

# Unveiling Caste Oppression: An Analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' and the Quest for Social Justice

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## Abstract:

Mulk Raj Anand's novel "Untouchable" serves as a chilling exposé of the life of Bakha, a member of India's lowest caste, the Harijan, depicting his struggles and humiliations over the course of a single day. Influenced by Gandhi's principles, Anand passionately denounces the caste system's brutality and hypocrisy, highlighting the plight of the untouchables living in squalor and deprivation. Through vivid imagery and realistic portrayal, Anand confronts the reader with the harsh realities faced by Bakha and his community, including discrimination, abuse, and societal neglect. The novel critiques both British colonial rule and traditional Hindu beliefs for exacerbating the suffering of the untouchables. Anand proposes three solutions to combat untouchability: conversion to Christianity, adopting Gandhi's approach, or technological intervention. Through his poignant storytelling, Anand advocates for social reform and justice, challenging entrenched prejudices and advocating for a more equitable society. The study examines Anand's portrayal of untouchability, his depiction of the caste system, and his advocacy for a more equitable society.

Keywords: Untouchability, Caste system, Gandhi, Social reform, Realism.

## Introduction:

Mulk Raj Anand, an Indian novelist, is also known for his short stories and critiques on art, all written in English. He gained international recognition and was honored with the Sahitya Academy Award in 1972. Alongside Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, Anand forms one of the most famous trios of Indian novelists. Among them, Anand stands out as the most prolific and versatile. Through his novels, Anand offered a groundbreaking portrayal of Indian society following its independence in 1947, shedding light on the realities of the people and exposing the exploitative forces, whether imperialists or feudalists, with unwavering honesty and depth of understanding.

Anand's position in the realm of Indo-Anglian fiction is certainly high and elevated. His prolific writing career covers a period of over thirty six years. His literary achievement comprises not only novels, but also short stories and critical essays on literature and art. His first five novels appeared in the following sequence took him to the prominence – 'Untouchable' (1935) 'Coolie' (1936), 'Two Leaves and Bud' (36) 'The Village' (1939) and 'Across the Black Water' (1945). There are, however, several novels and collections of short stories. "The sword and the sickle", "The Barbar's trade Union," "The Big Heart," "The Tractor and the Corn Goddess, 'Seven Summers,'" "Private life of an Indian Prince" and the 'Morning Face". He drew a realistic and sympathetic portrait of the poor, down trodden and the underprivileged of his country.

Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable" stands as a significant contribution to Indian literature, particularly for its unflinching portrayal of social issues. The novel offers a poignant depiction of untouchability, shedding light on the deplorable conditions faced by the lowest caste in Indian society. Through the lens of social realism, Anand exposes the injustices and prejudices ingrained in the caste system, while also advocating for humanistic principles. This research aims to delve deeper into Anand's exploration of untouchability and humanism, analyzing the thematic elements, narrative techniques, and socio-political context of the novel.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

To analyze the representation of caste-based oppression in Mulk Raj Anand's "untouchable"

To investigate the influence of Gandhian ideals on Mulk Raj Anand's portrayal of social justice in "untouchable"

To evaluate the effectiveness of Anand's proposed solutions to combat untouchability in "untouchable"

### **Methodology of the Study:**

This research employs a qualitative analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable," drawing on close reading and textual analysis to examine the thematic elements and narrative techniques used by the author. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and critical essays, will be consulted to provide additional insights and perspectives on the novel. Quotations from the text will be incorporated to support key arguments and observations.

### **Discussion:**

Anand started his literary career with 'Untouchable' (1935); a novel accounts the chilling expose of the life of a member of the Indians lowest and most abhorred caste Harijan. The story of a single day in the life of Bakha , a toilet cleaner, who accidentally meets a member of a higher caste, it is critically acclaimed worldwide and won the reputation of being Indians Charles Dickens. Anand is indeed, the fiery voice of those people who form the Untouchable caste. Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, an unclean outcaste, suffers a number of humiliations in the course of his day. He begins his day with the abuses of his father, Lakha, the jameder of the sweeper, 'Ohe, Bakha ! Ohe Bakha ! Ohe scoundrel of a sweeper's son ! Come and clean a latrine for me!'

Anand admired Gandhi's principles of self-help and opposition to Western consumerism. He was inspired by a story in "Young India" about a sweeper boy named Uka. This led Anand to seek out Gandhi and eventually live with him at the Sabarmati Ashram. During his time there, Anand closely observed Gandhi's compassion for the Harijans, the lowest caste in society. He was particularly moved by Gandhi's genuine care for them. Anand's novel "Untouchable" was influenced by this experience, with Gandhi even offering suggestions to trim it down and focus more on the protagonist's experiences rather than intellectual musings. Anand reflected on this, saying, "The genuineness of his love for the outcastes moved me more importantly than many of his other ideas except that we then all followed his thoughts on national freedom as our main food, day night."

Anand in 'Untouchable' deals with the indelible problem of the out castes and made it a canvas for painting the plight of the Untouchability. The most ignominious, impoverished and deplorable plight of the untouchables are exposed here with a sharp critical note. The 'outcaste's colony' is situated outside the town and is inhabited by washer man, the cobber, the scavengers, the barbarians, the water carriers and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines ran near the lane. Foul and stinking smell of the dead bodies of the animals left to dry on its banks is asphyxiating. There is no network of drains in this unhygienic place that send forth the most offensive smell. They are all deprived of the basic human rights and condemned to live in polluted and contaminated surroundings. The total development and welfare of these outcastes depends on the mercy of the caste-Hindus who treated them like beasts. Their sufferings knew no bounds. Their problems have been mitigated upon to considerable level had the upper class society showed interest towards them. The caste bound Indian society not allows the untouchables to taste the free air of freedom.

The novelist passionately denounces the castes system and exposes the callousness and hypocrisy of the caste Hindus who consider themselves the custodians of Hindu cultural Heritage. In one place, the readers are informed about the serious illness of Bakha.

The doctor who belongs to caste Hindu community reluctant to visit the untouchable's colony for it would pollute them. His father Lakha haunted and begged from door to door for help, persuaded a Muslim Hakim to visit his cottage to examine Bakha. The Muslims have little faith in Untouchability. The Untouchables are the victim of the orthodox and fanatic belief existing in our society set by the caste Hindu to govern their lives. The Untouchables are not allowed to use the well for this would contaminate the water and the entire periphery of the well. One can get the water only if a caste Hindu condescends.

Anand applied his art with a mission to unfold and lacerated the hypocrisy of the caste Hindu priests always pretends to be innocent and again the hollowness of the society that Bakha belongs to. The two episodes, i.e the well and the temple ones, are pictured to unmask the maliciousness and malevolence of caste Hindu priests.

In the morning, Sohini, Bakha's sister, goes to the well with a pitcher to get water. She waits for someone from the higher caste to fill her pitcher since she's not allowed to use the well directly due to her outcast status. When Pandit Kalinath chooses Sohini over Gulabo, the washerman's wife, to fill the pitcher, Gulabo becomes angry and insults Sohini, calling her names like "bitch" and "prostitute." Gulabo is skilled in manipulating the higher castes, while Sohini remains humble and modest, enduring the hardships with a smile despite her exceptional beauty, which leads to jealousy among other untouchable women.

Pandit Kalinath is depicted as morally weak, indulging in excessive eating and showing a lustful nature. He blames his overeating for stomach issues, oblivious to the starvation faced by many untouchables. His life revolves around reciting sacred verses, but he's also driven by sexual desires. Sohini's beauty captivates him while she waits in line at the well, stirring his lustful desires, despite his outward appearance of piety.

The novel strongly criticizes the Indian caste system and suggests that British colonial rule worsened the suffering of outcastes like Bakha. Throughout the story, Bakha endures many humiliations and hardships. In one scene, he

accidentally touches a high-caste Hindu while lost in thoughts of enjoying sweets, leading to a crowd angrily berating him. Despite his apologies, the caste Hindu doesn't relent and slaps Bakha, ruining his sweets. Bakha, unable to defend himself, suffers silently, realizing that his outcaste status makes his situation even worse. His reaction to the injustice is deeply touching and heart-breaking.

“Why was all this? ..... but why could not I say something ? Could I have joined my hands and gone away? ..... The slap on the face, ..... the cruel crowd. All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused?”

This is not only the speech of Bakha, it is also flash out spontaneously by the millions of Bakha who form the untouchable caste. Bakha is thus both an individual as well as a type, larger than life figure, a true representative of the class of which he belongs. This episode is, indeed, the most violent incident in the novel.

Anand, the novelist known for his realistic style, paints a poignant picture in the temple scene of his novel. Bakha, the protagonist, longs to enter the temple with reverence to catch a glimpse of the Hindu gods and goddesses. However, his respect is shattered by cries of "polluted! Polluted! Polluted!" Bakha's desire to see the gods intensifies despite the strict rules set by the orthodox priests, leading him to commit a serious fault.

Feeling restless in the presence of the divine, Bakha decides to defy the consequences and climbs upstairs to get a closer look at the images of the deities. He examines every detail of the temple with curiosity, feeling intoxicated by the smell of incense and the rhythmic chanting of the worshippers. Bakha finds himself joining in the worship, deeply moved by the spiritual atmosphere.

But suddenly, shouts of "polluted, polluted" disrupt the tranquility. Bakha is confronted by a furious crowd, accusing him of defiling the temple with his presence. He is charged by one of the furious crowd: - “Get off the steps, scavengers, off with you, you have defiled our whole service. You have defiled our temple. Now we will have to do purification ceremony, get down, get away, dog.”<sup>7</sup> The overwhelming sound and hostility leave him paralyzed with fear. He tries to cry out in terror but his voice fails him. He wants to stand up against the humiliating situation but finds himself too weak to move. In the midst of this, he learns another shocking piece of news: his sister, Sohini, has been sexually harassed by the priest, Kali Nath. Sohini reveals that the priest teased her and then groped her while she was working. Sohini reports:- “He .....e.....e...just teased me. And then when I was bending down to work, he come and held me by my breast.”

Bakha's dignity is deeply wounded, and he reacts with rage. He feels the urge to retaliate against the Brahmin who insulted him. However, Sohini intervenes and prevents him from acting impulsively by pulling on his coat. Exhausted and hungry, Bakha returns home and recounts the incident to his father. Despite seeking comfort, Bakha remains disappointed and frustrated. Instead of consolation, he is advised to announce his presence when moving through a crowd.

Sohini's molestation represents the ultimate act of brutality, where justice is denied to a girl who has been molested by a priest simply because she is an untouchable. Tradition has become a major obstacle in her path. Bakha, on the other hand, struggles to transform his anger, resentment, and desire for revenge into tangible action, as he is surrounded by people in his community who are nothing but cowards. They will never support Bakha or bolster his courage to fight against the social evils that plague society. Born to untouchable parents and raised among the untouchables, Bakha's caste determines his social standing. As an outcast, tradition forbids him from raising his voice against injustice and exploitation. He is compelled to conform to societal norms, even though his conscience does not approve.

The novel *Untouchable* is the first to depict untouchability as a social issue faced by millions of untouchables like Bakha. In addition, it explores the philosophy of humanism. Anand, being a realistic novelist, does not fully believe in the philosophy of humanism and socialism. Instead, he portrays the tragic situation of social outcasts. Towards the end of the novel, Anand proposes three concrete solutions to address the problem of untouchability. The conclusion of *Untouchable* incorporates these three solutions. Anand suggests three alternatives to combat the age-old issue of untouchability: conversion to Christianity through Jesus Christ, following Mahatma Gandhi's approach towards social outcasts to abolish untouchability, or introducing the flush system through the use of machines. These alternatives are presented in the concluding part of the novel.

### **Conclusion:**

Anand has penned 'Untouchable' to create a 'epic-misery' of the pathos of untouchables, subjected to brutality and savagery and barbarity meted on them by the so-called custodians of Hindu culture and traditions, the caste Hindus. Anand takes excessive interest in portrayal of their plight and social ambience with feeling and realism. Anand is a significant humanist and applied his humanism as an instrument to express his love, sympathy, compassion and respect for the untouchables. Through the poignant portrayal of characters like Bakha and Sohini, Anand exposes the brutality and injustice inflicted upon the lowest caste by the caste Hindus. The novel delves deep into the themes of social inequality, oppression, and the hypocrisy of the caste system, painting a vivid picture of the suffering and struggles endured by the untouchables.

Anand's writing is not merely a literary endeavour but a passionate call for social reform and justice. He unveils the deep-rooted prejudices and biases that permeate Indian society, challenging readers to confront the harsh truths of untouchability. Moreover, Anand's exploration of humanism and his proposal of concrete solutions at the end of the novel underscore his commitment to addressing this age-old issue.

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