

## **Unveiling Untouchability in Mulk Raj Anand's Novel "Untouchable"**

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**Abstract**

*Mulk Raj Anand, born in 1905, was one of the great Indian writers of English fiction. He was a novelist with a deep social commitment. His Untouchable is unique and original in many ways. It is known as the 'epic of misery'. The Novel has received International recognition. Through his novels, he has highlighted the social evils against the mindsets of individuals and some privileged sections of the society. Particularly in his novel Untouchable, he has chiefly dealt with the ghastly evil of untouchability afflicting pre-independence Hindu society. This Novel shows the larger backdrop of the cast configurations within the Hindu society that have hindered the healthy growth of a considerable section of the Indian community for the centuries.*

**Keywords**

*Untouchability, Outcaste, Ill-treatment, Slave, Humiliation, Aggrieved, Insulting*

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Anand has very boldly highlighted the miserable condition of the unfortunate untouchables and suggested that they can only be freed from the shackles of Untouchability if the men infuse some sympathy and tenderness into their own hearts and the men who are considered untouchables and humiliated as pariahs show enough courage to live boldly and protest against their humiliation. Anand has artistically portrayed the harsh reality of the Hindu society which was divided into various pigeonholes. E.M. Forster comments on this aspect of the novel in the following words:

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 he 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.

The opening lines of the novel encapsulate the 'big difference' between the untouchables and other residential communities in the town:

The outcastes' 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 washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. References to the text are from the Orient Paperbacks 1935 rpt. edition of *Untouchable*.

The early-morning scene of the novel presents a very pathetic and heart-rending account of untouchability. Sohini, the sister of Bakha, goes to the well with a pitcher to fetch water so that she may prepare tea for her father who is dying of hunger. Being an untouchable, she cannot draw water herself. She cannot even climb up the steps to the well as her very shadow will pollute the water in the well. There are a large number of other outcastes also who like her, are waiting for some kind-hearted Hindu to come and draw water for them. The novelist presents a beautiful account in the following words:

“So the outcastes had to wait for chance to bring some caste Hindu to the well, for luck to decide that he was kind, for fate to ordain that he had time-

to get their pitchers filled with water. They crowded around the well, congested the space below its high brick platform, morning, noon and night, joining their hands with servile humility to every passer-by, cursing their fate, and bemoaning their fate, if they were refused the help they so wanted, beseeching and blessing, condescended to listen to them, or to help them."

Gulabo and Waziro are also the part of crowd waiting for water. Gulabo feels jealous of Sohini for she is growing into a beautiful woman. Her fear is that her own importance shall be eclipsed by this sweeper girl in the near future. She, without any provocation from anyone, abuses and harasses Sohini who bears all her bullying most patiently. This Sohini-Gulabo episode throws ample light on their respective characters and adds a dramatic touch to the scene. They have to wait for hours before an ill-humored priest Pandit Kali Nath comes to the well and when he comes, they pray for him to draw water for them. Pandit Kali Nath draws water for them not for their help due to sympathy but to relieve his constipation. The Pandit Kali Nath who is attracted by the beauty of the girl, casts a cursory glance around and makes out Sohini for his favor. He does not listen to Gulabo and other women who say that they have waited longer, they should be served first. He simply dismisses them and pours water into Sohini's pitcher. Then he asks her to come that day to the temple and clean his house.

When Sohini goes to sweep the courtyard of the house of Pandit Kali Nath of the temple in which twelve-headed and ten-armed gods and goddess of the Hindu pantheon from which the caste of Bakha and his family has been alienated as their only religion is to keep others pure and clean. On one hand, the only touch of the untouchables was sufficient enough to defile the temple but on the other hand, the priest of the temple Pandit Kali Nath does not hesitate to molest the beautiful girl Sohini in the temple who is a scavenger and belongs to so-called outcastes. In the same scene, the homage of Bakha to his gods is answered with the cries "polluted! polluted!" raised by the temple priest to extricate himself from the alarm Sohini has raised to ward off his activities towards her. But when Bakha learns about the truth, he decides to take revenge for the insult of his sister but is unable to do so because of the caste barriers imposed upon his community.

The temple scene is followed by another humiliating and traumatic episode known as the "Chapati-throwing" episode. According to existing religious customs, Bakha returns from the temple through the silver-smith's lane collecting crumbs and leftovers of the food. But he has to face abuses and insults again. Although he demands food for the work of cleanliness he has already done, even then the woman behaves as if he were a dog and throws the Chapati down her roof for Bakha which

falls on the damp and dirty place below where some child is relieving himself. He picks it up and without any more attempts to collect food from other houses returns home. He has to cry at the doors like a beggar. His condition is worse than a hypocritical Sadhu who gets much better attention for doing nothing.

Anand as a strong believer in the dignity of man and equality of all men, is naturally shocked by the inhuman way the untouchables are treated by those that belong to superior castes – especially the Brahmins or the so-called “twice-born”. The degradation and humiliation inflicted on the unfortunate sections of society are highlighted through the oft-repeated refrain of Bakha ‘Posh, posh, sweeper coming.’ The very fact that they were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the only source of drinking water in the town Bulandshahr called ‘the cast-well’, and had to wait for sometimes for hours together for the generosity of some cast – Hindu to pour water in their empty pitchers which clearly indicates how deep-rooted this evil had become. Although Bakha and his other outcast friends sometimes played hockey with the two boys of the Hindu babu, yet the mere touch of a cast Brahmin unleashes an invasion of abusive epithets and physical assault on Bakha. He is not able to enjoy the taste of eating mouth-watering jalebis when he unconsciously touches the tunic of a cast Hindu who immediately starts shouting at him.

Why don't you call, you 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.

Bakha, having been disappointed at this incident, is completely taken aback with his hands joined together in apology without uttering a single word. He only bends his forehead over them and utters wanting apology but is not able to satisfy the ‘touched’ man who does not even care to hear what he says. He again starts abusing him:

‘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 ... now, on account of you, I’ll be late.

A large crowd gathers around him and increases the mental and physical agony of the aggrieved man Bakha who feels confused by this fresh development. Anand 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 a 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.

One of the people in the crowd puts false blame on Bakha for 'beating him.' When he protests against the false accusation and asks for forgiveness for his present crime of 'forgetting to call his arrival' and 'touching the cast Hindu', no one in the crowd believes a word of what he says. The novelist expresses the peculiarity of his problematic situation in these observations:

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!'

However, Bakha draws the sympathy from a passer-by Mohammedan Tongawallah which infuriated the 'touched man' further and slaps him on his face. Resultantly his turban is fallen off and the jalebis in the paper bag in his hand are 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! been angry at his extravagance, and the boys of the outcastes' colony teased him on account of his eccentric dresses and called him 'Pilpali sahib'. And he knew, of course, that except for his English clothes, there was nothing English in his life".

Bakha suffers from humiliation even at his home. While Bakha lying in bed, he hears his father's stem and authoritative call, "Get up, ohe you Bakhya, the son of

a pig!”. He gets angry at the abusive language of his father as he is already feeling depressed that morning. His father’s abuses create a growing dislike in his heart for the short-tempered, sickly old man. But the memory of his mother compels him to think of the days when she was alive. She showed him all the affection that warmed his heart. She used to give him a brass tankard full of a boiling hot mixture of water, tea leaves and milk from the steaming earthen saucepan.

Bakha comes out of his reverie as he hears the shouts: “Phe, Bakhya! Ohe, Bakhya! Ohe, scoundrel of a sweeper’s son. Come and clean a latrine for me!”. It is Havildar charat Singh, the famous hockey player of the 38<sup>th</sup> Dogra regiment. He suffers from piles and accuses Bakha of his ailment: “Why aren’t the latrines clean, the rogue of a Bakha? There is not one fit to go near. I have walked all around. Do you know you are responsible for my piles? I caught the contagion sitting on one of those dirty latrines!”. Bakha picks up his brush and basket and sets out to clean the latrines.

In spite of his dirty job, Bakha remains clean. He looks intelligent, and sensitive and wants to maintain his dignity which does not belong to the ordinary scavenger who is generally considered as uncouth and unclean in the existing society. The Havildar is thoroughly impressed by Bakha’s quickness and efficiency in doing his job: “You are becoming a ‘gentleman’, ohe Bakha!”. With a grin that symbolises two thousand years of racial and caste superiority, he asks Bakha to see him that afternoon and take the gift of a hockey stick from him.

Bakha feels delighted and exulted at the sympathetic gesture shown by Charat Singh, one of the best hockey players of the regiment whose generous promise arouses the feeling of servility in Bakha which he has inherited from his forefathers: the weakness of the down-trodden, the helplessness of the poor, the passive contentment of the bottom dog. But he is suddenly ill-treated at the Hakim’s house and also how the Hakim had later visited their house in the outcastes’ colony to save the dying Bakha’s life.

When his younger brother Rakha comes with some food from the barracks, they all start eating from the same basket but Bakha suddenly stops when his hand touches something sticky in the pieces of the left-over chapatias and his mind is filled with a sense of revulsion that it might be mixed up with somebody’s saliva. He excuses himself from eating by telling a lie that he had been invited by Ram Charan to his sister’s marriage where he will receive his share of sweets.

Bakha expresses his association with Ram Charan’s sister and his desire to marry her which is turned down by the girl’s mother Gulabo on the basis of the

superiority of the cast as they belong to the washermen community. In this way, we see the hierarchy even among the outcastes which come as a hindrance in the desired marriage of Bakha with Ram Charan's sister. Bakha is filled with deep gratitude for Charat Singh for his kindness when he offers him tea and gives him the promised hockey stick. Bakha suffers from further humiliation when he is accused by Babu's wife of defiling her house by coming there when he carries the wounded son of Babu to his house. Even at his home, Bakha is ill-treated by both his father and younger brother for wasting his time instead of engaging himself in the job of cleaning the latrines in the barracks. When he is told to leave home, Bakha is filled with utmost despair. He starts wondering what he had done to deserve the misery he was experiencing. He says that he would rather prefer dying to be ill-treated both at home and outside. It fills the heart of Bakha with despair.

While sitting in a dejected mood under a tree, Bakha is suddenly overwhelmed by the foreigner Colonel Hutchinson, Chief of the Salvation Army in the region when the latter shows interest in him but he is unable to understand what he is told about the love of Christ, the Original Sin and other related stories. The rude behavior and insulting remarks about the sweepers made by Colonel Hutchinson's wife fill Bakha's mind again with pain and he starts moving aimlessly when he suddenly hears some people shouting "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai" followed by another group shouting still louder. "The Mahatma has come!". Along with the crowd of people, he too goes to the Golbagh where Mahatma Gandhi is going to address a meeting. There he finds the Hindu Lallas, the Kashmiri Muslims, the Sikh rustics, red-checked Afghans, Indian Christians and many people from the outcastes' colony together in the crowd. He realizes that it was only Mahatma Gandhi who could bring unity among all the castes. He hears babus of talking about Gandhi being a legend and the freedom becoming a reality soon under his leadership. He also comes to know that Gandhi had been released from the jail on the condition that he would not make any political speech. Just then he hears a shout from the crowd "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai! Hindu, Mussulman, Sikh ki jai! Harijan ki jai!" and sees Gandhi Ji escorted by Kasturba Gandhi on one side and English disciple Mirabel, on the other.

In his speech at Golbagh, Gandhi Ji declares that untouchability is the greatest blot on Hinduism and says that it is very strange for the Indians to seek freedom from the grip of a foreign nation while they themselves are trampling upon millions of their fellow human beings for centuries. Thereafter he relates the story of the scavenger boy Ulka, an untouchable who was working in his house as a cleaner and for whose sake Gandhi Ji always pleaded with his mother in his childhood. The feeling of Humanism reached the climax when the Mahatma expresses his strong

desire to be born a scavenger in his next life so that he could realize the pains and sufferings of the untouchables and justify his concern regarding his efforts being made to remove the social evil of untouchability from the society. Gandhi Ji says,

“I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts leveled at them, in order that I may endeavor to free myself and them from their miserable condition. Therefore, I prayed that, if I should be born again, I should be so, not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, but as an outcaste, as an Untouchable.”

He asks them not to accept the remains of the food from the high-caste Hindus but to insist on payment in sound food grains. Gandhi concludes his speech with the words:

“May god give you strength to work out your soul’s salvation to the end!”

Bakha is deeply touched by the concluding words of the Mahatma’s speech which seemed to convey Bakha’s own feeling of horror and indignation at the ill-treatment of the untouchables by the caste Hindus. When the Gandhi Ji leaves, the people again shout, “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai”. Now the question arises of how this deeply rooted Untouchability based on an inequality-graded system, can be got rid of in the country where the Washermen community considers itself superior to the other castes even among the outcastes. Iqbal Nath Parashar, a young poet, and his friend R.N. Bashir, a Barrister-at-Law talk about introducing the flush system for sewage disposal.

The plot of the Novel is linear in form and simple in content. It is one of the best experimental plots in the elementary stage of an Indian novel in English Literature. The Novelist, Anand has made it the most well-structured plot by using the narrative techniques of stream-of-consciousness, flashback, reverie, interior monologue etc. and confining the action to less than twenty-four hours in the life of its hero Bakha. The Novel has been written with the single purpose of the theme of untouchability which has been well defined and analyzed from different viewpoints and in all its complexity. Anand tries not to create these scenes through Bakha’s eyes. As a novelist, he is looking on from the side so that he could see him during his pilgrim’s progress, confronting his routine cosmogony. Says Anand,

“Although I could see Bakha alone, a kind of expatriate, an exile,



the outcaste, I wanted to put him into his own setting. And he was rendered in terms of his own human situations.”

The most important thing for the novelist is to impart actuality to the scene through which the sap of his life flows, making everything into his felt experiences and not an abstract statement. The novel succeeds in giving a direct impression of the reality of Bakha's life, indicating the sources of his inner rhythms and vibrations.

Untouchable is essentially a contemporary novel that highlights the miserable, pitiable and pathetic condition of the untouchables. The novel presents the realistic situation of the free natural man of our era who is enslaved by circumstances but revolts against his suppressions. Anand has beautifully applied the narrative techniques of flashback, reverie, reminiscence, instinctive awareness of reality, and intuition and has coupled them with the truncated thoughts, symbolic images, words and phrases. Mulk Raj Anand's consciousness of the underdogs and his real concern for the upliftment of the outcastes, make Untouchable a modern novel in the real sense of the term.

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