



CASTE AND CLASS CONFLICT IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

Arif Rashid Shah

M.Phil English

Department of English,

Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Govt. Arts and Commerce Collage,

Devi Ahilya Viswavidyalaya, Indore (M.P.)

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6012-9023>

Email: arifshah59@gmail.com

Nargis Akhter

M.Phil English

Department of English,

Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Govt. Arts and Commerce Collage,

Devi Ahilya Viswavidyalaya, Indore (M.P.)

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0273-0248>

Email: nargisenglish@gmail.com

Abstract

This study shows that Mulk Raj Anand has exposed caste and class conflict which was in practice in the Indian society and its culture. Mulk Raj Anand was most prolific of all Indian writers of his age. Even though he was born in Hindu family, he never hesitated to expose how poor and downtrodden are suppressed and treated badly in the society. The paper deals with the characters suffering and misery, the individual's difficulties in the facing them with illustrations from the novel.

Key Words: Class conflict, Upper caste people, Lower caste people.

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand, a pioneer of Indian writing in English, has gained an international reputation through his works. Anand's literary career is notable for his depiction of the lives of the poorer castes in traditional Indian society. His novels set an entire generation of educated Indians thinking about India's social evils that were perpetuated in the name of religion and tradition. His works were a chilling exposé of the day-to-day life and used it as a tool to make broad attacks on various elements of India's social structure and on British rule in India. It brought into sharp focus the dehumanising contradictions within colonised Indian society. Through his writings he revealed that in addition to the foreign colonialism of Britain there existed layers of colonialism within Indian society. This internal colonialism stood in the way of India's transition to a modern civil society. While exposing



the overarching divide between the British and a colonised India, he reveals an Indian society creating its own layers of colonisers and colonised thereby rendering the fledgling Indian nationalism an extremely problematic concept. An incredibly prolific writer, Anand's creative career spanning a period of more than seventy-five years has been inextricably intertwined with the search for a just, equitable, and forward-looking India. He has written extensively in areas as variegated and diverse as art and sculpture, politics, Indian literature and history of ideas.

The hero of the novel *Untouchable*, was a sweeper boy, Bakha. Anand was very friendly with him and admired him in a number of ways. One incident that had happened when he was growing up may be recalled here. Once Anand was injured while at play. The sweeper boy took care of him in every way and took him home. Anand's mother, instead of feeling grateful for the care extended to her son, rebuked the sweeper boy for having physically touched him and made him impure. Anand was baffled by what he saw. What the sweeper boy had done was a normal human thing—to help someone who had been injured—and he had no intention of doing anything which would undermine or outrage any one's belief in Hinduism. As a matter of fact, the sweeper boy was also a Hindu but men he was an untouchable!

This was something which profoundly disturbed Anand and he found it difficult to accept. What he saw in England was qualitatively different. There was no question of anyone being regarded as an untouchable. A human being was a human being and there was nothing else to it. This aspect of Hindu society in which he had grown up bothered him and upset him profoundly. What he saw in UK was a preview of life which he regarded as acceptable. What was happening in India was unacceptable to him and to the kind of society which he wanted to see established in India.

During his stay in Wales and the close interaction he had with Irene, he talked freely to her about his early childhood, his various experiences and so on. There developed such a close bond between them that, partly because he had found someone sympathetic in Irene, and partly driven by his own personal experience, he started writing a kind of confession for her. Irene encouraged him to do so and he reduced the story of his childhood to writing. He wrote something like 1,800 pages. While Anand wrote in long hand, Irene typed it out. If the manuscript is still available in his papers which are in Khandala, it would be a great mine of information about his early years.



Regardless of whether that manuscript still exists or not, the fact remains that much of his later writing can be traced back to what happened in those early years of his life. When he took to novel writing in a professional way, he was writing on the basis of what he had gone through and recorded in that manuscript. The more important thing to understand is that Anand's youth coincided with the new political awakening that was taking place in India during those years. It was a period of social turmoil. Things that had been accepted for centuries together now came to be questioned. The Western ways of thinking began to make an impact on Indian society. The steady emergence of the movement for Indian freedom acquired a mass character under the influence of Gandhi. Before long, Anand got drawn into it.

Untouchability was one unacceptable dimension of what he saw and he began to question it. Many other things too were being questioned. Not only that, the imperialist hold on India was also being questioned. The link between imperial rule and the feudal setup that held India under siege was also under attack. There was estrangement between the Hindus and the Muslims, and as time went by, the British started to fish in trouble waters.

Being a sensitive and thoughtful young man, Anand reacted to all these things in a manner that, years later, when his writing career took on, his sociological imagination and vision could not but assume a prominent role in it. To come back to the 1926 Strike, Anand had found it a somewhat disturbing experience. Before long, he came to the conclusion that the bulk of Englishmen and women stood for the kind of status quo which imperialism represented in the rest of the world. He had seen ample evidence of it in India and, now, for a change, he witnessed it even in UK.

The rise of the Labour Party, the new emerging political force, took another 3-4 decades to come to power. It was only in 1945 that the Labour Party won a decisive victory. It had won a victory of sorts in the early 30s as well but it was not decisive enough to change the political situation as it might have.

Anand's interaction with Irene proved to be exceptionally productive as far as his own personal growth was concerned. She not only typed out his manuscript, they both became so close to each other that, together, they visited the continent for several days and went around Paris and various other places. This was his first visit to the continent and he found it both educative and stimulating. The funding for this visit had come from Irene's father. Irene was active in the Irish movement for



independence. At one stage, she was arrested and put behind the bars. Anand visited her in jail! And remained in touch with her almost all the time. What is relevant here is the fact that Irene, being both a thinker and a doer, influenced Anand profoundly. His decision in 1945 to return to India after two decades in England was to quite an extent influenced by the example of Irene. There is more to be said on this subject which will be taken up later. We now move on to how *Untouchable*, his first novel, came to be written and in what circumstances it was published.

Ever since he had become an adult, Anand had identified himself with the dispossessed and the underprivileged. As a part of this outlook on life, he looked upon Gandhi as an innovator in Hindu society. More precisely, his experience as a child persuaded him to write something on the subject. There was an incidental story in Gandhi's weekly newspaper, *Harijan*, about a young untouchable boy which excited Anand's imagination. Prompted by that, he wrote a letter to Gandhi asking for an appointment with him. Gandhi promptly replied in the positive. As hinted earlier, perhaps Anand was already busy writing something on the theme of the equality of all human beings.

At this stage, it is important to recall his experiences in London which are discussed in some detail in his book, *Conversations in Bloomsbury*. As is clear from a reading of this book, Anand had got drawn into what was generally known as the literary life of England soon after his initial stay in London. Leonard and Virginia Woolf, a well known literary couple, generally played host at the time to some of the leading writers of the day in their home in Bloomsbury. It was located in the heart of the central London.

Being almost next to the British Museum and encircled by some of the better known bookshops in London, it was an ideal location for the weekly meeting of some of the leading writers of the time. Leonard Woolf had worked in Ceylon, as it was known then, for a few years as a civil servant. But he soon chose to resign and returned to London. He established a publishing house, called the Hogarth Press, and started publishing the writings of some of those people who mattered in the world of letters. Anand somehow got to know Leonard and started correcting proofs for him in order to supplement his income. This in turn put him in contact with a number of leading writers and made him sensitive to the currents and cross currents of contemporary literary life. James Joyce was a leading writer of that period. Anand had read him extensively. One of the things that impressed him after a reading of his *Ulysses* was that he had compressed the happenings of the events in one of his



novel into one day. Following that model, Anand attempted a novel, entitled Bakha. Bakha, as referred to earlier, was a sweeper boy who had been a friend of his as a child. Anand decided to write about him and projected him as the hero of his novel. Eventually the title of the novel was changed to Untouchable.

It was during this period in his life that he came very close to Irene. He would write out something and she would type it out for him. How to go and see Gandhi who had responded so promptly? He had to find money to travel back to India and it was not so easy but somehow he managed it. He had gone to London in 1925 and his first journey back to India was in 1929. A couple of years later, he revisited India and this time he came back with the manuscript of his maiden novel which he read out to Gandhi and rewrote it substantially in the light of what Gandhi had told him. At that time, Gandhi lived in Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad. As arranged, he went to the Ashram. He was dressed like an Englishman at that time. The moment Gandhi saw him in his corduroy jacket; Gandhi expressed disapproval of his dress. Indeed, without asking for his consent, Gandhi told Mahadev Desai, his secretary, to give him some khadi clothes. After he had changed into the Indian dress, Gandhi had another meeting with him and asked him about his mission. Anand told him about the novel that he had written. Gandhi's first observation was that he might write a pamphlet rather than a novel but, on Anand's insistence that he preferred a fictional mode of communication, Gandhi did not press his point any further. For the next several weeks, at an appointed hour of the day, Anand would read out one chapter of the novel at each sitting and Gandhi gave his reactions to what was read out. But before this could be done, Gandhi had told Anand that there were three conditions which he would have to fulfill.

The first one was that he would not drink. Anand replied honestly to the effect that while he had been drinking in London, he would not do so in the Ashram. The second condition was that he would not look upon any woman with a feeling of desire. To this, Anand replied that he would act as desired but he could not forget his girl friend in England who, among other things, had helped him come to India. Gandhi accepted this contention without any further discussion. Thirdly, he would have to clean the latrines like other members of the Ashram. Anand accepted this condition readily. One important outcome of his long stay in the Ashram was that Gandhi told him in no uncertain terms and in convincing detail that his characters should not speak like Bloomsbury intellectuals. On the



contrary, they should speak like ordinary men and women whom Anand had encountered in the course of his growing up. This was a piece of advice which made him reexamine his assumptions. To refuse to accept social discrimination as a fact of life was perfectly in order. But how to express it in terms of conversation in daily life was something that he had yet to learn. To some extent, Gandhi taught him that. To cut a long story short, the novel got condensed by about one third. With that draft in his pocket, Anand revisited his family in Amritsar and travelled around the country for quite some months. Travelling around the country was one of the things suggested to him by Gandhi. He told him that he had gone to England for higher study but had had very little experience of life in India. If he wanted to be a writer, one of the things to do was to go around the country and understand it better. Anand acted upon this advice and visited different parts of India during the next few months. Among other places, he revisited Kangra where he had spent some time during his childhood. He also visited the Assam tea gardens. Sometime later, when he published his novel, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, he based it on his visit to Assam. Let us come back to *Untouchable*. After his return to London, he got busy with a book on Persian Painting and another on *The Hindu View of Art*.

These two were specialised books and there was an established market for them. In another year or so, he was almost ready with his manuscript of *Untouchable* and started looking around for a publisher. But no one was prepared to publish it. It is important to understand why. While a number of British citizens who had lived in India had written novels about India, their point of view was essentially imperialist in character. One important example of it was the kind of fiction that Rudyard Kipling had written. His novel, *Kim*, had proved immensely popular. If Kipling eventually went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, one important feature of his work was the imperial view of India which he had projected. This perception of India was generally accepted in the West.

Indeed, it was the prevalent view about India in the Western world, at least till then. In the 1920s, E.M. Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*, was published. There was something fresh about it. The point of view projected here was more humanistic than imperialistic. After *Kim*, this was one novel which had compelled attention, so to speak. Forster had spent quite some time in India and understood the country much better than the earlier generation of imperialist writers.

What Anand now attempted went much beyond E.M. Forster. Two things about him and his novel were unmistakable. One was his unconcealed hatred of imperialism. This was at odds with the kind



of writing that Kipling and most others had been doing. The other important dimension of his writing was his total disapproval of and disgust with the kind of feudal life which he had witnessed and lived through in India. His opposition to the; caste system and his fervent belief in the equality of all human beings dripped from every word that he wrote. What was the motive power behind his writing? His own answer is revealing. In his book, Apology for Heroism, he states: I had come abroad, not merely with the purpose of sight seeing, but with the vague and genuine ambition to learn the secrets of European civilization, to reside for a time in a world where ideas of social and human equality could at least be discussed freely, if they were not quite sincerely accepted.

This very idea is expressed a little more graphically later in the same book: I struggled to weigh up the double burden on my shoulders, the Alps of the European tradition and the Himalayas of my Indian past, all my senses aching to realise the significance of the history of my country, all my heart and brain devoted to the search of those causes which had led to its present degeneracy.

These two quotations illustrate the kind of mental and emotional thinking with which he wrote Untouchable. Everything came from his heart. The hero of the novel, Bakha, has a number of hectic experiences which, following the model of James Joyce, he compressed into one day. Each experience is different in character but each one of them illustrates how he is treated as an untouchable all the time. As E.M. Forster who wrote the Preface to the novel pointed out, the novel has a form though not a tight structure. Even though some people think that it is loosely constructed, that is not exactly so. Towards the end of the novel which, in a sense, reveals, and indeed underlines his marginalised existence as a sweeper boy, Bakha has three options open to him. One is to listen to the words of a missionary who wanted to convert him to Christianity. This might ease his situation to some extent but would not solve the problem. The second was to go by the wise and gratifying words of Gandhi who told his countrymen that to look upon anyone as an untouchable was not the right thing to do. Everyone was pure or impure in the same measure, and to look down upon anyone was not right. The third choice was that the new technology adopted in the West be adopted in India also so that human refuse is washed out, and no one can be labelled as a sweeper. The third option made good sense to him, and Anand leaves the matter at that. It is not necessary to go into further details except to make the point that Anand was talking about a world which was so distant for the English speaking reader that they had only heard about the situation in India and not seen it in the disturbing



manner in which Anand had described it. If the novel was not published, the principal reason was that Anand's point of view was not seen to be familiar with the English speaking reader. At least, that is what the publishers thought. It was the overwhelming popularity of the novel which made them reconsider their earlier conservative, indeed overcautious, perception of the taste of the reading public. The fact of the matter was that times were changing but the publishers had not yet understood the changing ethos of the age. Once it was published, public support to it was immediate and overwhelming. It was eventually translated into around 40 languages of the world. That kind of initial resistance and eventual resounding success is not an unknown phenomenon in literature. There are several examples where what is called consumer resistance comes in the way of a new kind of writing being published. Once it is published and wins public acclaim, the earlier barriers are overcome, and the kind of sensibility which new writers project comes to be accepted readily as well as enthusiastically. Anand's distinction lay in this fact that he was the first man to overcome this kind of consumer resistance and, in the process, projected his unique kind of sensibility.

As soon as *Untouchable* was published and once the critical doors were opened to him, Anand followed it up with his next novel. *Coolie*, which had been germinating in his mind for a long time. Indeed, it was written within three months of the publication of *Untouchable*. For Anand, this was some kind of a breakthrough. He had been struggling to express himself in his own distinctive way. Once the artificially manufactured kind of resistance which had delayed the publication of his first novel had been overcome, Anand started drawing upon his earlier experience of life and came out with many more novels and short stories.

While *Untouchable* had confined itself to the experiences of one day in Bakha's life, *Munoo* has a different kind of career. He flits from one job to another and it turns out that each one of them is worse than the earlier one. In both cases, it is an instance of exploitation by those controlling the social set up in which these two characters find themselves. Anand describes the successive stages of this desperate struggle for dignity with profound concern and compassion.

No wonder when he came out to India in the following year, he was already a famous man. As the author of two widely acclaimed novels and as having participated in the Spanish Civil War, Anand came to have a reputation which signified that here was a man who had something new to say. Not only that, having taken a consciously anti-Imperialist stance and written about those aspects of Indian



life which had hardly been touched upon earlier, there was something distinctive and unique about him. The Nehru family was one among the other people he got to know in the course of his visit. Nehru's sister, Krishna Huthee Singh, became a close friend and the two of them later collaborated in writing a book, titled *The Indian Bride*. Jawaharlal himself extended patronage to him. He spent some time in Allahabad and acted as Jawaharlal's political secretary for a few weeks. These things are being referred to here because they were destined to play a helpful role in his later career when he returned to India after 1945.

In conclusion, it may be added here that during his entire writing career, and even today, Anand is mainly known for these two novels. As far as one can judge, even in the decades to come, the kind of Indian reality which Anand projected would be historically difficult to ignore. For one thing, he was almost the first writer in English to project this issue. For another, that reality has not yet undergone a qualitative change. Almost every feature of it—its extent, spread, coverage, character, the feudal hang ups that stem from it and, above all, the sheer fact of exploitation by those who shamelessly indulge in it—are so stubbornly present even today that Anand continues to be relevant, even contemporary, both socially and artistically. And this was no mean achievement.

Secondly, Anand was the first writer in English to write about this exploited segment of Indian society. In doing so, he had fought many a battle. Eventually he had his way and that is what explains the verve and the authenticity of the first phase of his writing career. It lasted from 1935 when his first novel was published to 1937 when his novel about the ruthless exploitation going on in the Assam tea gardens was published. His overall perception is best described in the following lines which are taken from a letter he sent to one of his critics: Man's fate, today, is no longer in the hands of the gods, but is often in conflict with the evil in other men. Man makes himself, or thinks he can. The heart and mind of contemporary man is, therefore, moved by other casualties than salvation. While something has been said about his writing career after the publication of his first-phase novels, no one had visualised that the Second World War would come so soon, and in a sense, Anand would get trapped in London. It is that phase of his career which requires to be discussed now.

Conclusion

Anand suggests that a little more sympathy and a little more tenderness on the part of the society could have turned into a Bakha happy individual, and also averted his tragic end. There are many



writers in Indian Writing in English who have dealt with the theme of untouchability and segregation. But nobody has been able even to come near Mulk Raj Anand. With his literary power and perspectives he has tried his best to spring up the healthy human values and radical social transformation in our human society in which the haves and have not's both can enjoy happy Anand's commitment to reveal the deep rooted social evil like untouchability in the Indian society made him to create Bakha. Anand's childhood friends are mainly children from the cantonment. They included a dhobi boy called Ramcharan, a Muslim boy named Ali, and a sweeper boy Bakha. He mixed with them freely without giving importance to the caste feeling. His passionate childhood feelings and memories are reflected in every page of *Untouchable*.

Bakha is a prototype of millions of untouchables in India, because he represents the agony and anguish, the misery and frustration of the innumerable low caste people. Nobody has ever taught of transmuting into art the life and feelings of a 'Dalit' especially the latrine cleaner. They had no forum to express their problems, feelings and emotions. They are denied all kinds of rights - the right to think, speak and act. They had been so thoroughly muted and silenced by casteism. Anand provides the voice for the troubles of the innumerable 'Dalits' by acting as a mouthpiece for them. Only the bliss of human life on the same footings and fraternity peace, love and justice.

References:-

- i. Anand, M.R. '*Untouchable*' Penguin Books India, 1993 Page-106.
- ii. Anand, M.R. '*Untouchable*' Penguin Books India, 1993 Page-70
- iii. Forster, E.M. preface to '*Untouchable*'
- iv. Iyengar, K.R.S. '*Indian Writing in English*' page-334
- v. Naik, M.K. '*A History of Indian English Lit*', Page-155
- vi. Naik, M.K. '*A History of Indian English Lit*', Page-156
- vii. Naik, M.K. '*A History of Indian English Lit*', quoted from M. R. Anand's 'Apology for Heroism' (Page-67)
- viii. Naik, M.K. '*A History of Indian English Lit*', quoted from M. R. Anand's 'Apology for Heroism' (Page-155).