

Literature as Protest: Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable" and The Voice of the Oppressed

Radha Chaturvedi

Assistant Professor (English)

Shri Krishna University, Chhatarpur (M.P.)

ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) is a pioneering work in Indian English fiction that dramatizes the dehumanizing effects of the caste system through the lived experience of Bakha, a sweeper boy. This paper explores Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* as a seminal text that voices the plight of the marginalized and critiques the oppressive caste system of India. Through the protagonist Bakha, Anand presents a single day in the life of an outcaste sweeper, thereby offering a humanist perspective that transcends barriers of class, caste and colonial subjugation.

More than eight decades later, the novel still resonates, as caste-based discrimination and social inequality continue to shape contemporary India. In an era of modernization, technology and globalization Anand's humanist vision stands as a reminder of the urgent need for compassion, equality and dignity. This paper examines the novel as both a social document of colonial India and a timeless text relevant to the present era.

KEYWORDS

Untouchable, Caste, Outcaste, Humanism, Mulk Raj Anand, Social realism.

INTRODUCTION

Indian society has witnessed a big change since the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* in 1935. Independence, technological advancement and globalization have reshaped the nation. Yet, despite progress, caste-based discrimination has not disappeared. News headlines still reveal incidents of violence against Dalits in many parts of India and the struggle for equality remains unfinished. In this context, revisiting *Untouchable* is both timely and necessary. This novel presents a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper boy who experiences insult, humiliation and alienation because of his caste identity. Through Bakha's eyes, the reader is confronted with the dark realities of untouchability and through Anand's humanist vision, the possibility of compassion and reform is emphasized.

Anand's novel is not just about Bakha's humiliation in colonial india; it is about the universal human desire for dignity. By presenting a day in the life of an outcaste, Anand compels readers of every generation to confront social inequality. His humanist vision rooted in compassion and justice, speaks directly to contemporary concerns.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the social realities of caste discrimination.
2. To analyze the relevance of caste based discrimination in *Untouchable* in the context of modern indian society.
3. To investigate the role of colonial modernity and reformist thought.
4. To explore the novel's role in raising awareness about dignity , equality and human rights in present society .

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs qualitative research methods with a primary focus on textual analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* .In this paper secondary data is used mostly. The novel is examined through a historical contextual lens to understand its depiction of caste oppression in colonial india. The analysis of this novel in relation to modern society are used to highlight the continuing relevance of the text .The research further draws upon subaltern theoretical frameworks to critically engage with issues of caste , marginalization and human dignity.

SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

This novel depicts a single day in the life of Bakha , an 18 year old sweeper boy who belongs to the lowest strata of the caste system. The story highlights the inhuman practice of untouchability and the daily humiliation faced by those considered "outcastes".

- **Morning** – Bakha cleans the toilets and faces insults from high caste Hindus while doing his duty. Despite his hard work, he always get mistreatment and insult. Not only in society but Bakha faces tyranny at his own home by his own father Lakha, head of sweeper of the town. He is such a lazy and hypocritical character who has accepted his fate and wants his children to do the same. He always escapes his responsibilities and advises his son Bakha to accept his low status as his destiny and to continue the traditional work of cleaning toilets. He discourages Bakha's desire for dignity, education and change. There is a famous saying by FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY – "The best way to keep a prisoner from escaping is to make sure he never knows he is in Prison". This saying completely fits on Lakha.

- Street incident – while walking through market, Bakha accidentally collides against a high-caste man, who yells at him for “polluting” him. Bakha feels ashamed and angry at his helplessness.
- Temple incident -Curious to see inside a Hindu temple, Bakha peeks in, but is accused of polluting the place. A Priest named Pandit Kalinath molests his sister Sohini, yet blames her instead. This incident shows highest form of hypocrisy in Society where on one hand it is considered sin to touch an outcaste and on the other hand, hypocrites like Pandit kalinath do not even hesitate to molest a girl and infact an outcaste girl.
- Climax: Towards evening, he overhears three possible solutions to the problem of untouchability.
 - (a) Religious reform- suggested by a social reformer.
 - (b) Mahatma Gandhi's appeal to abolish untouchability through love, truth and betterment of Harijans.
 - (c) Modern technology (flush system) which would eliminate the need for manual scavenging .

Ending: - The novel closes on a note of hope and uncertainty as Bakha walks contemplating these solutions , unsure which path will bring real freedom.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN OUTCASTE: THEN AND NOW

Bakha's day begins with cleaning toilets and continues with insult , humiliation and exclusion. Though his individuality shines through – his love for clean clothes, admiration for British soldiers and interest in hockey .Society reduces him to his caste identity.

Even in present times , the echoes of Bakha's life are visible. Reports by human rights organizations show that manual scavenging, which Bakha struggles with, still exists despite being outlawed. Dalits continue to face exclusion in temples, schools and even workplaces. The humiliation of being treated as “less than human” , which Bakha experienced in 1930s has modern parallels in caste based discrimination and violence. Thus, the single day of Bakha's life mirrors centuries of oppression and remains tragically relevant in the 21st century.

HUMANIST VISION OF MULKRAJ ANAND IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Humanism is the belief that every human being has intrinsic worth and dignity regardless of caste, class, race , gender and religion. It stresses reason, compassion and ethical values as

guiding principles for life. It believes in human responsibility to shape a just and meaningful world. In literary studies, humanism means focusing on the human experience – emotions, struggles and moral choices rather than abstract ideals.

At the heart of *Untouchable* lies Anand's humanism. Though Bakha suffers, he is not portrayed merely as a victim. Instead, Anand emphasizes his individuality, his aspiration and his dignity. Bakha loves hockey, admires the clothes of the British soldiers and dreams of escaping his humiliating life. These human qualities elevate him from being a mere symbol of caste oppression to a fully realized character.

Anand's humanist philosophy rejects social hierarchies and affirms the equality of all beings. His sympathy for Bakha is not based on pity but on recognition of his inherent worth. Through Bakha, Anand insists that dignity is not the privilege of a few but the right of every human being. What makes *Untouchable* unique is not only its critique of caste but also its humanist vision. Anand does not portray Bakha a mere victim but he presents him as a human being with dreams, aspirations and dignity. In today's context, Anand's humanism speaks on equality, human rights and social justice. As societies scuffle with divisions of caste, class, race and religion. This reminder that every individual has dignity becomes profoundly urgent.

SOCIAL REALISM AND PROTEST

Social realism is a literary and artistic movement that aims to depict everyday life and social conditions as they truly are. Social realism is realistic portrayal of society with a focus on injustice and social change. Mulk Raj Anand was deeply influenced by the currents of reformist thought in the 1930s. The nationalist movement, the rise of Gandhi and exposure to European humanism shaped his literary vision. *Untouchable* is thus a product of both Indian social conditions and global literary traditions.

Anand's realism was revolutionary in his time, for he chose an outcaste boy as his protagonist, something rarely attempted in Indian English fiction of the colonial period. Anand employs realism to depict caste oppression. His language is direct, his scenes uncompromising, and his characters drawn from everyday life rather than aristocratic circles. In doing so, he breaks from colonial literary traditions that often ignored the marginalized. The novel also functions as a protest text by giving Bakha central voice, Anand challenges the silence imposed upon the outcastes. Literature becomes a medium to question social injustice and demand reform.

Movement such as Dalit literature and Dalit autobiography carry forward Anand's legacy narrating the pain of humiliation and the assertion of identity. Writers like Omprakash valmiki (Joothan) and Bama (karukku) brings out Bakha's cry for dignity. In this way, Untouchable is not an isolated text of the past but a foundation for present struggles.

UNTOUCHABLE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

In the In the era of globalization, one might assume that caste divisions would lose significance, yet caste continues to influence marriages, employment and politics in India. Even in diasporic communities abroad, caste discrimination surfaces in subtle form. Even in today's society, we work at same workplace disregard of any caste boundation but still we are lacking somewhere whenever it comes to make them the part of our social gatherings.

Anand's Untouchable thus travels beyond its colonial setting, addressing global concerns of inequality, prejudice and exclusion. The novel also resonates with other struggles-racial discrimination in America, apartheid in South Africa, or class struggles worldwide. Bakha's humiliation becomes symbolic of all oppressed identities, making "Untouchable" a text of universal significance.

THE ENDING : REFORM, TECHNOLOGY AND MODERN RELEVANCE

At the end of the novel, Gandhiji's speech denounces untouchability, offering a spiritual and moral path to reform. Simultaneously, the flush system is presented as a technological solution to the degrading occupation of manual scavenging.

Moral Reform- Despite laws, caste prejudice often exists in social practices. Moral reform through education, awareness and empathy is still required.

Technological Reform -The flush system symbolizes the role of technology in ending degrading practices .Today, with innovations in sanitation and mechanization, the need for human beings to perform demeaning labour Can be eliminated.

Thus, the novel's ending anticipates the dual approach needed even in the 21st century, structural reforms through technology and social reforms through moral awakening.

CONCLUSION

Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable" is both a product of its time and a timeless call for justice. By narrating a day in the life of Bakha, Anand exposes the brutality of cast oppression and affirms the dignity of the marginalized.

Even today, Untouchable remains relevant as questions of caste discrimination and social justice continue to shape Indian society. In the present era, the novel continues to echo in every instance of caste violence, in form of manual scavenging and in the ongoing struggle for equality. Anand's humanist vision remains relevant as it challenges us to recognise the humanity of the "other". In a country like India that is modern yet traditional, Progressive yet plagued by inequality. Untouchable serves as both a warning and a guide. It reminds us that true progress lies not only in technological advancement but also in social compassion and human dignity. As long as society denies equality to any group, Bakha's Cry will remain alive, urging us to listen, reflect and act.

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