is the cause of the degeneration of the richest language of the world. However, it has happened just because of the misinterpretation of our scriptures that breaches among various castes have been created. In this connection S. Radhakrishnan rightly observes:

The institution of caste illustrates the spirit of comprehensive synthesis characteristic of the Hindu mind with its faith in the collaboration of races and the cooperation of cultures. Paradoxical as it may seem, the system of caste is the outcome of tolerance and trust. Though it has now degenerated into an instrument of oppression and intolerance, though it tends to perpetuate inequality and develop the spirit of exclusiveness these unfortunate effects are not the central motives of the system. (The Hindu View of Life 67)

In his first novel *Untouchable*, the author's *de force*, Anand peeps into the life of an untouchable, Bakha, the protagonist who represents the misery and inhuman treatment of the downtrodden and the have-nots before independence. Mulk Raj

Anand narrates a single day's events in the life of Bakha, an eighteen years old boy who is the son of Lakha, the sweeper, the cleaner of the latrines. Through these two prominent characters, the author hammers hard on the caste conflict which constitutes the core of Hindu religion and procures an obstacle in the path of peace and prosperity. Though this dangerous disease of caste conflict was on its zenith before Independence, it is still seen much or less in almost every State of India. The untouchables or the socially isolated people who form the most vital part of a nation have to lead a deplorable and miserable life beyond description. The theme of the novel *Untouchable* itself is very realistic. *Untouchable* is a realistic novel of socially crushed protagonist Bakha. It is a slice of a life without any modification. The novel begins with a realistic picture of "The Outcastes" colony. The local color of the novel is evoked with the photographic realism and accuracy. Anand describes:

"The Outcastes" colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, The leather-workers. The washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the glasscutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odor of the hides and skins of the dead carcasses left today on its banks. The dung of donkeys, sheep, horses cows and buffaloes heaps up to be made into fuel cakes. (*Untouchable* 9)

This description brings to our mind the photographic fidelity of how those victims of a lopsided social system lead their lives. On the skirts of town or village, their existence is a reminder of what they are, how they are discarded from the mainstream to live as abandoned creatures:

At least so thought Bakha, a young man of eighteen, strong and able-bodied, the son of Lakha, the Jemadar of all the sweepers in the town and the cantonment, and officially in charge of the three rows of public latrines which lined the extremest end of the colony, by the brookside. (U 9)

This is the real one can see in the hut of an untouchable. Anand observes and presents the real photographic picture. Usually, Bakha's day starts with the scolding of his father Lakha, the jamadar of all the sweepers in the town and the cantonment. Bakha dreams to look like Britishers which is very much real to the colonial mind of Indian *Untouchable*. Anand states:

Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement when he first went to live at the British regimental attacks with his uncle. He had had glimpses, during his sojourn there, of the like the Tommies lived: sleeping on strange, low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets; eating eggs,

drinking tea and wine in tiny; going to parade and then walking down to the bazaar with cigarettes in their mouths and small silver-mounted. Canes in their hands. And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. (U 11)

But it is a dream of desire which is very far from the reality for Bakha. Bakha's day begins with endearing entreaties and downright abuses by his father and his encounter with the high-caste people, who cannot put up with his very sight. His father, Lakha, the jemadar of the sweepers, first of all, ill-treats him by asking him in the early hours of the cold morning to go out to clean latrines:

Get up, oh you Bakhiya, the son of a pig! Get up attend to the latrines or the sepoys will be angry. (U 13)

The ill-treatment of Bakha by the caste Hindu is very harsh. Anand describes the misery and humiliation of Bakha by the real world which is utmost reality of our society. He has to keep physical distance from Hindus and has to show "Posh, Posh, Sweeper coming" so that they may save themselves from being defiled by the touch of untouchable. This ritual or tradition was age-old in India. Bakha is stopped by a caste Hindu for "polluting" him. He failed to announce himself as usual, in return receives the torrent of abuses?

Why don't you call, your swine and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed 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! (U 51)

Coming out of his reverie, Bakha is completely taken aback and his hands instinctively join together in apology without uttering a single word. He only bends his forehead over them and mumbles something but the 'touched' man does not care to hear what he says as he is not satisfied with Bakha's dumb humility. He again starts abusing:

'Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! 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-o-o...and get washed-d-d...I...I was going to business and now..., on account of you, I'll be late.' (U 51)

The situation results in a crowd gathering around to see what the row is about and this encourages the aggrieved man further in his denunciations. Bakha feels further confused by this fresh development and the novelist describes his misery, hopelessness, and helplessness in the following words:

His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, far away from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a

barrier, not physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the onlookers, but a moral one. He knew that contact with him, if he pushed through, would defile a great many more of these men. And he could already hear in his ears the abuse that he would thus draw on himself. (U 52)

One of the urchins in the crowd falsely accuses Bakha of 'beating them.' When he protests against the false accusation and asks for forgiveness for his present crime of 'forgetting to call his arrival' and 'touching the caste Hindu, no one in the crowd believes a word of what he says. The peculiarity of his problematic situation is echoed aptly in the following observations of Anand:

He was really sorry and tried hard to convey his repentance to his tormentors. But the barrier of space that the crowd had placed between themselves and him seemed to prevent his feeling from getting across. And he stood still while they raged and fumed and sneered in fury: 'Careless, irresponsible swine!' 'They don't want to work.' 'They laze about!' 'They ought to be wiped off the surface of the earth!' (U 54)

The sympathy that miserable Bakha draws from a passer-by Mohammedan tonga-wallah infuriates the 'touched man' further, and so he gives Bakha a harsh and sharp slap on the face and it results in his turban falling off and the jalebis in the paper bag in his hand getting scattered in the dust. This unfortunate incident makes him indulge in pitiable self-analysis of his plight in this interior monologue:

Why was all this fuss? Why was I so humble? I could have struck him! And to think that I was so eager to come to the town this morning. Why didn't I shout to warn the people of my approach? That comes from not looking after one's work. I should have begun to sweep the thoroughfare. I should have seen the high-caste people in the street. That man! That he should have hit me! My poor jalebis! I should have eaten them. But why couldn't I say something? Couldn't I have joined my hands to him and then gone away. The slap on my face! The coward! (U 56)

The reaction of the caste Hindu, touched by the untouchable Bakha is a typical one. It only reveals the tragic dilemma of the untouchables. Bakha becomes acutely aware of his low social status and protests in his mind:

The cruel crowd! All of them were 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 too. That's why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That's why they don't touch us, the high-castes. (U 56)

He is moved by the kindness of the tonga-wallah but the word “untouchable” haunts him:

The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep to tell me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhammadan. They don't mind touching us, the Muhammadans and the sahibs. It is only the Hindus and the outcasts who are not sweepers. For them, I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!' (U 56-57)

Thus, another aspect of untouchability is unfolded by Anand through the kind treatment meted out to Bakha and other outcasts by the Mohammedans, Christians and the men in the armed forces. Bakha is humanely consoled by the Mohammedan tonga-wallah after he is slapped by the touched-Lalla. Havildar Charat Singh too offers him tea and gives him a hockey stick. The unexpected visit of Hakim Bhagwan Das to Lakha's house when Bakha's condition had deteriorated to the extent of impending death establishes the nobility of the medical profession.

E.M.Forster writes about Bakha in the following words:

Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive; we can recognize his broad intelligent face, graceful torso and heavy buttocks, as he does his nasty jobs, or stumps out in artillery boots in hopes of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in his hand. (Preface 7)

Anand also throws light on the hypocrisy and lustfulness of pretensions so-called priests through the character of panditKalinath who believes to be polluted by the touch ofuntouchable and has a strong sexual desire for Sohini, an untouchable. It is his evil intention that urges him to ask Sohini to come to clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. Sohini innocently goes to do so, he catches her but she refuses his suggestions. He then raises an alarm:

Polluted, polluted, polluted” shouted the Brahmin below...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 purificatory ceremony. (U 67)

He is the priest, the highest caste in the hierarchy of the caste system and is supposed to lead a life of purity both inwardly and outwardly. But here he invites the untouchable Sohini to the temple the abode of God, in whose presence he wants to molest her. Soon a crowd gathers and the people berate Bakha saying they would need to perform a purification ceremony now:

‘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, getaway, you dog!’ ...A temple can be polluted according to Holy Books by a low-caste man within sixty-nine yards of it, and here has was actually on the steps, at the door. We are ruined. We will need to have a sacrificial fire in order to purify ourselves and our shrine. (U 68)

Thus, the Temple Incident flings a harsh and rugged satire on the hypocrisy and ostentations of the upper caste people like PanditKalinath.

Anand’s realism is also seen in his use of the literal translation of Punjabiexclamation and swear words. These expressions like “Rape-mother”, “Rape-sister”, “Wah Guru”, “Ri daughter of a Pig” are frequent in the novel. The People who gather around Bakha shout abuses by calling him, “low-caste vermin”, “Swine”, “Cock eyed”, “son of a bow-legged Scorpion”, “dog”, “brute”, “dirty dog”, “Son of a bitch”, “Son of a dog”, “Offspring of a pig” etc. These abusive words thrown on a lonely and helplessness person are in opposition to the privileged folk’s claim of being “twice-born”. These words actually reveal their polluted mind. Excessive use of such expressions has been criticized as coarse and vulgar, but Anand could not have presented human life so realistically without a liberal use of such expressions.

By the realistic, sensitive and compassionate portrayal of an individual, Mulk Raj Anand displays his penetrating thought and humane attitude in understanding the grim realities of the social life in India. Certainly, Anand’s novel *untouchable* is a masterlywork because it evinces a happy harmony between his social preoccupation and artistic gifts. As prof. K.R.S. Iyengar sums up the novel:

*Untouchable* strikes us as the picture of the place of a society, and the certain person not easily to be forgotten; a picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy. As a novelist addressing himself to the task of exposing certain evils, Anand has been as effective as Dickens himself. (Indian Writing in English 330)

Another solution to the evil of untouchability is offered by R.N. Bashir, an advocate, and his young poet friend Iqbal Nath Sarashar who think that the introduction of the flush system will automatically put an end to this obnoxious social evil. As Parashar says:

Well, we must destroy caste, we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations. We must recognize an equality of rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone. The Mahatma didn’t say so, but the legal and social basis of caste having been broken down by the British Indian penal code, which recognizes the rights of every man before a court, caste is now mainly governed by profession. When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first we will do when we accept the machine will be to introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone to handle it – the flush system. Then the



sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society. (U 162)

Thus, we can say Anand, at the end of the novel, rules out any possibility of being bracketed as a social reformer. Three possible solutions to his problem are suggested to Bakha: one, 'Conversion to Christianity', secondly 'the acceptance of the Flush System' and finally, 'Abolition of untouchability'. But he is not shown accepting any one of the solutions to his problem.

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