

# Depiction of Caste Discrimination and Social Injustice in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

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**Abstract:** *The three famous Indian novelists R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Mulk Raj Anand are considered the founders of Indo-English literature. He was born in Peshawar on December 12, 1905. His literary output was filled with a political conviction that realistically and sympathetically depicted the life of India's underprivileged, making him the finest representative of Indian literature in English. His works, which focus on the wretched lives of the impoverished, are truthfully written. As a writer for the average person, Anand has written extensively on the rural, the severe poverty, orphans, untouchables, and urban laborers. He made it his mission to combat prejudice and social snobbery. In his works, he depicts the lives of soldiers, peasants, outcasts, and the downtrodden and despondent members of society in India. According to renowned critic P.K. Singh, Anand has a deep concern for India's poor, and his books therefore shed light on the suffering and plight of the "have-nots." His books provide intricate portraits of Indian society, paying particular attention to the suffering of the impoverished. One The wretchedness and agony of the oppressed and crushed people, as well as their fight for a better existence, are the subjects of Anand's early works. His other books are essentially variations on the same idea. The current study aims to investigate the ways in which Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable" reflects many societal challenges and characteristics.*

**Keywords:** Caste discrimination, untouchability, social injustice, oppression, identity, Dalit experience, colonial rule, human dignity, reform, and empathy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since Indian society was "galvanized into a new social and political awareness, it was bound to seek creative expression for its new consciousness, and the novel has, in all ages, been a handy instrument for this purpose." Fiction, like all literary forms, is closely linked to social aspects and values. At a period when India was experiencing dire conditions, Anand began writing. The battle against poverty, illiteracy, superstition, the caste system, untouchability, and other social injustices occurred concurrently with the movement for political independence. No artist working at the time could fail to capture this rise in his creations. "Anand could not but respond to the impact of events in India," says Dr. Iyengar. But like Bankim Chandra before him, he used book writing as a means of political activity. As a man of the people, he wrote for the people and of the people. In the same way that an avalanche or flood displays a flurry of velocity, a burst of power, and a heady rush towards the objective, it might be said that his early works have a feeling of direction.

In essence, Mulk Raj Anand is an advocate for the poor and marginalized. Given their destitution, indifference, and hopelessness, he has always recognized the need to assist in bringing the untouchables, peasants, serfs, coolies, and other marginalized groups of society up to human dignity and self-awareness. According to Saros Cowasjee, Anand "introduced a whole new people, who had seldom entered the realm of literature, in his narratives." 4. "The march of evolution and subject to pressures both conventional and contingent" is how he describes Indian society. 5. He is the pioneer of social transformation in Indian English novels, and he has used the "Dickensian piquancy of realism" to depict the hypocrisy and shams that lie behind the veneer of social life.

Untouchable (1935), Mulk Raj Anand's first book, is a terrifying indictment of the daily existence of an individual belonging to India's untouchable caste. Bakha, a sweeper kid, is the main character of the book. Like his father Lakha, an 18-year-old untouchable kid who works as a sweeper and latrine cleaner, Bakha is considered an outsider by society. The hero is both a victim and a rebel. He objects to the indifference of Hindu castes and complains against it. However, as a traditionalist, he is idealistic and cannot see opposing society or the "agents" of religious organizations. Anand "exemplifies the problem of 'untouchability,' the treatment of the latrine-cleaning class condemned to isolation and deprivation as handlers of excrement; he exposes this as a social evil and suggests its remedy," according to Prof. H. M. Williams.

The modern societal beliefs, habits, traditions, and social problems of Hindu society in the 1930s particularly the curse of the caste and class system—are the main emphasis of the story. In actuality, it is a sociological and socially concerned book. It highlights the miseries and hardships that caste Hindus imposed on the untouchables and outcasts, including the grass cutters, scavengers, leather workers, washermen, barbers, water carriers, and so on. It expresses a strong opposition to the societal injustice that untouchables face. Anand describes a day in Bakha's life with unwavering realism. It is an ordinary day in the life of an untouchable, filled with insults, disappointments, minor joys, hope, and hunger. Other characters, like Bakha, also endure hardships as a result of their lower caste. They have no right to complain or voice their feelings; they just endure. Bakha is a universal character who represents the injustice, humiliation, exploitation, and persecution that have befallen the whole outcast community. His anguish and shame are not unique to him; they are shared by all marginalized and disadvantaged people. According to C.D. Narasimhaiah, Bakha seems to be a typical representative untouchable, illustrating the predicament of dispossessed people worldwide as well as the so-called Hindu untouchables. 8.

Untouchability, the novel's central concept, is very realistic. Bakha, the protagonist of the realistic book Untouchable, is socially devastated. It is a slice of life that hasn't been altered in any way. The tale opens with a realistic depiction of the colony of outcasts. According to Anand, the outcastes' colony was a collection of two rows of mudwalled homes that were beyond the town's and the cantonment's bounds but yet under their shadow. There were outcasts from Hindu society, including scavengers, leather workers, barbers, washermen, water carriers, and grass cutters. Once having clear water, the brook near the lane was now contaminated by the dirt and filth from the public restrooms surrounding it, the smell of the dead carcasses' hides and skins that were left to dry on the banks, and the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows, and buffaloes that had been piled up to make fuel cakes.

Bakha's day starts with his father's charming pleas and outright mistreatment, as well as his meeting with the upper caste, who cannot tolerate his appearance. First and foremost, he is mistreated by his father, Lakha, the Jamadar of the sweepers, who asks him to go out and clean latrines early in the chilly morning. "Get up, you Bakhiya, you are a pig's The sepoys will be upset if you don't get up and clean the restrooms.

Everywhere he goes, he is treated worse than an animal would be treated, both within and outside. Chapatis are thrown to him from the third level when he gets hungry. He is also given jilebis in the same manner that a dog is given a bone. A package of cigarettes is thrown to him by a Hindu merchant. Since the morning, he has been going through a string of embarrassing events. When a member of the Hindu caste slaps him for polluting him, he is astonished. "Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach?" shouts the upper caste Hindu. Do you realize, cock-eyed offspring of a bowlegged scorpion, that you have touched and defiled me? I'll have to go take a bath now in order to cleanse myself. And I wore a new shirt and dhoti this morning.

Although Bakha is physically capable of retaliating, he chooses to keep quiet and endure all the humiliations at his own speed. "His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, for away from the torment," the writer recounts. Then he understood that he was surrounded by a barrier a moral one, rather than a physical one, since one thrust from his massive shoulders would have been sufficient to knock the skeleton-like bodies of the bystanders off balance. The Hindu caste's reaction to the untouchable Bakha is a common one. It just highlights the untouchables' terrible predicament. As Bakha states: "Why are we always assaulted while they are all abused? On that day, my father was mistreated by the sanitary inspector. They constantly mistreat us. since we sweep. because we come into contact with excrement. They detest excrement. I detest it too. As a sweeper, I am untouchable.

Indeed, these depressing circumstances and traumatic events incite revolt in Bakha. The sweepers who are in charge of keeping things tidy are doomed to reside in areas that are unsanitary and unhygienic. Because of how bad their situation is, they are not permitted to use the well for water. For it, they must rely on the benevolence of Hindu castes. Anand depicts the brutal truth and the scourge of untouchability in this instance. The water incident is really heartwarming and poignant. Social realism is evident in Anand's striking observation, use of regional vernacular, abuses, and the unvarnished depiction of untouchability. The high-caste Hindus treat Bakha's sister, Sohini, poorly. The untouchables are not doing well. According to Anand, the Hindus of the three higher castes would see the water as contaminated if the outcasts ever drew water from the well, hence they were not permitted to climb the platform around it. Additionally, they were denied access to the neighboring brook since doing so might taint the stream. Since digging a well in a mountainous town like Bulandshahr is expensive, they didn't have their own well. In order to fill their pitchers with water, they were forced to gather at the base of the caste Hindu well and rely on the generosity of some of their superiors. Page 26

It takes Sohini a long time to bring her brother a pot of water since he is thirsty and exhausted. Eventually, one of the Hindus, Pandit Kali Nath, summons her to clean his house's courtyard near the temple and provides water for her. When Sohini naively tries to do so, he grabs her by the breast, but she rejects his advances. Here, Anand exposes the hypocrisy and lustfulness of the arrogant, so-called priest Pandit Kali Nath, who has intense sexual yearning for Sohini, an untouchable, and believes that the touch of an untouchable pollutes him. Anand eloquently exposes this contradiction and deceit throughout the book. The Brahmin below yelled, "Polluted, Polluted, Polluted!" as he subsequently raised the alarm. Scavenger, get off the stairs! You're off! Our whole service has been tainted by you! Our temple has been polluted by you! The cost of the purification ritual will now need to be covered.

The height of hypocrisy is this. Bakha arrives on the scene in a timely manner, and the scenario infuriates him. When he learns about Pandit Kali Nath's effort to harass his sister Sohini, he becomes aware of caste hatred and hypocritical societal injustices. No one is willing to trust or stand with Sohini when she attempts to speak the truth. Bakha becomes enraged and wants to beat him up, but Sohini intervenes. They both decide to quit up after realizing how powerless they are because of their caste's restrictions. Untouchables often endure this kind of humiliation, which they have come to accept as part of an ancient custom. Desperate to go home, he informs his father Lakha about the Pandit's abuse of Sohini and his insult. "Because we clean their dirt, they believe we are nothing more than dirt." Page 89

In an attempt to ease his son's sorrow, Lakha tells him about a negative event in his own life. Bakha is brought back to reality by it. Mulk Raj Anand offers Christ, Gandhi, and the flush system as three ways to combat the evil of untouchability toward the book's conclusion. Bakha is taken to the church by Christian missionary Colonel Hutchinson, whom he chances to meet. In order to convert Bakha to Christianity, he requests that he confess his wrongdoing. He believes that the best way to end untouchability is by Christianity. Bakha is thus dissatisfied as the missionary is unable to define Christ. Bakha hears Mahatma Gandhi provide an alternative approach at a public gathering at Golbagh. Gandhi claims that all Indians are equal in his lengthy lecture, which also includes an example of a Brahmin doing sweeping duties. Even his desire to be reincarnated as an untouchable is expressed.

He renames them "Harijan" and refers to them as the Hindu religion's cleansers. Additionally, he advises them to quit asking for food for their jobs and cautions them about their poor behaviors. Bakha's heart is directly touched by Gandhi's comments. The final solution the water closet, as the poet had promised comes just after this. Only the flush system can defeat all the vices associated with untouchability; neither a deity nor promises of self-sacrifice are required to safeguard the untouchables. Bakha understands that using a machine or the flush system is the only way to eliminate untouchability. Bakha returns to his mud-walled cottage after considering what he has heard, wondering about the Machine and the Mahatma at the same time. He wants to share with his father all Gandhi stated about them and the flush system. In this sense, the book closes on a strong tone of hope. Mulk Raj Anand demonstrates his keen insight and compassionate disposition in comprehending the harsh realities of Indian social life via the realistic and sympathetic depiction of a person. According to Professor Nagarajan, Anand views life as it is, exposing as a writer the brutality of flesh wounds, blood, and all shedding sentimentalism while writing with a deft touch of mockery of social and economic injustices.

Anand aspires to bring society's downtrodden, repressed, exploited, and dehumanized sections to the fore. As a result, he berates human hypocrisy, societal evils, and personal peculiarities. He has brought attention to societal issues and conflicts that he has personally seen and experienced. In his works, Anand criticizes societal snobbery and prejudice and calls for a broader perspective, more tolerance, intimacy, selflessness, and understanding. Given these literary attributes, renowned critic P.K. Singh refers to Anand as "a communist behind the curtain."

## II. CONCLUSION

One of the first and most potent literary critiques of India's deeply ingrained caste system and the social inequities that accompany it is Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable*. Set over the course of one day in the life of a young sweeper boy named Bakha, the book offers a multi-layered criticism of the systematic dehumanization of the oppressed in colonial India in addition to being a moving account of personal pain. In summary, *Untouchable* is a seminal work of Indian English literature and a crucial contribution to socio-political debate because of Anand's thorough, multifaceted, and deeply sympathetic handling of societal concerns.

Fundamentally, *Untouchable* brutally and realistically reveals the atrocities of caste-based prejudice. Bakha's lived experience is made more intense by Anand's choice to just show the events of one day in her life, showing that humiliation is not an isolated incident but rather a part of daily life for the "untouchables." The psychological wounds suffered by the downtrodden, who are denied not just their dignity but also their access to social mobility, education, and basic comforts, are made clear in the book. Bakha's encounters with Gandhians, Christian missionaries, British authorities, and upper-caste Hindus demonstrate how pervasive his oppression was. Bakha's every move is examined, monitored, and penalized by a strict social structure that feeds off his degrading behavior, whether he is spanked for slapping a high-caste guy or made fun of for wanting to dress well.

Anand explores the internal repercussions of untouchability in great detail, going beyond its obvious surface effects. The caste system's psychological colonization is highlighted by Bakha's internalized inferiority, perplexity, and mixed affection for the British colonists. Bakha is shown by Anand as a thinking, feeling person who longs for recognition, cleanliness, and dignity rather than just as a victim. His desire for modernity and education is a reflection of the human need to better oneself, which caste society methodically stifles. By humanizing the untouchables, Anand persuades the reader to see them as complicated human beings with agency and goals rather than as faceless objects of sympathy.

The part that religion plays in upholding caste inequality is another important social problem that Anand tackles in *Untouchable*. Anand highlights the role that religious organizations have in upholding societal hierarchies via a number of characters, such as the Hindu priest who attacks Bakha and the temple officials who bar him from entering. In the book, religion is used as a means of dominance and exclusion rather than spiritual enlightenment. Even Gandhi's reformist efforts are viewed with considerable cynicism, despite their relative respect. After listening to Gandhi's lecture, Bakha is not persuaded; instead, he is struck by the sensible recommendation to use a flush system in order to do away with the necessity for hand scavenging. This instance offers a potent critique of the limits of spiritual transformation in the absence of observable socioeconomic improvement.

Colonial modernism and its unclear effects on Indian society are also criticized in the book. Although Bakha perceives British officials to be more polite than his Indian counterparts, their condescending demeanor and inability to question the caste structure expose the futility of their "civilizing mission." Anand avoids romanticizing colonialism by portraying it as a system that, while less obviously brutal at times, maintains the status quo in the end. Indian readers are forced to face their inner inconsistencies as a result of the British presence in *Untouchable*, which acts as a mirror reflecting the shortcomings of Indian society. Anand gently implies that logic, education, and structural change must be implemented throughout Indian society in order to really end caste injustice.

Anand's use of language and storytelling method is one of his approach's most inventive features. He deftly uses Indian idioms and speech patterns in his English-language writing to convey the cadences of indigenous thinking. He is able to reach a wider audience while realistically portraying his characters' inner lives because to this language hybridity. Readers may enter Bakha's head thanks to the unrestricted indirect speech, which evokes strong feelings. In order to evoke reader empathy and dismantle the psychological barrier that caste ideology imposes between the "touchable" and the "untouchable," this narrative closeness is essential.

Although they are not the main emphasis, *Untouchable* also subtly expresses women's difficulties. Bakha's sister Sohini comes to represent the dual marginalization Dalit women experience—being suppressed by both gender and caste. The temple priest's abuse of her and the vilification that followed highlight how vulnerable lower-caste women are in patriarchal cultures. Anand's nuanced portrayal of Sohini's predicament highlights the complexity of societal oppression and foreshadows subsequent feminist criticisms.

Anand's dedication to historical truth and realism enhances his handling of societal concerns. He does not portray the downtrodden as morally superior to their oppressors or romanticize them. Rather, he presents a nuanced picture that acknowledges the diversity of human nature. People like Bakha's father, Lakha, who is both a victim and an enforcer of the caste system, show how deeply ingrained social structures perpetuate themselves via ideas that people absorb. Similar to this, Bakha is a likable and realistic protagonist rather than just a victimization symbol because of his episodes of rage, guilt, and sorrow.

One of *Untouchable's* strongest points is that it ends without providing a definitive closure. Three options are put out to Bakha: technical advancement, Christian conversion, and Gandhian reform. None is categorically recommended, but each is examined closely. Anand's understanding of the intricacy of social change is reflected in this open-endedness. Instead of offering a straightforward fix, he challenges readers to think, consider, and participate in the transformation process. The last scene, in which Bakha considers the flush system as he leaves, raises the possibility that practical, systemic advances that uphold dignity and lessen reliance might bring about true change rather than just dogma.

In the end, *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand is a timeless and provocative novel that tests readers' moral sensibilities. It is a deep ethical text that calls for reflection and action, not just a social realism book. Untouchability, religious hypocrisy, gender discrimination, and colonial culpability are among the societal concerns that Anand bravely, unapologetically, and empathetically addresses. Given the persistence of social inequity and caste prejudice in modern culture, his work is still important today. By giving the voiceless a platform via *Untouchable*, Anand elevated the issues of the underprivileged to the forefront of both literary and national awareness. The novel's legacy is rooted in its ability to challenge, agitate, and inspire change in addition to its artistic value. By doing this, Anand achieved literature's ultimate goal, which is to change society rather than just reflect it.

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