



## Plight of the untouchables as presented by Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable*

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### Abstract

*Untouchable* is a novel published in 1935. The novel is written by a prominent member of Progressive Writers Movement Mulk Raj Anand. Anand had a great influence of Mahatma Gandhi on his mind. He met Gandhi in his ashram and discussed about his plan of writing a novel about the untouchability. He completed the draft of the novel in the ashram itself. *Untouchable* tells the story of a scavenger boy Bakha. It relates a one day odyssey of his life. Bakha becomes the representative and mouthpiece of the whole section of untouchables. Their life is full of sordidness and squalor. They are not even considered as human beings. Their mere touching to another person can bring dire consequences to them. The present paper examines the problems and plight of untouchables and their possible solution as described by Mulk Raj Anand.

**Keywords:** untouchability, scavenger, mouthpiece, consequence, sordidness, squalor

### Introduction

Untouchability has been practiced in India since time immemorial. Certain sections of people have been relegated to a position that even their touch can create a big blunder in the life of other. Untouchability has been abolished by the constitution and practicing it is a crime but the evil has not been eradicated completely. Untouchables constitute a big part of Hindu society. They were not allowed to enter the public places like schools temples. They had been forced to live an inhuman life. Many social reformers like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar raised their voice against this system. Gandhi considered untouchability a big blot on Hinduism. Mulk Raj Anand who was a prominent member of Indian Progressive Writer's Movement (IPWA) was very much influenced by Gandhi and his fight against untouchability. Anand gave the final form to the draft of the novel *Untouchable* in Gandhi's ashram. Anand had a great sympathy for the underdog in his heart. He had the first-hand experience with the lives of untouchables when he was living as a boy with his father in an Army cantonment. Surjit S. Duai writes, "of all his novels, it is the most immediate product of his personal experience and the ethos of the India in which he grew up. It is the closest to these sources of his creativity both in time and space, its action confined to a place resembling the town where he lived as a boy" (Bhatnagar 29).

*Untouchable* is the first novel of Anand and it was published in 1935. Some critics put the novel in the category of subaltern literature. Commenting on the subaltern strain of the novel Syed Afroz Ashrafi writes, "My concern here is to dismantle the thesis that the advocates of the suppressed were born in the African continent whether it is apartheid or struggle for freedom for such concerns were even more prominent in Indo Anglican writings and the writer to take to such writings and expose the glory faced, stony hearted monster of the society, having created too many taboos, guided by an ideology too cruel to survive in a society is Mulk

Raj Anand. In fact the so called Dalit literature has its root in Indo Anglican fiction and the genesis of such writings could well be traced back to 1935 when Anand wrote his first novel *Untouchable*, followed by *Coolie* in 1936. Together these two novels if seen in totality fully qualify and deserve to be clubbed with subaltern group (Khan 133)."

The writers of Progressive Writers Movement defined their goal to reform the society through literature. Surjit S. Dalai writes, "As a progressive writer, Anand firmly believed that literature had a social purpose. But he also believed with an equally sure feeling about the nature of literature that this purpose was achieved better by a faithful portrayal of authentic experience and by imaginative and aesthetic integrity than by a bald enunciation of social theory thinly masked in fabricated stories" (Bhatnagar 26). The scavenger community which is often called Bhangi in various states of India is considered lowest among all the castes of untouchables. Anand also gives description of leather workers and washermen but their social status is slight high to the Bhangis. There are hierarchies even among the untouchables and the person like Anand who had observed their life keenly could portray it realistically. E.M. Forster in the preface to the novel writes, "*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" (Anand Preface vii).

The novel *Untouchable* presents the story of a one day odyssey of its protagonist Bakha who is a scavenger boy. Bakha is eighteen and lived with his family which consists of his father Lakha, younger brother Rakha and younger sister Sohini. They are living in a pathetic condition with an uncongenial environment. Describing the locality Anand writes, "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

animals left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheeps, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. 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 stink. And altogether the rampart of human and animal refuse...lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and misery...lay within it" (Anand 9). Thus through the description of the locality Anand presents the pathetic and inhuman conditions in which these people are living. The writer chooses the character of Padit Kali Nath to expose the hypocrisy of caste Hindus. On one hand these people hesitate to touch a scavenger and on the other they try to molest their women. Pandit Kali Nath tries to molest Sohini but all his advances have been rejected by her. In the market Bakha miskanelly touches a man, even after apologising the man slaps him. The crowd is ready to beat Bakha but he is saved by a Muslim Tonga driver. Bakha feels humiliated and insulted when a woman throws bread from the roof of the houses and the bread falls on the pavement. Bakha is hesitant to pick the bread but finally he picks it up but he thinks, "I shouldn't have picked that bread from the pavement, he said, and sighed...Meanwhile he began to feel hungry as if rats were running in his belly" (Anand74). When Bakha tells his father about all the incidents of the day, his father consoles him with the words, "We must realize that it is their religion which prevents them from touching us" (Anand 83). Though the cruelty of the caste Hindus is exposed in novel but the writer doesn't hesitate to give examples of benevolent people. By giving these examples he proves the famous proverb the all fingers are not the same. One such example is Havildar Charat Singh, who invites Bakha to his house and offered him tea. Charat Singh also gives him a new hockey stick. His father tells him that the hakim came to treat him when he was dying in his childhood.

The novel provides three solutions to the problems of the untouchables. The first one is the conversion to Christianity which is suggested by Hutchinson who is missionary, The second one is the change of heart of the caste towards the untouchables and consider them their own brothers. The second solution is suggested by Mahatma Gandhi in his speech. The third and the last one is the introduction if flush system and usage of Machines for the sanitation work. The poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar suggests that if the untouchables stop doing this filthy work of sanitation, caste Hindus will stop hating them. The last solution seems more appropriate.

To conclude it can be said that the novel is a satire on the untouchability and caste system of the country. The writer criticizes the mentality and hypocrisy of the upper caste Hindus. Bakha becomes the representative and mouthpiece for the whole section of untouchables. The novel with its voice of protest can be seen as a predecessor of Dalit literature of late twentieth century.

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