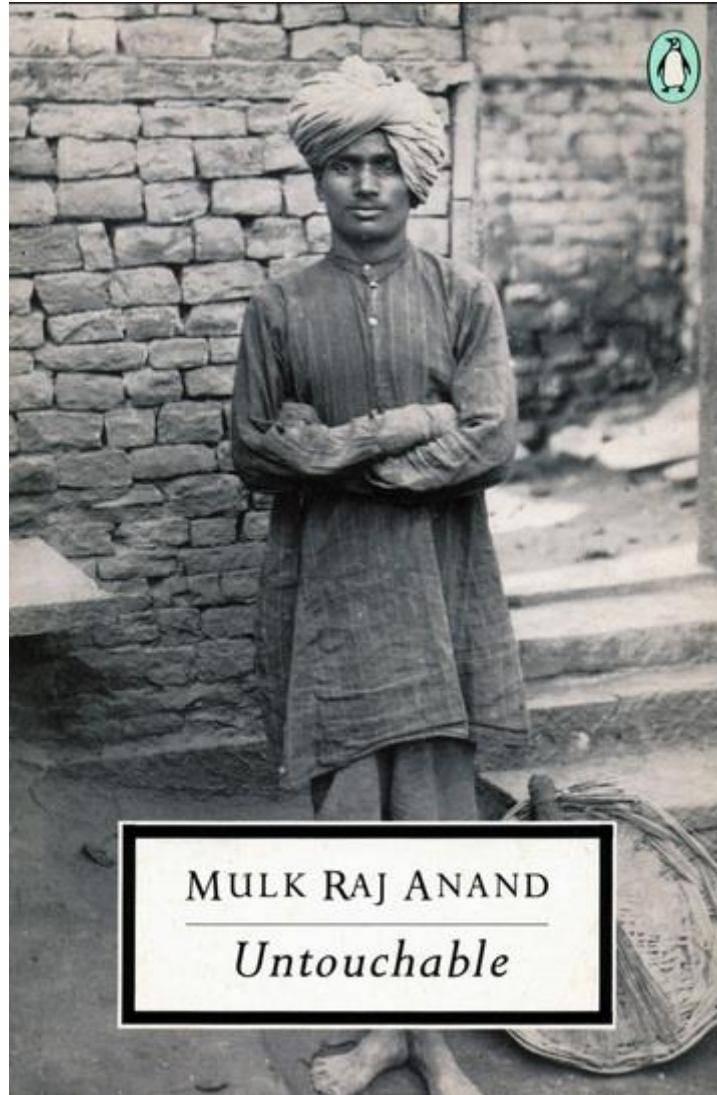


Sufferings of Poor and Downtrodden in Mulk Raj Anand's Novel
Untouchable

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Abstract

This article discusses the portrayal of the sufferings of poor and downtrodden in Mulkraj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. The sufferings of poor and downtrodden have been a familiar sight in India throughout the ages. Poverty is glorified in theological terms, but in real life the poor and the downtrodden are looked down upon and ill-treated. Anand's novel *Untouchable* created a writer's revolution both in the writing in Indian languages and in

Indian Writing in English. Anand has located the protagonist, Bakha, in a fixed reality in the hope of capturing the essence of the sweeper's existence. The one day action of the hero is intended to represent a fairly complete sociological experience.

Key words: Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, Bakha, sweepers in India, social status and caste exploitation, ill-treatment.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

Mulk Raj Anand started his literary career as novelist with his first novel *Untouchable* under the deep influence of Gandhi. The novel attained fame all over the literary circle of the world and it is also generally regarded as one of his best novel. He focuses on the oppressed downtrodden, and thus brings their problems to the surface so that an average reader might be able to understand the plight of the innocent creatures who suffer for no fault of their own but simply because they are the outcastes as they are born in that particular class of untouchables.

One Day Action

Anand has located the protagonist, Bakha, in a fixed reality in the hope of capturing the essence of the sweeper's existence. The one day action of the hero is intended to represent a fairly complete sociological experience. An uneducated young man of eighteen years, he is not dull-witted. Like others of his community he is subjected to humiliation and indifference by high-caste people. He is aware of his low position and also conscious of his inability to offer resistance against the inhuman treatment ruthlessly meted out to him. He is born in a sweeper family, so he is never provided proper upbringing to become a civilized man.

Dealing with Social Problems and Exploitation

Mulk Raj Anand is deeply concerned here with the social problems, and is committed to the eradication of the evils which infest as well as contaminate the modern society. The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he can't easily escape. Unclean himself; he pollutes others when touches them. Moreover, he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. It is his duty to call out and warn the people that he is coming. Society insults him perpetually, dwarfs his natural growth and checks his potentialities from finding proper manifestation.

Posh, posh, Sweeper is Coming!

Bakha is constrained to announce his approach by crying “Posh, posh, sweeper is coming” (57) lest he may defile the twice born Brahmins like Pandit Kali Nath. Cigarettes are flung at him as a bone is flung at an insistent sniffing dog. Jalebis are thrown at him like the wastes thrown at a pig and the thin paper like pancakes (given as food to the sweeper) flies down to him like a kite from the third floor. Wherever he goes, he is referred to as a swine, son of a pig, low caste vermin. The privileged caste men state arrogantly that the untouchables "ought to be wiped off the surface of the earth" (133).

Sufferings of a Social Class

The novel is concerned not with the life and sufferings of some particular individual, but with the life and sufferings of untouchables as a class. Through the particular untouchable Bakha, the novelist has focused attention on the miserable plight of untouchables generally. The novelist narrates a single day events in the life of Bakha, an eighteen years old boy. He is the son of Lakha, the sweeper, the cleaner of the latrines. Through these two prominent characters, the author hammers hard on the caste-conflict. Though this dangerous disease of caste conflict was on its summit before Independence, it is still seen much or less in almost every State of India. The untouchables or the socially isolated people who form the most vital part of a nation have to lead a deplorable and miserable life beyond description.

Bakha as a Symbol

Bakha symbolizes the exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of untouchables like him. Most of the actions of the novel take place at an outcaste colony and in the streets of the small town. Bakha starts his day welcomed by the abuses of his father and is forced to clean the latrines with a brush and a basket. The work of this caste is to clean toilets and streets and keeps them clean for the upper castes. The living conditions of the untouchables were extremely squalid and they are forced to reside in kutcha mud-walled, single-roomed cottages. There is not proper system of drainage and there is foul smell everywhere. Almost every page of the novel is drenched in Bakha’s unseen tears who patiently endure the most humiliating and depressing days of his young life in this story. From sunrise on he is forced to deal with discrimination, hatred and hypocrisy. Bakha begins

his daily routine work with his father's cascade of abuses: "Get up, ohe, you Bakhya, Ohe son of pig" (5).

A Subaltern

Bakha is a subaltern who plays a pivotal role relating his own life, struggle and escapades with a view to establishing his own identity as well as gaining the status of a youth. Through his daily routine the writer exposes various kinds of institutional cruelty and injustice that he receives. His job is to add psychological dimension to the physical torment that his family is enduring. Sometimes he faces the oral and verbal attacks from the higher class people. This creates a fierce picture of arbitrary torture and depicts the disturbing relationship between power and fear. This presents a culture of total repression and the state of human beings at the mercy of the cruellest, most incomprehensible, irrational social order. The victim faces humiliation. It not only hits him physically but robs his sense of dignity and makes him an average human being totally powerless and helpless.

Outcastes Colony

With Bakha, the central character, there are other characters who also suffer because of their lower caste. For the privileged, the colony of the untouchability is a forbidden place. That is why it is termed as, "out-castes colony" (1). It reveals that the privileged people are totally indifferent to the welfare of the people who slavishly serve them. They treat the outcastes as their moveable, yet untouchable, property. They consider the sweepers dirty just because they clean their dirt. They make the untouchables lead a life of total dependence on them. Even for water, the basic necessity of human existence, the sweepers have to depend on the mercy of the upper caste people.

Realistic Description

The novel depicts about Bakha and his community's suffering in a realistic manner. They are forced to live in the society excluded of filthy locality. The theme of the novel - untouchability itself is very realistic. *Untouchable* is a realistic novel of socially crushed protagonist Bakha. It is a slice from a life without any modification. The novel begins with a realistic picture of the outcastes' colony. The local color of the novel is evoked with the photographic realism and accuracy. The novel opens with the description of the untouched

colony of Untouchables where they living, living without any facility, since the thousands of years. Their colony is portrayed thus in this novel:

Geographical Location of the Colony of Outcastes

The outcasts' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal- clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffalos heaped up to be made in to fuel cakes. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh, which gave out the most offensive smell. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an uncongenial place to live in... (1)

Sensible and Sensitive Understanding

The novel *Untouchable* reveals a sensible and sensitive understanding of social exploitation inherent in the class and caste structure of colonial India and the ever – growing conflict between the forces of tradition and modernity in the Indian society. It also reveals the accurate scale of the painful struggle of the outcaste and the oppressed to find an identity for themselves in a hostile society by unsociability and poverty which makes the people run to cities and various places. The untouchables become an outcast that is not to be touched. They are economically exploited. They lose their identity as individual human beings and live as an ostracized section of humanity thereby losing the identity as a group also. This identity crisis percolates to the future generations too.

Treated as Worse than Animals

Mulk Raj Anand's most of the heroes are outcastes and hail from the lowest strata of society. They are in search of their actual position in society, which they are denied. They are treated as unwanted, inhuman and even as a scum of the earth. Respect, love and sympathy are seldom accorded to them, despite their honest and sincere services. The protagonist Bakha in *Untouchable*, who is born to the parents of a scavenger family, gets the identical

crisis even from birth and profession Bakha is treated as an animal but not as a human being having his own dignity, value and individual identity. This is only because of his profession and birth. He has to face the problems within the hierarchy of the castes among the untouchables. Mulk Raj Anand presents here the worst sufferings of Bakha who is not at all accepted by the washerman and the other outcastes of Bulashah because he belonged to the lowest among low. Chota, the son of a leather worker and Ramcharan, the son of a washerman always regarded themselves superior to Bakha, who was a sweeper and the lowest among the low.

Less Crowded Canvas

The novel is elegant with less crowded canvas. There are Bakha, a scavenger boy, the hero, Lakha, Sohini, Chota, Ram Charan and Rakha. Bakha is the son of a jamadar, Lakha. Rakha and Sohini are siblings. Rakha has no sense of self-esteem, he is rather naïve. Pandit Kali Nath is a caste Hindu priest, libidinous and hypocrite. He assaults Sohini. Colonel Hutchinson is a Christian missionary; he is highly motivated to proselytize the untouchables into Christianity. Iqbal Nath Sarshar is a zealous poet. There are a few characters of less significance. They are Gulabo, the washer woman and Havilder Charat Singh who is generous to Bakha. But Bakha is focused and ubiquitous and the novelist presents an account of everything that happens on this fateful day.

Lakha, Bakha's Father

Lakha, Bakha's father, is the jamadar of all the sweepers in the town and the cantonment and officially in charge of the three rows of public Latrines which lie the extreme end of the colony, by the brook-side; Anand introduces him in the beginning of the novel. He does not play any significant role but he is a remarkable character for certain characteristic features of an Indian outcaste. He symbolizes the grief, agony, poverty and disease of an aged outcaste. Anand has focused the attention on such a character because he is also a human being; he does feel pains; he does have his own dreams.

Tolerating Humiliation

Lakha characterizes the down-trodden untouchables. Old age and sickness have rendered him lethargic, ill-tempered and self-centered. He is pre-occupied with his own bread and tea. He does not care for his own children. He has abandoned them at the mercy of

Heaven. He has accepted the misery and poverty and untouchability as his destiny. He believed that the outcastes are born to serve others. He tolerates all social evils without single word of complain. He has inherited extreme servility as a consequence of thousand years of racial and caste superiority that is in vogue in India. Prolonged sickness and inactive life has rendered him ill-tempered and peevish. He never treats his children with love and affection as a father should do. He does not greet them with good words. He is always abusing. He used to utter sub-standard and vulgar words typical to low-caste community. His diction and phrases, “you son of a pig” (5), “you illegally begotten” (6) and “call those son of pig (23)” expose his ill-temper. Mulk Raj Anand points out his soft corner of Lakha through the following lines:

‘No tea, no piece of bread, and I am dying of hunger! Put the tea on and call those sons of a pig, Bakha and Rakha, to me!’ Then he frowned in the gruff manner of a man who was really good and kind at heart, but who knew he was weak and infirm and so bullied his children, to preserve his authority, lest he should be repudiated by them, refused and rejected as the difficult old yubbish he was. (23)

Bakha’s Illness

The story of Bakha’s illness reveals his virtuous features of a father. Once Bakha falls seriously ill. Lakha rocks the child in his arm and spends a sleepless night. He needs his life desperately. In morning he rushes to Hakim Bhagwan Dass and begs to save the life of his son. Lakha admits that his sin is beyond compensation and further implores to treat his child and to give some medicine. The physician agrees and thus Bakha is cured. Bigamy and polygamy are common phenomena among the outcastes. But Lakha does not re-marry even after the death of his wife. He knows that his love and care will be divided. He will be biased to his new wife and neglect his children. His sacrifice is natural instinct.

Generational Changes

Lakha represents the type of old, sickly and servile sweepers, the class which is now on the verge of extinction. He enjoys somewhat a superior position among the sweepers of Bulashah. He has almost given up work due to old age and ill-health on one hand, and coming of age of his son (Bakha) on the other. The son being eighteen can now perform his father’s work well. As a typical Indian father he does not feel like continuing his professional

drudgery and almost retires from his job. When the novel begins the readers are given to understand that Lakha is a retired Jamadar. His father, Lakha, angrily growled and abusively called him:

‘Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoy will be angry.

The old man seemed to awake instinctively, for a moment, just about that time every morning and then to relapse into his noisy sleep under the greasy, dense, thick, discoloured, patched quilt. (3)

PRIMARY SOURCE

Anand, Raj Mulk. *Untouchable*. New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1935.



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