



## **THE MARGINALISED CLASS AND CASTE IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A legendary figure in the Indian Novel in English, Anand has earned a remarkable and commendable place among the Indian novelists like R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. He has endeared himself to millions of readers, throughout the English-speaking world, because of his flair for story-telling and his passionate humanism. His works are interspersed with Indian moral values, the evil forces which dominate the society, his humanitarian attitude and deep sympathy for the poor, wretched and the down-trodden people. Untouchable is indeed a pathetic cry of the sufferings of the low class people under the British rule and also under the pressure of outdated Hindu/Brahmin customs and oppressive traditions. The Indian society had been suffering under the burden of slavery for the past two hundred years. Age old practices of discrimination on the basis of caste and class continued to crush the free spirit of man and also continued to separate man from man.*

**Key Words:** Marginalised, Oppressed, Indian Society, Untouchability, Low Caste.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a place of pride among the Indian English writers whose literary career extended to nearly four decades. A legendary figure in the Indian Novel in English, Anand has earned a remarkable and commendable place among the Indian novelists like R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. He has endeared himself to millions of readers, throughout the English-speaking world, because of his flair for story-telling and his passionate humanism. His works are interspersed with Indian moral values, the evil forces which dominate the society, his humanitarian attitude and deep sympathy for the poor, wretched and the down-trodden people. Saros Cowasjee holds that Anand “in his narratives presented a lot of new people, who had rarely entered the sphere of literature” (Cowasjee 40). He has a strange capacity for depicting realistically the sad and miserable plight of the low classes. His novels are full of sympathetic feelings about the people and places he knows from his first hand knowledge. He is a marked realist and he has a profound imaginative and sensitive

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apprehension of the Indian society in all its ramifications. His novels are faithful documents on the contemporary social set up as it presents a real picture of the rural India. He is a lover of mankind and his novels reflect his responsibility towards society, especially those who are marginalized, oppressed, and the subalterns who suffer at the hands of the colonial masters, and the so called representatives of the upper class of the traditional Hindu society. His faithful account and realistic portrayal of the prevailing orthodox Hinduism are quite valuable in bringing a positive change in the society.

As literature is the reflection of society and social values of the age in which it is written, the present novel by Anand is no exception to it. Marlene Fisher comments, "Indian society galvanized into a new social and political awareness, was bound to seek creative expression for its new consciousness and the novel has, in all ages, been handy instrument for this purpose" (Fisher 48). When Anand started writing in the 1930s, India was in a state of transition, a change was coming in every field of life and simultaneously the struggle for political freedom was gaining momentum on one side and fight against poverty, illiteracy, casteism, superstition, untouchability was also being condemned by the writers of the age as they thought that without economic and social independence political freedom was incomplete and meaningless.

*Untouchable* is indeed a pathetic cry of the sufferings of the low class people under the British rule and also under the pressure of outdated Hindu/Brahmin customs and oppressive traditions. The Indian society had been suffering under the burden of slavery for the past two hundred years. Age old practices of discrimination on the basis of caste and class continued to crush the free spirit of man and also continued to separate man from man. The society suffered at different levels but could not think of uniting, regardless of any bias, under one banner of humanity. They remained disintegrated under different flags. To a sensitive heart like his, this discrimination was digging at the roots and was eating away the vitality of the country. Anand could see and understand that discrimination rampant in society was weakening the nation. Thus *Untouchable* is a pathetic but also a heart rending cry of the author against the cruelty and prejudice of the higher caste people towards the lower castes, the dalits and the subalterns. It is his ruthless attack against the hitherto rigid, gradually crumbling caste-system in India.

To Mulk Raj Anand, casteism is an age-old lie made by the powerful and wicked in society to uphold discrimination. His prime concern as a social critic is to remove caste system as it damages social cohesion by giving certain sections of society an unfair advantage over others permanently. Casteism is a hydra-headed evil, contagious like small pox and it poisons and destroys the dignity of man. The issues that surfaced in *Untouchable* are caste, gender, class exploitation and religious discrimination. Anand himself believes that in India, caste system is a powerful one that gave privileges to a few people according to their 'superior' religious



order and identity. *Untouchable* manifestly portrays this trend of the national movement by using the Dalits as a vehicle for political, social and religious reform. In this way, the novel represents the nationalistic history of the country and has an immense impact on both the National Movement and the Indian English literature.

In the Manu Smriti, the authentic law book of Hindu social and domestic code and conduct, the Shudras or the fourth Varna or the untouchables are not allowed to acquire knowledge of Vedic literature and other scriptures. They have no right to go to the temples, no liberty to even listen to the Mantras or the incantation of the Vedas. They are also deprived of the right of studying Sanskrit as it was the language of most of the religious books. This caused the deterioration and downfall of this great language and it has become almost a dead language today. It is important to mention here that the sweepers and the scavengers are regarded as untouchables because of the filthy work they have to do. The so-called upper caste people believed that a touch by a sweeper or a scavenger would pollute them. Religion plays a crucial role in our country and Hindu religion emerges as the major dominating force. The presence of an untouchable was considered to be a bad omen to the Brahmins. The most ironic thing about the entire issue was that it was these so called untouchables who worked in the land for providing food and other essential things of life to the Brahmins but these high caste guardians of morality tried to exploit and crush these down-trodden in the powerful social structure. Actually, 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. In this social order, the problem came when it developed prejudices against the lower castes and they were allotted the jobs which were least desired by others, for example, they were required to perform manual labour, maintain public health by removing garbage, human waste and excreta, cleaning streets, sewers and dry latrines. Dalits were considered to be a polluted class which was secluded from upper Hindu castes, their religious and social life. Priyamvada Gopal comments, "Dalits were commonly distinguished precisely by their invisibility and ritually enforced physical segregation from other members of the society" (Gopal 50). It means that they were not permitted to go to schools, temples and other public places and this discriminating treatment checked their progress, harmonious development and human rights.

Through *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand draws our attention to a number of questionable customs and social ways of the Hindu society of the thirties, particularly the caste system. It makes us conscious of the various problems of the untouchables who are ill treated, underfed and exploited by the upper strata of our society. This orthodox social system made Anand's conscience paint the abominable picture of caste-ridden society, having been divided since ancient times on caste lines. The novel remains a telling document of relevance even today in view of recent atrocities being committed on Harijans by high caste Hindus. Untouchability, the social evil, is shown with its deep roots. In other words, it reflects the deep-rooted

prejudices, the barbarism and the cruelty with which men inflict on human beings who are still non-entities in the eyes of the society. Anand has attempted a fictional depiction of heart-felt experiences of this dehumanizing social evil, which results in loneliness, loss of identity and rootlessness. With a penetrating insight into untouchability and a touching presentation of its various facets, Anand has carved out for himself a niche in the temple of fame. Anand's treatment of untouchability explores some fine moral and realistic aspects of human life. Caste and national barriers have no significance for him and he regards all mankind as one, and his purpose is to focus attention on the plight of the have-nots arouse sympathy for them.

In the novel, Bulashah is a small village in Punjab and there is a small colony named as outcaste's colony. There are, "a group of mud-walled houses...there lived the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes of Hindu society" (Anand 1). In the novel, we see that Bakha becomes a poor victim of this repressing power again and again. In the earlier analyses The novel depicts the cruel treatment given by the high caste Hindus to the untouchable sweeper and scavenger, cobblers, washermen, etc. who suffer because of their birth in the low caste and have no right to protest or give expression to their resentment. Though Bakha in his friend and family circles condemns this callous behaviour of high caste Hindus and he admires western culture and customs for treating human beings as equals, but the power structure of the tradition bound Hindu society is such that there is a great imbalance of power. In *Untouchable*, the reflection of this idea can be seen when Havaladar Charat Singh shouts loudly:

*Oh, Bakhya! Oh, Bakhya! Oh, you scoundrel of a sweeper's son! Come and clear a latrine for me! Why aren't the latrines clean, you rogue of a Bakhe! There is not one fit to go near!"* (7)

In Anand's *Untouchable*, Bakha's beautiful sister Sohini represents a docile and meek woman who used to go to fetch water from the village well in the pitcher where she has to wait much for the arrival of a high caste Hindu who may help to draw water as she is strictly prohibited not to pollute the water with her touch This wretched condition of the untouchables is very distressing as they have to be on the mercy of the high caste Hindus for getting water from the public well. The low caste people were so poor to have their own wells, therefore they were compelled to live in dirt, dust, filth and thrust because of their subalternity. As Anand narrates:

*The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. (14-15)*



The well episode in this novel is a vital evidence for understanding the social problems of the Dalit or subaltern community. Anand castigates Hindu caste system and the evil designs of the privileged class to think that only they can enjoy the basic amenities of life. Sohini is supposed to have the virtues of patience, meekness, docility and submission to the wishes desires and whims of the lecherous upper caste people like Pandit Kali Nath. Bakha's agony is not the outcome of any flaw but because of his birth in the subaltern class. He wants to improve his social status but soon realizes his low position when a shopkeeper throws a packet of cigarettes at him as a butcher throws a bone to a street dog or a confectioner throws a packet of jalebis at him in an insulting manner and a high caste housewife throws chapattis at him in angry mood, makes him feel inferior to every one and wherever he goes, people keep distance from him with the shouting word 'defiled' and 'polluted'. So Anand depicts the humanitarian outlook in presenting those conditions which Bakha and other people of his class faced in the narrow Hindu society and its condemnable ideology. 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).

Like a normal human being, Bakha wants to lead a good life but his day starts with his routine of toilet cleaning with three rows of toilets to be cleaned and that too single-handedly. So Bakha, even at eighteen, is burdened with the strenuous routine of a sweeper and he has to in addition to it, endure all humiliation so frequently inflicted on sweepers in the caste-ridden Hindu society. In the novel Bakha becomes the target of recriminations from several on-looking high-caste Hindus. Though he is a fine boy, tender and wise, yet all the reward society gives him is a humiliation or injury or a mixture of both. Detested by the power structure of the high class people, Bakha has to announce his arrival lest the upper class be touched and defiled. He has a good physique and Nature has bestowed upon him all countenance and conscience. The five basic elements have their equal share in him and the full warmth of the sun lends him the ability to work and to feel fast but the touching incident in the bazaar further adds to his injuries when Bakha inadvertently has touched a high caste Hindu in the market and thus polluted him. The touched man is hysteric with anger and shouts:

*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... Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! (38)*

Bakha continued to listen to this insult but could not say anything because of his marginalized status in the bigoted and orthodox Hindu society. He hung his head in shame and whispered some words of pardon but his repeated requests had no effect on anyone. Most of the incidents in the novel prove it, and all of a sudden he realizes his position in the world:



*All of them abused, abused, why are we always abused?...*  
*It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers.*  
*For them I am a sweeper ... untouchable! Untouchable! (38)*

Through this novel, Anand documented the abuses of the exploited class. The importance of writing is found in the writer's sensitivity towards human beings, particularly those who are crushed under the weight of ethnic-sectarian violence of any sort, none of which is of their own making. When Bakha steps forward to attack the priest his feet get glued to the earth because of the social and religious power of Pandit Kali Nath and realises that he, an untouchable, has polluted the temple by entering it. So Bakha returns home with his sister, denying himself the chance of revenge. He submits to the tradition and norms set up by the society and Bakha's sudden revelation through an inner, hereditary knowledge that he is low and polluted are in fact handed down by generations which had wittingly been submitting to these unacceptable practices. As he grows up in that social set-up, he has accepted all this naturally and spontaneously. As M.K. Naik rightly observes, "Weakness corrupts, and absolute weakness corrupts absolutely. Bakha is caught in the vicious circle from where there is no escape" (Naik 48). He is aware of the limitation of the given social structure, and is also ready to acknowledge the rising rebellion and seething anger within him, but is unable to translate that protest into action because of his powerless, cowardly class. Confrontations between Bakha and his society are significant in the novel but more remarkable is the attention given to Bakha's mind. Between the struggle of the individual and society, Bakha is always defeated, but every time his potentiality to register his protest becomes more pronounced. Towards the end of the novel he reaches the conclusion that the new technology of flush toilet will save this caste and will liberate his whole community from this shabby job of toilet cleaning system. Rejected, dejected and subjected to trials and tribulations, Bakha holds tightly the strong hope that the ceremony of innocence won't be drowned always. The novel, though full of boils and toils, ends on a note of optimism.

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