



Please touch the “Untouchables”: A Critical Study of Mulk Raj Anand’s “Untouchable”.



Moklesur Rahaman

Ph.D Research Scholar P.G. Dept of English & Research Centre
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya, India.

Abstract:

Mulk Raj Anand is a prolific Indo-Anglian Writer. He has made his mark on the readers in India and abroad for his achievement in Anglo-Indian novel. His first novel “Untouchable”, published in 1935 is an important social document which deals with the burning problem of our Indian society i.e., ‘untouchability’. The author has presented the issue in a realistic manner in his novel. “Untouchable”, angry a injustice, full of protest, enlivened by Marxist and Gandhian humanism, satirical and generous, shows his sympathy with the underdog-Bakha, the protagonist, a hereditary latrine cleaner. He cleans the latrines and lives from hand-to-mouth. He struggles hard to lead better life. But his experience in his own working place and in society, where he lives, changes everything. The Indian caste system humiliates and abuses him. The novel seeks to stress the evils of untouchability by focusing attention on the miserable plight, suffering, poverty and degradation of a larger section down-trodden of Indian society. The main purpose of the novelist is not to tell an artistic story about a unacknowledged boy in order to arouse sympathy to him: rather, to highlight a burning social problem ‘untouchability’, and to arouse due respect to the down-trodden. The message of the novel is very clear- the

untouchables are not the part of our society, and they are not subject for exploitation at all; please touch them. They do ‘a dirty work’ in order to survive. The novel creates a sense of our responsibility towards the victims of social injustice and exploitation. Bakha’s anguish and humiliation are not of his alone, but the suffering of whole outcastes and underdogs. The world of the novel, indeed, is a microcosm of India. This article discusses the sufferings and agony of the ‘Untouchable’, which are the familiar sight in Indian society throughout the ages. The ‘Untouchables’ want only their human rights and true justice.

Keywords:

Caste-system; Untouchability; Down-trodden; Social injustice and Exploitation; Hypocrisy and Human value

Introduction: Indian Hindu Society from the ancient time is based on caste-system, which made barriers among people and divide humanity into four main classes -the Brahmins, the Kshatriya, the Vaishyas and the Sudras. This complex social structure of Indian Hindu society is devoid of humanism. The Brahmins belongs to the highest point of the social Pyramid; they are the priests and



they dominate over others. The Kshatriya are the warriors and the defenders of society; they come next only to the Brahmins. The Vaishyas are the business community and the producers of wealth; their duty is trade and commerce. They hold the third rank in the society. The Sudras are the weaker section of the society; they are the peasants, labourers, the workmen, the serfs, the coolies, sweepers and the other suppressed members of the society; they are considered the lowest caste. They are suffering because they are by birth outcaste. Among the Sudras the sweepers and the scavengers are regarded as untouchables because of they have to do filthy work—cleaning latrine with their hands. The prejudice in the minds of the caste Hindus against the sweepers and the scavengers are very strong. They treat the sweepers and the scavengers unjustly for one reason or another. E.M. Forster considers it a devilish system which could have been contrived only by man, the animal being incapable of devising such an infernal system. Mulk Raj Anand's "**Untouchable**" shows the realistic picture of Indian society of the nineteen thirties dealing with the caste conflict. The novel is concerned with the feelings of Bakha, a sweeper boy and his experiences in the course of a single day in the town of Bulandshahr, in Punjab. The protagonist, Bakha suffers due to his belonging to a low caste Hindu family. Bakha symbolizes the racial discrimination, exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of untouchables like him. We can realize the humiliation and physical as well as mental agonies of the untouchables throughout the novel. Saros Cowasjee remarks: "Anand is deeply concerned with social problems and that he is committed to the eradication of the evils which infest modern society. Is this a deplorable aim of an artist? Is *Untouchable* a propaganda because it reveals the exploitation of the poor by the rich? Propaganda is a term given currency by the

bourgeois critic/ and loosely used in India to caption any work where the author's intention is plain." Anand condemns the caste-Hindus through the different incidents held in the course of the novel.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the roots of untouchability in the Hindu society in India.
2. To examine the attitude of the so-called higher class people towards the sweepers and the scavengers.
3. To find out the main reason(s) behind the untouchability.
4. To identify and analyse the specific factors that promote or hinder the upliftment of the condition of the sweepers and the scavengers.
5. To suggest measures following the root maps of the author for improving and promoting the condition of the sweepers and the scavengers.

Mulk Raj Anand's "**Untouchable**" depicts a day in the life of Bakha, a Sweeper-boy, and brings out the impact on him of the various events which take place during the course of the day. Bakha starts his morning welcomed by the abuses of his father Lakha and is forced to clean the latrines with a brush and a basket: "Get up, ohe, you Bhakhya, Ohe son of pig! Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten." It was not abuses of his father; rather it was the call of reality. His sister Sohini goes to fetch water from the caste well where she is compelled to wait for a caste Hindu to draw water which is again a routine for her life. Their predicament is so dire that they are not allowed to draw water from the well. Pundit Kali Nath fills her pitcher with water and summons her, with an ill intention to clean the temple courtyard. Bakha, on the request of his father



rushes to the town to clean the roads. On his way he meets his friends and they plan a hockey match in the afternoon. While walking through the streets of the town, a caste Hindu gets defiled by his touch to which he tries to apologize. Joining his hands in humility, he stands deaf and dumb. The people gather around the scene and abuse Bakha. He pleads but no one feels pity for him. The defiled man gives a slap on Bakha's face and leaves the place. For the first time in his life Bakha is made aware of his status as an untouchable; centuries of servility have made him weak, helpless, and morally degenerate. While roaming outside the temple he curiously looks into the temple. A Brahmin sees Bakha on the steps and shouts at him for polluting the temple. While climbing down the steps he finds his sister Sohini standing in the courtyard frightened and speechless. She tells Bakha about the priest's attempt to molest her while she was cleaning his latrine. She further tells him that she screamed out of fear and the priest came out shouting that he had been defiled by an untouchable girl. The low horse cry "Polluted! Polluted! Polluted!", rudely shakes him, for, to his amazement, he discovers that his entry has defiled the temple for his daity. An enraged Bhaka decides to look for the priest but Sohini stops him. Bakha fires but fails to protest an innocent girl from the indecent advances and lusty clutches of a devil. He sends Sohini home and goes to an alley nearby to beg for food. While walking through the streets of the town, a caste Hindu gets defiled by his touch to which he tries to apologize. Joining his hands in humility, he stands deaf and dumb. The people gather around the scene and abuse Bakha. He pleads but no one feels pity for him. The defiled man gives a slap on Bakha's face and leaves the place. The slap he receives from the high caste Brahmin for defiling him by his touch makes him aware of his true identity. He starts shouting for food but

nobody responds. Tired of the hectic schedule he sleeps on the wooden platform in front of a caste Hindu's house. A high caste woman comes out of the house on the call of a Sadhu. She shouts at Bakha for polluting her house. She asks him to clean the drain to get a piece of bread. He returns home and tells his father Lakha about his insult and Sohini's molestation by the Pandit. Lakha realizes his helplessness due to the limitations of their caste in the society. To assuage his son's grief he narrates him a nasty experience of his own life. It brings Bakha back to his senses. He leaves the house to meet his friends. While wandering through the railway station he hears the news of Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in the town. He rushes to Golbagh to hear Gandhi's speech. Through the conversation between the two pro- and anti- Gandhi groups, Bhaka comes to know that the only solution to eradicate untouchability is the use of machine or the flush system. Bakha realizes that the only solution to get rid of untouchability is the use of machine or the flush system. This exploitation and helplessness of Bakha and his sister is a true reflection of social reality in the then India. Injustice inflicted upon Bakha makes him rebellious. Excessive abuse and insult makes him think about retaliation. Anand shows the seamy side of life in his novel "**Untouchable**". Filth and dirt appear as much as beauty and cleanliness in his life. The life of sweeper Bakha and his sister in the feudal society is depicted with all its minute details. Mulk Raj Anand had depicted the hypocrisy of the upper caste people that men like Pt. Kali Nath enjoy the warm touch of the Harijan girls, Sohini. He does not hesitate to desire sexual pleasure from her body. Mulk Raj Anand exposes all this shams, hypocrisy and double standard or double dealing here. Anand himself said 'I have been accused of indulging in political and social propaganda. But fundamentally,



my exposition of character and situation is to reveal life in as total a manner as possible.

During his psychological transition from innocence to experience, he faces identity crisis. Initially he possesses no awareness of being an outcaste. The kind treatment from the White Tommies makes him feel superior to his fellow outcastes and this superiority complex is reflected in his attitude and appearance. He does not live unclean or uncouth like other scavengers. His intelligence, sensitivity and the air of dignity differentiate him from his fellow outcastes. Even a high caste Charat Singh feels "Here was a low caste man who seemed clean." He calls Bakha a gentleman. Indeed, Bakha challenges the hypocrisy and prejudice of high caste people. Anand then raises an alarm of; "Polluted, Polluted, Polluted!" shouted the Brahmin below.....Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony."

' In the major part of the novel, however, the pathos of the untouchable's plight is revealed through telling incidents such as the pollution episode in the market, the molestation of Sahani, the incident at the well, and the like. 'Untouchables' suffer without any fault of their own, simply because they are the outcastes as they are born in that particular class of untouchables. They become the victims of inhuman cruelty and physical torment in their working places and even streets. The untouchables are socially isolated people but they are the most vital part of our society. The need social dignity and love. Despite their honest and sincere services for the society, they are treated as inhuman and unwanted. As Bakha says: "...All of them abused, abused, abused why we are always abused? The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers.

Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it to...I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an untouchable!" p. 58-59 All these stir the feeling of protest in Bakha. But he is not unseen tears, which a sensitive reader feels flowing from his heart able to transform his resentment into protest and action. 'Bahha of the morning is not the same as Bakha of the evening, His life remains the same, but during the course of the day there is a sea-change psychologically. He has attained some measure of self-realization and self- knowledge.' The novel is drenched in Bakha's unbearable pain and

Mulk Raj Anand's "**Untouchable**" is mainly a story of protest against the set norms of casteism in Hindu society. He has tried to hard the deeply rooted castism in Indian society in his famous work 'Untouchable.' Untouchability which are predominant evils in our Indian society isolates the sweepers and the scavengers from the main stream of the society. Anand is the first Indian novelist to have depicted in the novel from the stigma of this evil which isolates a man from his own society. (Jha 59) The use of machine or the flush system is not only the solution of Untouchability; as untouchability is deeply rooted in our Indian psyche, we have to change our outlook towards them. The ending of the novel ask a basic question to the readers, how to alleviate the oppression of the untouchables? In the preface to the book "**Untouchable**", E.M. Forester wrote: "The book seems to me indescribably clean.... It has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it" (9) C.D. Narasimhaiah rightly remarks that Bakha seems to be a typical representative untouchable exemplifying the plight of not only the so-called Hindu untouchables. Anand succeeds in exposing the oppression, injustice, exploitation of the outcastes in India. Towards the end of the novel, the author suggests three solutions to overcome



the vice of untouchability-Christ, Gandhi and the flush system. M. K. Naik writes about the concluding part of the novel :-“In the end it suggests three alternative solutions to his problem:-a missionary tries to persuade him to embrace Christianity; he listens to Gandhiji who advocates social reform; and he also hears of mechanized sanitation, as the only answer possible.” Anand believes that casteism is a crime against humanity and every one who believes in human dignity should actively try to eliminate it. The novel aims at wiping away social barriers and orthodoxy and casteism from society, and established human value.

Conclusion: Mulk Raj Anand’s “**Untouchable**” conveys the message of justice and social importance of the Untouchables. They need no sympathy but their true respect in the society. Because the man made caste-system has thrown them out from the main stream of the society. They have become isolated from the main stream of the society. The exploitation of the under-dog- hero, the Untouchable fires the novelist’s imagination which reveals in the novel realistic way. Objectivity, balance and realism characterise Anand’s treatment of the theme of exploitation and injustice to the Untouchables. The novel in Anand’s hand becomes an instrument of humanism, which conveys the message of justice and social respect.

Methodology: The work is mainly based on secondary source of information, such as published documents, books, review, autobiography, journal, critiques etc. To fulfill the objectives of the study, I try to find out the roots and evils of untouchability in the Hindu society, which Mulk Raj Anand nakedly portrayed in his first novel “**Untouchable**”. In my present study, an attempt has been made to analyse and interpret the social position of the

Untouchables and the respect they can expect from us.

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Vol. I

Acknowledgement: I convey my deep
sense of gratitude to all the Teachers,
P.G. Department of English & Research,
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya, India for

suggesting the way I may find suitable for
the development of my paper, valuable
guidance, & constant help & continuous
encouragement in the preparation of this
manuscript. I owe to them in every sense for
the providing me with the facilities
throughout the course of investigation. I am
grateful to all my friends & classmates for
their co-operation.

RESUME: Mr. **Moklesur Rahaman** is a
research scholar in English Literature. He is
presently pursuing his Ph. D. in English from
P.G. Dept of English & Research Centre,
MAGADH UNIVERSITY, BODH -GAYA,
INDIA. His areas of interest are Indian
Writings in English and Commonwealth
Literature.