



Touching Untouchability: Social Evils in Mulk Raj Anand's Novel "Untouchables"

Archana Chauhan^{a,*}, 

^a Assistant Professor (English), Institute of Law & Research, Jasana, M.D. University, Rohtak (India).

KEYWORDS

Dowry, Superstitions, Untouchables, Eradicate, Gender inequality, Sweeper

ABSTRACT

In this study we shall come to know how Mulk Raj Anand, the prolific Indian writer in English, exposed social evils in his novels and put them in front of us. This study deals with the sufferings and miseries of the downtrodden and underprivileged peoples inflicted on them by the high castes Hindus. This study demonstrates that Anand, though being born in a high caste Hindu family, will successfully portrays the agonies of Bakha, a sweeper boy and the untouchable, who was not accepted in the high society. How Bakha must endure insults, abusive epithets and bear physical assault if he unintentionally crosses a high caste person.

About the Author

Author Mulk Raj Anand was born on December 12, 1905, in Peshawar, now in Pakistan, into a Hindu Kshatriya family. His father Lal Chand began attending school rather than continuing in his ancestor's trade as a copper and silver worker. After passing the British Military Examination, he studied English and completed his time in a cantonment. In his entire unit, he was the sole literate man. Anand's father gave him a revolutionary disposition. Mother of Anand was well versed in folklore. Anand claims that his mother had a natural talent for storytelling, "So sure, was my mother's gift for story telling", says Anand, "That sometimes I found myself rapt in her tales with an intensity of wonder." (MEG-07, IGNOU, pg.18).

In 1924, Anand graduated with honours from Khalsa College in Amritsar. He then relocated to England and enrolled as a freshman at University College London. He earned a philosophy doctorate from Cambridge University. Picasso and the Bloomsbury Group members became his buddies during this time. He also became a member of "The Criterion," a literary journal founded by T.S. Eliot. Even in 1937, he participated in the Spanish Civil War.

Gandhi ji left a lasting impression on him. He spent three months in his Sabarmati Ashram while penning his book "The Untouchables," according to his principles of simplicity and sincerity. Together with certain writers and intellectuals from India, he created the Progressive Writers Association in 1935. He participated actively in both the British Labor Party and the Indian National Congress during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1946, he founded "Marg", a magazine about Fine Arts and got the financial support from TATA Group.

In 1947, he returned to India. In 1960, he served in Punjab University as a professor of Literature and Fine Arts. He was awarded the International Peace Prize in 1952, Padma Bhushan in 1967 and Sahitya Academy Award in 1972. He travelled back to India in 1947. He worked as a professor of literature and fine arts at Punjab University in 1960. He received the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize, the 1967 Padma Bhushan, and the 1972 Sahitya Academy Award.

Introduction

Social evils like the caste system, the dowry system, gender inequity, and many kinds of superstitions have pervaded Indian society for centuries and some still do today. The disparity that existed in the society of his day was highlighted

* Corresponding author


E-mail: archana040184@gmail.com (Archana Chauhan).

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 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5822-5398>



by Mulk Raj Anand in his writings. Exploitation of the underprivileged is a result of the gap between the rich and the poor. In his stories, Anand not only called attention to the exploitation of the underprivileged, but he also described the psychological struggles they face. Unlike other novelists of his era, Anand went against the grain when he chose underdogs as the main characters in his books. Bakha, Munoo, Krishna, Lalu, Gauri, and Ananta are just a few of the protagonists in his books who all represent the common underdog from the real society. In Anand's words, "All these heroes as the other men and the women who had emerged in my novels.... were dear to me because they were the reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth."

"Coolie," a book by Anand, examines the negative effects of the class system and child labour. The main character, Munoo, is an orphan from Kangra who battled through life while working as a housekeeper, a factory worker, a coolie, and a rickshaw puller. He was unable to raise his social standing because of the class system that existed in the society. In large industrial centers, child labour has been a familiar sight for generations. Munoo went to work in a cotton plant in Bombay that was comparable to hell for labourers. Anand established a new trend of social protest in Indian literature with "Two Leaves and a Bud." The protagonist of this book was taken advantage of by British tea owners and merchants, which brought attention to the fact that the working class was being exploited by the British and the rich merchants.

Gangu, the protagonist is a victim of forced labour. Similarly, in his novel "The Big Heart" Anand presented casteism, industrialization, capitalism and the exploitation of women. Here Janki has to face character assassination when she refused to live the typical life of a widow after her husband's death. The novel depicts how a woman has to undergo hardships and exploitation in the name of social customs or better say superstitions present in the society. Anand portrayed the true picture of the contemporary society in such a way as if he is holding a mirror in front of us. His first novel "Untouchables" presents the humiliation and oppression of Bakha, the protagonist in the name of untouchable.

Untouchability is a practice whereby members of lower castes are kept at a distance by upper class members and are thus denied access to all social benefits and social equality. A community or caste of individuals known as Dalits is subjected to inhumane treatment merely by virtue of being a member of a lower caste. At every turn in their lives, they must deal with prejudice. The Sanskrit word "Dalit" implies "broken" or "downtrodden." Mahatma Jotiba Phule coined the term "Dalit" for the untouchables and outcasts in the 1880s. Our Vedic scriptures are the source of the caste system. Purusha Sukta of the Veda states that the population is split into the four following major groups:

Priests, academics, and educators make up the Brahmin community.

The Kshatriyas are kings, soldiers, and officials.

The Vaishyas include farmers, artisans, traders, and cattle herders.

Among the Shudras are labourers and sanitation personnel.

In this context, Shudras were seen as deserving of hatred, impurity, and disdain. They were given the responsibilities of labourers, gutter cleaners, and scavengers. They formerly raised pigs, which are regarded as dirty animals.

We can observe that untouchables were viewed as impure in Anand's book "Untouchables." If a Brahmin or any member of an upper caste interacts with these people, they must perform an ablution. When Bakha went to the town to sweep the streets in place of his father, a Hindu trader allegedly claimed that Bakha had touched him and caused him to become unclean. The merchant spanked Bakha and reprimanded him. Bakha has to use the repetitive refrain "posh, posh sweeper" to signal his arrival at a location.

In the temples, they were not allowed entry. Anand illustrates the irony of the circumstance by having Bakha sweep the temple's courtyard every day while forbidding him from offering sacrifices to the gods. Once he was deeply moved by the bhajans singing in the temple and dared to climb a few steps leading to the holy place inside, there was a loud cry 'polluted, polluted!' Similarly, they were not allowed to take water from the common well, to read Vedas and to go to the common schools. Bakha was fond of studies. He even bought a first primer of English. But his self-study didn't go beyond the alphabets. He was not allowed to go in schools because

his presence can pollute the environment of school. The lack of access to education draws attention to the persecution of untouchables and the ensuing class conflict. Anand has provided numerous examples of how the Dalits are discriminated against in this place

Anand dared to expose the terrible truth of the era. We learned about deeply ingrained social evils including the caste system, bigotry, and superstition through this work. The hypocrisy of the so-called upper caste people is demonstrated by Anand. While Bakha's sister Sohini was cleaning the bathroom in his home, the priest, who acts unclean at the sight of a Dalit, attempted to offend her modesty. Bakha wants to retaliate, but he feels completely powerless. Conflict between and among classes is also present in the book. Despite his buddies being members of the lower caste, Bakha is the lowest caste among his friends due to his occupation as a sweeper. Consequently, despite feeling a connection to his friend Ram Charan's sister, he is unable to imagine marrying her, not even in his dreams. Additionally, the girl's mother opposed the union due to Bakha's caste. Anand shows that Bakha has an immature admiration for the British colonizers, this admiration of him somewhere pinches the readers. But here Bakha's intension of doing so is to escape from the harsh reality of his life as the Britishers don't follow such class system or untouchability.

The novel "Untouchables," is a reflection of society. It highlights the inconsistencies and oppressions in the divided or, to put it another way, classed society of colonized India. Unfortunately, we, not the colonisers, were the ones who labelled some of our population as "the outcasts." To keep these outcasts apart from us, we created a variety of obstacles. After reading this book, a lot of educated Indians and foreigners began to consider how the caste system directly impedes the development of these people. One of them was E.M. Forester. He compared the slaves to the sweepers in the preface to "The Untouchables." A slave was considerably more valuable to him than a sweeper. He said that a slave can change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound forever. He further said that a sweeper is excluded from social intercourse, he is a disgusting object to the orthodox. (IGNOU, M.E.G-07, page no. 28).

The novel contains a religious element to some extent. In one case, Bakha asked a Muslim guy for a coal to light his cigarette, and the Muslim man gave it to him without any hesitation. Not only that, but he also lit his cigarette using the same coal. It wouldn't have been done by a Hindu. Bakha's preference for Muslims and Britons emphasizes how primarily Hindus are identified with class conflict. Themes of cyclical oppression and class conflict are also present in this book, when Bakha and his siblings are forced to choose the same line of work as their father, a sweeper. Additionally, Bakha and his sister were automatically made untouchables for their father due of their entire lifetime. They eventually came to believe that untouchability was their fate and that neither they nor their progeny could escape it. This is a case of the cyclical oppression that Anand emphasizes in this book.

Similarly, the prohibition of education to someone on the basis of his caste is also an example of discrimination, in present scenario the right to education has become a fundamental right. The lack of education made them suffer at every step of their life. Devoid of education, Bakha and the people like him, have to go through poverty and oppression by the upper caste. In one instance from this novel, a shopkeeper gave Bakha less candies than the money he offered to the shopkeeper. Shopkeepers used to raise the price for a product for the untouchables as compared to the price for a person who is not an outcaste. What an ironic circumstance this is. A person who cannot afford a product even on the base price is given that product on a high price and vice versa. It can be an instance of dishonesty on the part of the shopkeeper or ignorance brought on by untouchables like Bakha's lack of education. Another factor that keeps them in abject poverty is the high costs of essential goods.

Anand described the character Bakha and his feelings in a heartfelt way. Bakha is the protagonist of this novel. But he is a victim of social evils like untouchability, class struggle child labour etc., E.M. Forester wrote to Anand in a letter:

"you ma(d)e your sweeper sympathetic yet avoid(ed) making him a hero or a martyr" (Penguin Books)

Anand described Bakha as a tiger but a tiger at bay because he was helpless in taking revenge to the priest who outraged

his sister's modesty. The upper caste men had created some barriers to protect themselves to be questioned. Bakha has to bear the psychological scars of untouchability, not only Bakha these scars are inherited by coming generations also. They are given the leftover food of the caste men. A housewife of the upper caste family dotingly served a sadhu but the same woman treated Bakha badly with a dose of abuses and rebukes when he asked for a piece of bread. Again, Anand shows us the level of hypocrisy of the upper caste. Similarly, when he saved a boy in the stampede in a hockey match, instead of being thankful by the boy's family, he was blamed for all the happenings, because being outcasts they were considered the root cause of all the problems for the upper castes. Whether or not they were at fault, the upper caste people assigned blame on these untouchable outcasts for all the unfortunate events and misfortune.

Anand started writing the first draft of this novel during a long week end in Dublin. Once he read an article in 'Young India' by Gandhiji where he mentioned a boy named Uka, a sweeper, who was in torn clothes and hungry. Gandhiji took him to his ashram. After reading the article, Anand wrote to Gandhiji seeking an appointment. He met him in his Sabarmati ashram. He was allowed to stay there on some conditions. When Gandhiji read his draft, he suggested him to cut down more than a hundred pages and he also asked him to do some corrections. During the three months stay in Sabarmati ashram, Anand revised the whole novel and finally got the approval of Gandhiji for the revised version and got it published in May 1935.

Anand's draft of novel was based on imagination but his revised version is more realistic. This novel depicts a day of Bakha's life as an untouchable. Anand, like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce used the 'Stream of Consciousness' technique in this novel. "Untouchables" focuses a number of

superstitions and social evils of Hindu society in 1930s with the weapon of 'Irony' in front of us. We can feel irony in a number of instances through contrasting appearance with reality.

Conclusion:

The discriminatory practice of "untouchability" is a clear violation of human rights. Bakha and a great number of others like him were deprived of their rights to equality and education. With the use of his novels, Anand exposes these social ills. He was upbeat as well since he offered solutions in addition to highlighting the social ills that exist. He claimed that all of their problems might be solved if the men of the upper caste developed some compassion for the impoverished and oppressed and if the males who are shunned because they are outcasts gathered the guts to treat others with respect. Finally, Anand proposed three remedies for the problem of untouchability. In the end, Anand offered three solutions to the evil of untouchability. In the very first solution, Bakha realized that in Christianity, there is not any discrimination between the pundits and the sweepers. But still he couldn't make up his mind to convert himself in Christianity because he was confused about the original sin and all human beings being sinners.

Bakha found another solution when he saw people from all classes gathered to see and listen to Gandhiji. He saw a magnetic force in Gandhiji to eradicate the class system. The third solution was provided to him by an advocate, R.N. Bashir and his young poet friend Iqbal Nath Sarashar, who made him aware about the flush system. They said that the introduction of flush system automatically will eradicate the evil of untouchability.

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