

MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*: THE STUDY OF CASTEISM, HARDSHIP, AND HUMILIATION

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935) narrates the events of one single day in the life of an eighteen year old boy named Bakha who is a sweeper by profession. He, his family and the people of his caste had to clean the roads, courtyards and the latrines of the community for which they were not paid sufficient wages. As a result, they had to beg or borrow from the rich and were expected to overwork in whatever unhygienic situations available. It was a sort of physical, social, financial and psychological imprisonment for them which they tried to come out with empty stomach and perplexed, disturbed mind set. They were not allowed to touch the water wells, temples or everything that was common for the society. The hardships and humiliation faced by Bakha, the protagonist, is basically the outcome of caste system and the untouchability.

Keywords

Touching, Orthodoxy, Sweeper, Untouchable, etc.

Full Article

Untouchable strikes us as the picture of a place, of a society, and of certain persons not easily to be forgotten- a picture that is also an indictment or the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy. As a novelist addressing himself to the task of exposing certain evils, Anand (it must be conceded) has been as effective almost as Dickens himself (Iyengar, 227).

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* narrates the events of one single day in the life of an eighteen year old boy named Bakha who is a sweeper by profession. He, his family and the people of his caste had to clean the roads, courtyards and the latrines of the community for which they were not paid sufficient wages. As a result, they had to beg or borrow from the rich and were expected to overwork in whatever unhygienic situations available. It was a sort of physical, social, financial and psychological imprisonment for them which they tried to come out with empty stomach and perplexed, disturbed mind set. They were not allowed to touch the water wells, temples or everything that was common for the society. As Cowasjee, in *So Many Freedoms*, observes, "Untouchable opens quietly on an autumn morning and by the time the evening approaches, the author has been able to build round his hero a spiritual crisis of such breath that it seems to embrace the whole of India" (Cowasjee, 10).

Anand narrates the story of the unfortunates of the society who were the victims of the power dynamics and the mutations that took place over many years. Anand is a novelist of the thirties



when the Gandhian struggle for freedom was at its height. Naturally, he was influenced by Gandhi's love and sympathy for the untouchables, the suffering and the poor. During Anand's stay in England, he had been considerably influenced by the human concerns and values Karl Marx. Therefore, Anand's early novels are mainly a literature of protest which describe the daily life of the oppressed and show the lifestyle of the oppressors. They fit in to a kind of social realism which places stress on human misery without clearly showing the possibility of a better future. Anand not only throws light on their utter poverty and distress but also focuses its attention on their low-caste. As K.N. Sinha comments:

The novel has a tragic beauty of its own. The will to revolt and impossible circumstances constitute the basic tension in the novel. The hero is simultaneously a rebel and victim. His anguish becomes our sorrow. But Bakha has no tragic status as scapegoat and a victim, tyrannized by a recalcitrant society. He is the lowest of the lowly whose destiny does not suffer any appreciable erosion (Sinha, 35).

Anand as a novelist does not believe in 'art for art's sake' but is of the view that the novel should focus its attention on the plight of the have-nots and thus contribute towards their bright future. Thus for Anand, the novel is an instrument of humanism, an instrument for the enlightenment of man and for the betterment of his lot, a means for the expression of his love, sympathy, and compassion, and *Untouchable* is no exception in this respect. Anand's heart melts down with pity at the predicament of the untouchables that he expressed with ruthless reality. M. K. Naik points out: "The strength of Anand's fiction lies in its vast range, its wealth of living characters, its ruthless realism, its deeply felt indignation at social wrongs, and its strong humanitarian compassion" (A History of Indian English Literature, 167).

In contrast with this, Anand was well-equipped to embark upon this revolutionary course. As a child, he had played with the children of the sweepers attached to the regiment in which his father was employed. In fact, Bakha, the hero of *Untouchable*, is drawn after one of his playmates. There was little about his hero and his life that Anand did not know. Anand's picture of Bakha and his life has thus a clear ring of authenticity about it. As E. M. Forster, in his preface to the novel, remarks,

Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however, sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity (Forster, Preface to *Untouchable*).

Anand's disapproval of untouchability develops its efficacy from a total control of all the aspects of Bakha's problems. Anand shows a sure understanding of the psychology of both the upper caste Hindus and the untouchable. The caste Hindu boasts of six thousand years of social and class superiority and refuses to accept that the untouchable is also a human being just like him but wrongly asserts treating him like a sub-human creature, to be exploited on every occasion. The temple priest Pandit Kali Nath and the betel-leaf seller are the best examples of class superiority. In Indian society the caste plays an important role and it has become an important part of life of Indian social setup. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has written about it:



Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible... There is no charity to the needy. There is no charity but it begins with the caste and ends with caste. There is sympathy but not for other caste.”(Ambedkar B. R., 37)

The story of social power structure and evident mutations in *Untouchable* takes place in the city of Bulashah in Punjab and depicts the struggle of Bakha, a young, low caste boy to come out of the vicious circle of casteism and poverty. He struggles to change the social and economic status of his family. In the process of development, he meets a variety of people, most of whom despise him for his low class life, social degradation and financial dependence. The element of power dynamics is present in the novel from the beginning to the end. The final solution, though imaginary, for the despicable act of cleaning latrines in the form of a flush machine declares the power of knowledge, science and modernity.

The religious power of Hutchinson's religious conversion and the emotional appeal of Mahatma Gandhi to love the downtrodden of the society could not win over the idea of flush science. It exposes the hypocrisy of such religious and emotional appeals that keeps the status quo unchanged.

Bakha, though still a boy, keeps on moving and observing the world around him. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* shows a realistic picture of the various oppressed sections of the society of the pre-independence India. It was a time when people passionately wanted political freedom and nobody paid much attention to change the social customs and rituals that tortured many. There were different religions and almost every religion had different castes inside, based upon the work they did or the work they were assigned to do by the virtue of their family business. Later on, the working class people were unfortunately segregated on the basis of caste which gave birth to the heinous custom of untouchability.

Bakha and his family were one of those many who suffered and received the abuse from the so called high caste people. The protagonist of the novel, Bakha, is representative of all the downtrodden people of the country who faced discrimination and suppression due to their caste. Bakha and his family suffer because they belong to the lower class and caste of the society.

Untouchable narrates the life-stories of the marginalized and destitute people of an orthodox Indian society. It is an accusation of the snobbery and hypocrisy seen in the upper caste sections of a Hindu society.

In fact the writer's first three novels *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Three Leaves and a Bud* are quests of the protagonists for the grail of peace and well-being, biological and spiritual. Tragedy lies in the unreachability of the aspirations of the protagonists. Munoo's aspiration for the food and the boot, Bakha's for a casteless society and Gangu's, the plantation labourer for a life without the threat of debt and disease would never be fulfilled (Goswami, 30).

The social aspect of the novel that is the treatment of religion and caste discrimination has been delineated in a realistic manner. Anand employs the stream of consciousness technique in the novel which allows the author to delve deep into the mind of the central character, Bakha, who is tormented by the treatment of the society towards him and his fellow beings. These are also a member off flashbacks used along with symbolic images and thoughts combined with an awareness of the reality touch to the novel.



When Anand started writing fiction, he decided he would prefer the familiar to the fancied, that he would avoid the highways of Romance and sophistication but explore the by lanes of the outcasts and the peasants, the sepoys and the working people. It was, however, no laborious exercise of self-exercise, self-conscious Proletarians. To Anand, it was merely the easier and more natural way... (Iyengar, 224)

The events that take place in Bakha's one single day can be described as the shortened form of his whole life of sweeping and cleaning the latrines and go on begging for a mouthful of morsels and a pitcher full of 'well' water. His thinking and talking to his own self while undergoing the Pain give birth to his stream of consciousness in the manner of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Though the novel has good deal of human faces and dirty experiences, it affects the readers to the level of feeling oneness with the protagonist. E. M. Forster very aptly verities in the preface about this heart touching story,

... The book seems to me "indescribably clean and I hesitate for words in which this can be conveyed. Avoiding rhetoric and circumlocution, it has gone straight to the heart of as subject and purified it... it is to the directness of his attack that Mr. Anand's success is probably due (Forster, Preface)

The factor of caste plays very important role in this novel. We come across its after effects in the form of untouchability and social segregation on the basis of the duty that they perform. Here the proletariat, who hardly own any property, become the centre of attraction and Anand tries to give justice to them by discussing the unlawful and unsocial events and their never ending struggles. The landlord-slave theory of exploitation is at work and Anand skilfully records the mutations.

Of all his novels, *Untouchable* is the most compact and artistically satisfying, *Coolie* is the most extensive in space and time, evoking variegated action and multiplicity in character, while *Two Leaves and a Bird* is the most effective as a piece of implied indictment. *Untouchable* is, further, the shortest of the novels and the most revealing and rewarding of the lot (Iyengar, 224).

Mulk Raj Anand narrates the story in a straight forward, linear way. The novel, though not divided into chapters, has certain events that work as chapters. Anand describes the pitiful situations of the untouchables through the character Bakha, their sufferings and physical and mental agonies almost with the thorough skill of historical narrator. In the words of Marlene Fisher: "...Anand's first novel, then, is at one and the same time a fine piece of creative work in terms of its own artistic integrity and an indication of the author's humanistic commitments and future novelistic directions" (Fisher, 39).

The novel begins with one early morning household chores in the outcaste's colony where Lakha and his family- Bakha, Rakha and Sohini live a happy life. As the sunrays intensify, Bakha and other members of his family set on their respective duties i.e. cleaning roads, latrines and courtyards with their brushes and baskets. One has to cook and go to the well to fetch water and witness the quarrels at the well, walk back slowly with continuous warning for the public in order to avoid their touch. Bakha's longing for education, with all humiliation and meeting high class Hindus, Tommies- the white men, and good Muslims remains as it is.



The accidental touching episode and its ugly consequences form the central part of the novel and all the unfortunate incidents that follow throughout the day revolve round this touching incident. The 'Posh, Posh, Sweeper coming' alarm spreads throughout the land, the town, the cantonment and the whole Indian society that warns people to avoid the touching. The temple scene in which Bakha's sudden meeting with God takes place is highly philosophical and spiritual that converts the scene into something dangerous- the so called pollution and Sohini's molestation. It makes the protagonist ruthless, deadly, pale and livid with anger and rage. Anand satirises the hypocrisy of the priests and the upper caste Hindus who exploit the ignorant people in the name of God and spirituality.

The chapati throwing incident at the Silversmith's Lane creates conflicting emotions of spiritual anguish and insult and humiliation in Bakha's helpless mind. Bakha's call -'Bread for the sweeper, mother' goes unnoticed most of the time. What he receives finally is the unhealthy food flung at him with zero empathy from the fourth story of the building. Bakha's act of attending the wedding ceremony of Ram Charan's sister turns into a matter of dissatisfaction. His visit to Havildar Charat singh is happy one when he gifts the legendary hat and the hockey stick for the forthcoming hockey match give some proud to feelings to Bakha.

Finally Bakha's meeting with colonel Hutchinson, Mahatma Gandhi and the large crowd of pre- impendence poor peasants of India creates a mixed reaction and understanding of the conflict and its rational and emotional solutions. Bakha comes out victorious with the idea of flush machine that is to be used to clean the latrines. These three meetings provide a sort of freedom of thinking to Bakha and he starts thinking rationally about the reduction of workload of his community.

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