



Exploring Subaltern Narrative: A Critical Analysis of Power Dynamics in ‘Untouchable’ by Mulk Raj Anand.

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The *Untouchable*, published in the year 1935 prior to India's Independence from Colonial rule, describes a day in the life of a scavenger boy named Bakha, who belonged to the lowest caste in Indian society, the sweeper class. Mulk Raj Anand's concern has always been in regard to the downtrodden and dejected class of society, whose voices are silenced by the societal class structure and have no means to express their anguish against the prevailing caste system. In the novel, Mr. Anand was vividly able to shed light on the dehumanizing treatment and social discrimination endured by Bakha, due to his low caste status. The *Untouchable* is a work of fiction, but the writer was able to depict the suffering and humiliation of the lower class in our society. Mulk Raj Anand was a Kshatriya by caste and had played with the children of Sweeper class adjacent to an Indian regiment. And as a result, he was able to convince the audience with the material in his possession. E.M Forster rightly remarks, "*Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known about his troubles. And no Untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity*". (*Untouchable* vii)

This paper aims to critically analyze the power dynamics portrayed in *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, shedding light on the subaltern narratives within the novel. Post colonial literary theory lay its emphasis on the former colonies and the impact on their history, culture and literature from colonization. The western intellectuals wrote history from their viewpoint and, as a result, the representation of the colonized people was far from the harsh reality that they faced due to colonization in the mainstream literature. Western

people shoulder the responsibility on their own to civilized the third world countries according to their tradition and manipulate their writing as they see fit. Postcolonial theory elucidates the exploitation of the colonized people in the name of modernization and industrialization and to obtain their needs, they tried to procure labour and raw materials outside Europe. In case of India, the policy of 'divide and rule' was adopted to exploit economically and dominate culturally and represent the colonized territories as mysterious and exotic and this was purposefully done by the Western intellectuals. The Subaltern study, a postcolonial theory, has become a way to address the colonial subjects initiated by European discourse and focuses on the third world countries like Asia, Africa, and those colonized subjects whose social and economic lives are represented in the literature by the prejudice of the imperial history. The Subaltern theory tries to alter the narrative and give voice to the classless people by representing their culture from their own point of view without the interference of colonialist power. With the spread of Subaltern theory, the power dynamics in literature changed. The euro-centric representation of the third world country as barbaric and uncivilized slowly began to diminish and the classless people in the domain of the world literature established their position, for now they are now they were represented with their own identity and their diversified culture are now celebrated. 'The subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourses and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse'. (Abrams 307) Gayatri Spivak, a postcolonial critic, in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak"? argued that the very structure of colonialism prevents the subalterns from raising their voice for rightful representation. The term subaltern can be used for anyone without stature existing outside the discourse.

In the *Untouchable*, Bakha was a subaltern in the class hierarchy of Indian society. Though he faced humiliation and dehumanizing treatment from the upper class, he could not raise his voice and fight against the prevailing law because the very structure of Indian society would not permit him. The untouchable, lives were more miserable and deplorable than that of a slave. They are forever bound to a state they are born into and there is no escape. They are considered unclean and pollute others when they come in contact. The realistic portrayal of the outcast from the rest of the class which is shown at the beginning of the story: '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' (Anand 1). The postcolonial

theory constitutes the Imperial as superior and saviour of the colonized nations and the conflicting desire for the ruled subject to imitate them. In the story, Bakha was fascinated by the British soldiers' way of living and this is clearly depicted in the story by the narrator: *'Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement when he first to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncles. He had glimpses, during his sojourn there, of the life the Tommies lived, sleeping on strange, low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets, eating eggs, drinking tea and wine in tin mugs, going to parade and then walking down to the bazaar with cigarettes in their mouths and silver-mounted canes in their hands. And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life'*. (Anand 3).

The caste system of Hindus is divided into four hierarchies, originated from Brahma, the Hindu God of creation. The Brahmins are placed at the top hierarchy, who were considered to have originated from the Brahma's head and mainly hold the profession of teacher and are considered as intellectual. The second hierarchy in the class system was the Kshatriya, who came from the arms of Brahma, and were mainly rulers or warriors. The third hierarchy is occupied by the Vaishyas, who came from his thighs and are traders. The lowest position is occupied by the Shudras, created from Brahma's feet and perform all menial duties.

In terms of power dynamics, the lowest class was treated no less than an animal. The outcastes were restricted to draw water from the well as the high castes consider the water would be polluted. The outcastes cannot afford to have their own well built. Therefore, they have to wait at the foot of the high-caste well for a high caste to come along, take pity on them, and pour water into their pitchers for them. In the story, the character of Pundit Kali Nath, one of the priest in charge of the temple, justly laid his eye on Bakha's younger sister Sohini when she went to fetch water from the well. He was inclined to be kind to her because she was young and had a pretty face and her body was visible under her muslin shirt and he filled her pitcher first, though she was the last in the line on the pretext of reward for her patience nature. He offered her to clean the courtyard of their house at the temple surrounding so that he could take advantage of her. The priest, who is regarded as the protector, was a hypocritical man for harboring such a corrupt thought shows the double standard of the upper class. When he inappropriately grope Sohini's chest from behind, the crowd instead of condemning the act were more concerned that their temple had been defiled by the untouchable and this incident filled Bakha with anguish but, he was unable to stand up for his sister's dignity because of his social status and the upper class people would never acknowledge their evil deeds. The higher

class people blamed all of their suffering and woes on the untouchables and this is reflected in the character of Havildar Charat Singh, the famous hockey player of the 38th Dogras regiment, blamed Bakha for his pile condition: *'Why aren't the latrines clean, you rogue of Bakhe! There is not one fit to go near! I have walked all round! Do you know you are responsible for my piles?'* (Anand 7)

Ramanand, a moneylender, shook Bakha out of his dream and demanded a latrine to be cleaned for him. The low-caste family had to depend on the alms given to them by the high class and they did not have the luxury to spare their time leisurely. The infliction of discrimination was also relevant in the incident, where Bakha bought a Jalebi to relinquish his craving and the shopkeeper asked him to keep the coin at a little distance lest he might pollute it by directly handing him the coin. The lower class refrained from any physical contact with the upper class. The incident in the road when Bakha unconsciously bumped into a higher class caused a stir and countless abuses and insults were hurled at him.: *'But the crowd which pressed round him, staring, grimaces pulling, jeering, and leering without a shadow of pity for his remorse. It stood unmoved, without heeding his apologies, and taking a sort of delight in watching him cower under the abuses and curses of its spokesman. Those who were silent seemed to sense in the indignation of the more vociferous member of the crowd, an expression of their awakening lust for power'*. (Anand 40). The upper class uses their social status to wrongfully accused the lower class and try to exert their dominance and power.

Mulk Raj explores all the two-facedness and double-minded ideology of the upper-class people and this was seen the way the Holy man was perceived and given alms while Bakha was insulted and curse of his very existence by the lady due to his lower status when he dozed off against the hard wood of the hall because he was too tired while collecting leftover bread. The way the upper class treats lower or untouchable people is distinctly and unambiguously. The injustice, humiliation and oppression felt by the whole community of the outcastes is justifiable.

A man like Havildar Singh, though was rude at the beginning to Bakha, but he does not strictly adhere to the maintenance of casteism and even gifted him with a hockey stick and even allowed Bakha to serve him with him. The other instance when Bakha was humiliated in the street, it was the Muhammadan man that showed him humility and kindness : *'The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, on that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhammadan and the Sahibs. It is only the Hindus, and the out-caste who are not sweeper. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! untouchable! That's the*

word!untouchable!I am untouchable!'.(Anand 43). The writer successfully portray the physical plight of the outcastes and brings out the social and economic exploitation through various dialogue and scenes that evoke a sense of resentment against the upper class among the readers.

The inhuman treatment meted out to Bakha through his encounter with different upper class characteristics keeps the authenticity of the prevailing Indian class system without any manipulation by the author. The upper class crossed the boundaries of moral conduct and politeness when it came to the lower class, which is the very ground of humanism. Anand, even for a moment, was not swayed in exposing the harsh reality. Not all Hindus are inconsiderate to the untouchable. There is a character like Havildar Charat Singh, who was extremely mean to Bakha at the beginning of the story, but rises above the humdrum of class distinction and treats the untouchable without any hesitation. He shared tea with Bakha in the same room and gave him a brand new hockey stick. Mr. Anand also infuses the diverse religion of India by bringing in the character of Colonel Hutchinson, a local Salvation Army, who was free from the hierarchical class system and was keen to convert Bakha to Christianity, but the latter was unconvinced of accepting Yessuh Messih as his saviour because the colonel was unable to deliver the message. The tonga-wallah, a Muhammadan represent the Islamic religion, one of the major religious belief in India but they do not follow and practise any casteism and even the English men. Bakha's desire to escape from his wretched fate was beautifully exposed by the writer the reality of human desire to imitate the higher self through the character of Bakha.

Through the creation of the subaltern character, Bakha, the writer tries to expose the evil caste system that hinders the growth of a particular section of society. Like how the subaltern writer represented the voice against the imperial portrayal of the colonized countries by re-writing their history, Mr. Anand, through Gandhi's visit in the village gave a ray of hope in the lives of the lower class when Mahatma addressed the issue of untouchability and called them 'Harijan' (children of god).

In literature, the narrative of the "Untouchable" and the subaltern lies in their ability to change the dominant narratives, raise awareness about social injustices, and empower marginalized communities. Subaltern writers in literature emphasis on the importance of giving voice to those who have been historically silenced. Mulk Raj Anand, in his novel, gives the voice to the subaltern, specifically the untouchables in the Indian Caste system. They provide a narrative platform to represent in the mainstream literature. By highlighting the subaltern perspective, the narrator challenges the caste divided society and gives out a social

message to sympathise with the marginalise. Literature as a platform can deconstruct the oppressive structure and have the ability to urge its readers to confront with their own biases. This novel particularly contributes to subaltern studies and serves as a historical documentation of the existing caste-based discrimination and lays emphasis on understanding the voice of the marginalized community and enriches our knowledge of their condition, powers, economic and social struggles that they encountered everyday of their lives.

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