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THE VOICE OF THE OPPRESSED: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

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ABSTRACT

One of the first and most important Indian English novels to explore the caste system and the cruel practice of untouchability is Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 work Untouchable. Anand highlights the violence, humiliation, and social marginalisation that Dalits endured in colonial India through the figure of Bakha, a teenage sweeper. This essay explores the novel's themes of female oppression, religious hypocrisy, caste discrimination, and the pursuit of liberty in order to analyse it as a work of social protest. This essay makes the case—based on critical viewpoints—that Untouchable is still a seminal work of Indian literature because of its humanist conception of justice and equality as well as its narrative realism.

Keywords: *untouchability, marginalisation, liberty*

INTRODUCTION

Millions of Indians have historically been marginalised by the centuries-old caste system, which denies them basic human rights, education, and dignity. Indian English writing started to take social themes, especially caste injustice, seriously in the early 20th century. Known as the "Charles Dickens of India," Mulk Raj Anand was a trailblazer in this area. His first book, Untouchable (1935), is still regarded as a classic in the social realism style.

This study explores the ways in which Anand exposes the systematic exploitation of the untouchable population by depicting a single day in Bakha's life. The book also examines

Untouchable's literary style and political overtones, placing it amid larger discussions of social reform, religious hypocrisy, and modernity.

Literature Review

Many academics have recognised Anand's dedication to social justice and practicality. "His ability to bring the marginalised into the centre of the narrative" was Anand's strength, according to Meenakshi Mukherjee (The Twice-Born Fiction). According to Indian Writing in English, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar characterises Untouchable as "a cry from the heart of India's oppressed millions."

Gandhi's impact was acknowledged by Anand, who stated that he wished to "give voice to the voiceless." Critics also draw attention to his reformist vision's shortcomings, though. Gandhi's speech in the book suggests one potential solution, but the modernist view of technology is offered as a substitute, highlighting Anand's conflicted feelings about religious reform as the only way forward.

Analysis and Discussion

The Marginalized Space

Mulk Raj Anand immerses the reader in a realm of marginalisation and degradation right away in Untouchable with a powerful depiction of the outcaste colony. As the narrator notes:

> *"The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment."*

The novel's main theme—the social and physical marginalisation of untouchables in Indian society—is introduced in this start. The colony's location—far from the main town yet close enough to meet its needs—is a reflection of how the caste system exploits Dalits' labour while systematically separating them. Although the untouchables are necessary for jobs like cleaning restrooms and sweeping streets, their sheer presence is thought to be a cause of pollution. According to critic K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar,

> *"The mud walls and segregated lanes become silent witnesses to the cruelties of caste in Anand's depiction of the outcaste colony" (Indian Writing in English 337).*

The colony itself is portrayed as unhygienic, overcrowded, and lacking dignity. Anand describes how "bits of dung and refuse lay strewn about," underlining the irony that those who maintain the town's cleanliness are forced to live amid filth. This cruel paradox becomes Bakha's lived reality, encapsulated in his bitter thought:

> *"They think we are dirt because we clean their dirt!"*

In this case, the physical surroundings serve as a metaphor and a mirror for the social situation of untouchables. They are destined to live in squalid environments that represent the disdain they are subjected to.

The colony serves as both a home and a prison for Bakha. It gives him a feeling of inclusion in his own group, but it also serves to further solidify his marginalisation. His appreciation of English attire and etiquette is an attempt to break free from the confines of his surroundings, but the colony's social and physical constraints serve as a reminder of the pointlessness of such goals.

> *"The colony is not only a geographical boundary but a psychic one, enclosing Bakha within a circle of humiliation from which escape seems impossible,"*
>
> Meenakshi Mukherjee notes (The Twice-Born Fiction 112).

Space itself so becomes politicised in Untouchable. The colony actively contributes to the perpetuation of caste systems rather than only serving as the setting for Bakha's tale. It is an example of what Michel Foucault may refer to as "disciplinary space," where social exclusion is etched onto the everyday landscape. In Anand's hands, the colony's portrayal dramatises how untouchability functions not just in rituals of contamination and purity but also in town planning, neighbourhood architecture, and the actual feeling of physical borders. Therefore, the marginalised space is not coincidental; rather, it is essential to comprehending the oppressive social structure that moulds Bakha's life.

The Experience of Humiliation

The main theme of Untouchable is humiliation, which Mulk Raj Anand portrays with unrelenting ferocity by demonstrating how Bakha is denied dignity in the most basic human exchanges. Bakha's body is constantly stigmatised as impure due to his status as an untouchable, and even unintentional contact with someone from a higher caste might spark public outcry. The most notable instance is when Bakha bumps into a Hindu caste member in the bazaar, who yells right away:

> *"Polluted! Polluted! He has touched me, this untouchable!"*

This outcry's savagery extends beyond its words. Bakha is paraded as a source of pollution, beaten, and cursed. In this case, shame is a public spectacle that upholds social hierarchy in addition to being a personal hurt. Bakha's inner torment, guilt, and desperate need for dignity are all depicted with great care by Anand. By reminding untouchables of their "place," the upper castes demonstrate their superiority, turning the humiliation experience into a daily display of power.

Bakha does labour that is vital to society's survival, which makes this humiliation all the more absurd. As he muses bitterly:

> *"They think we are dirt because we clean their dirt!"*

This paradox, which states that the very activity required to maintain public hygiene causes social contamination for the workers, perfectly captures the brutality of caste tyranny. Under Anand's control, humiliation takes on a structural nature, involving a system intended to maintain inequity as well as personal bias.

Intimate and private areas of life are likewise affected by humiliation. When Bakha's sister Sohini goes to get water, she is verbally abused and isn't allowed to draw it herself. Even worse, she is accused of polluting when a priest tries to harass her. The episode demonstrates the intersection of gender discrimination and caste oppression: untouchable women are doubly vulnerable and are not protected even within the moral framework.

> *"Sohini's humiliation reveals how the body of the untouchable woman becomes the site where caste and patriarchy converge,"*
>
> Meenakshi Mukherjee (The Twice-Born Fiction 118).

Such humiliations have the combined effect of psychological isolation in addition to physical degradation. Despite his desire for respect and recognition, Bakha's invisibility as a human being is reinforced by every interaction he has with caste Hindus. He looks up to cricket and English clothing in the hopes that these modernity markers will help him break free from stigma, but shame accompanies him everywhere and erases the uniqueness he seeks to express. In this instance, Anand's realism

> *"does not merely record the indignities of untouchability but forces the reader to inhabit the victim's consciousness and feel the sting of each insult,"*
>
> K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes (Indian Writing in English 340).

In this sense, humiliation is shown in Untouchable as a widespread social condition rather than as isolated instances. According to the novel, being untouchable entails living in constant shame and having one's humanity rejected in both public and private settings. Therefore, humiliation is not an incident; rather, it is a natural part of the caste system, which feeds off the devaluation of some in order to maintain the superiority of others.

Religion and Hypocrisy

One of the harshest criticisms of religion in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable is that it is used as a tool of tyranny rather than as a source of moral direction. Priests and religious

organisations that uphold caste systems under the pretence of piety and purity are exposed by Anand for their deceit. In the book, religion serves as a structure that upholds the weak rather than as a haven for them.

Bakha's sister Sohini's attempt to clean the temple courtyard is the most unsettling illustration of this duplicity. The priest attempts to molest her out of lust rather than out of thanks or compassion. He shifts the responsibility as soon as he is caught, yelling that Sohini has contaminated him:

> "Get away, you low-caste! You have defiled me by your touch!"

Anand's criticism revolves around this scene. It demonstrates how the oppressed are silenced and degraded by the use of religious power. The victim is accused of pollution as a result of the priest's effort at sexual exploitation, highlighting the connection between gender discrimination and caste.

> *"In the hands of the priest, religion ceases to be a spiritual force; it becomes a weapon that legitimises exploitation,"*
>
> Meenakshi Mukherjee notes (The Twice-Born Fiction 119).

When compared to the principles that religion purports to support, the hypocrisy is even more obvious. Hindu texts emphasise compassion, purity, and the sacredness of all life, yet people who profess to uphold these ideals consistently transgress them. By contrasting the temple, a hallowed location intended for spiritual interaction, with the corruption of its priest, Anand draws attention to this absurdity. Instead of providing salvation, the temple turns into yet another place of humiliation.

Anand also criticises religious discourse's wider support for untouchability. Gandhi gives hope by referring to untouchables as "Harijans," or "children of God," after denouncing them as a "sin" in the book. But Anand's interpretation of Gandhi's remarks clearly has flaws. Gandhi advocates for reform in Hinduism, yet the term "Harijan" itself is paternalistic, treating untouchables as recipients of the kindness of the upper caste rather than as free agents.

> *"Gandhi's rhetoric, though compassionate, still carries within it the hierarchy it seeks to dismantle,"*
>
> Anupama Chowdhury (Journal of Indian Literature Studies 45).

The topic is further complicated by the novel's inclusion of a Christian missionary. He promises equality in Christ and promotes conversion as a way out of the oppressive Hindu caste system. Bakha, however, is not convinced since he believes that switching to a different

religion would just result in a different hierarchy. As a result, Anand rejects religion as a real answer, whether it be Christian or Hindu. Rather, he highlights their shortcomings and hypocrisies.

Anand emphasises through these portrayals how religion may serve as a repressive ideology rather than a means of uplifting people. The hypocrisy is seen in the discrepancy between declared principles and actual life: missionaries preach freedom but run the risk of creating new kinds of bondage, reformers preach equality but uphold hierarchy, and monks teach purity but act as corrupt.

> *"Anand's genius lies in stripping religion of its sanctimonious mask and showing its complicity in social injustice,"*
>
> K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes (Indian Writing in English 342).

Therefore, religion in Untouchable turns into a system that justifies inequity rather than a source of moral truth. Anand encourages readers to understand that the origins of untouchability are not just social but also intricately linked to institutionalised religion by exposing its hypocrisies, which makes reform much more pressing and challenging.

Possibilities of Liberation

Untouchable does not conclude in hopelessness, despite the fact that a large portion of the book focusses on Bakha's experiences of degrading and humiliating treatment. Rather, Mulk Raj Anand presents three distinct ideas of liberation—Gandhian reform, Christian missionary fervour, and the rationalist promise of contemporary technology—each of which offers a possible means of severing the bonds of caste tyranny. Although none of them is offered as a perfect answer, Anand's dedication to investigating other options for social transformation is evident in their juxtaposition.

Gandhi's speech, which Bakha overhears towards the book's conclusion, provides the first vision. Gandhi claims that no Hindu text can excuse such violence and calls untouchability a "sin." He asserts the untouchables' status within the Hindu community by renaming them "Harijans," or "children of God." Bakha, who has spent his day being degraded as filthy and less than human, is moved by Gandhi's words. Gandhi declares: "The biggest stain on Hinduism is untouchability." To think of any human being as untouchable is a sin. Bakha's life is given hope at this point since it implies that Hinduism could undergo reform and give the downtrodden their dignity back. But there are issues with the solution. Gandhi reframes untouchables' identity in a paternalistic manner by referring to them as "Harijans," which offers sympathy but does not necessarily imply equality.

> *"The Harijan label still positions Dalits as dependents, requiring the benevolence of higher castes, rather than autonomous subjects,"*
>
> Anupama Chowdhury contends (Journal of Indian Literature Studies 47).

Although Anand shows Gandhi respect, he also gently conveys these boundaries by preventing Bakha from accepting the Mahatma's teachings without question. The Christian missionary, who attempts to convince Bakha to completely reject Hinduism, offers the second choice. He contends that Christianity provides a casteless religion in which everyone is treated equally by God. This promise of equality is alluring to a boy as degraded as Bakha. Anand, however, captures Bakha's hesitancy as he understands that conversion might merely substitute one type of dependency for another. His hesitation is a reflection of Anand's doubts about the ability of religion, whether Christian or Hindu, to provide a comprehensive remedy for social injustice.

> *"Anand positions Christianity not as liberation but as another hierarchy cloaked in universalism,"*
>
> Meenakshi Mukherjee (The Twice-Born Fiction 121).

Iqbal Nath Sarshar, a contemporary rationalist, presents the third vision of emancipation, arguing that advancements in technology may make untouchability obsolete. "The machine has no caste," he says, referring to the flush system, which would do away with the necessity for hand scavenging. Men won't have to handle human waste if we implement the flush system.

This perspective shifts the problem from religious morality to social modernization, proposing that material changes in infrastructure could dissolve the physical basis of untouchability. Unlike Gandhi's spiritual reform or the missionary's religious alternative, Sarshar's vision is secular and practical, grounded in the belief that social transformation follows technological advancement. Critics such as M.K. Naik see this as Anand's own leaning, noting that "the faith in the flush system reflects Anand's modernist conviction that progress lies not in ritual reform but in social and scientific change" (*A History of Indian English Literature* 238).

By presenting these three voices — the saint, the missionary, and the rationalist — Anand dramatizes the complexity of liberation for Bakha and his community. The novel deliberately refrains from endorsing a single path, instead leaving Bakha with choices to ponder. This open-endedness reflects both the urgency and the difficulty of dismantling centuries of caste oppression. It also underscores Anand's commitment to realism: liberation is possible, but it is not simple, nor can it be achieved overnight.

Even though Bakha's experiences of humiliating and degrading treatment take up a significant amount of Untouchable, the book does not end in despair. Instead, Mulk Raj Anand offers three different conceptions of liberation: the rationalist promise of modern technology, Christian missionary zeal, and Gandhian reform. Each of these concepts suggests a potential way to break free from the constraints of caste rule. Their juxtaposition demonstrates Anand's commitment to exploring alternative choices for social development, even though none of them is presented as the ideal solution.

The first vision comes from Gandhi's speech, which Bakha overhears near the end of the book. Gandhi says that no Hindu literature can justify such brutality and refers to untouchability as a "sin." By dubbing the untouchables "Harijans," or "children of God," he stresses their position within the Hindu community. Gandhi's remarks touch Bakha, who has spent his day being disparaged as unclean and less than human. According to Gandhi, "Untouchability is the biggest stain on Hinduism." It is sinful to consider any human being to be untouchable.

At this moment, Bakha's existence is offered hope since it suggests that Hinduism could change and restore dignity to the oppressed. However, the solution has problems. Gandhi uses the term "Harijans," which expresses sympathy but does not always imply equality, to recast the identity of untouchables in a paternalistic way. "The Harijan label still positions Dalits as dependents, requiring the benevolence of higher castes, rather than autonomous subjects," argues Anupama Chowdhury (Journal of Indian Literature Studies 47). Anand respects Gandhi, but he also subtly communicates these limits by keeping Bakha from blindly following the Mahatma's ideas.

The second option is presented by the Christian missionary, who tries to persuade Bakha to renounce Hinduism entirely. He argues that God treats everyone equally in Christianity, which offers a casteless religion. To a youngster as dehumanised as Bakha, this promise of equality is seductive. But Bakha's reluctance is captured by Anand, who recognises that conversion might only replace one kind of dependency with another. His hesitancy reflects Anand's scepticism over religion's capacity to offer a complete solution to societal injustice, whether it be Hindu or Christian. "Anand positions Christianity not as liberation but as another hierarchy cloaked in universalism," critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee have said (The Twice-Born Fiction 121).

The third vision of emancipation is put forth by modern rationalist Iqbal Nath Sarshar, who contends that technological developments could render untouchability obsolete. He claims that "the machine has no caste," alluding to the flush mechanism that would eliminate the need for hand scavenging. If we use the flush method, males won't have to handle human excrement.

Narrative Technique and Realism

Raj Mulk In addition to being a potent social statement, Anand's Untouchable is a seminal work in narrative technique, where style and substance are inextricably linked. Anand uses a very sympathetic kind of social realism that lets the reader experience Bakha and his neighbourhood firsthand. Anand emphasises the enduring basis of caste-based discrimination by condensing the action into a single day in Bakha's life. The one-day format implies that Bakha's suffering over the course of twenty-four hours is not unique, but rather reflects the daily struggles that untouchables face.

The novel's realistic depictions of the temple courtyard, the packed bazaar, and the outcaste community are striking. Anand describes Bakha's responsibilities in cleaning latrines and shows "bits of dung and refuse strewn about" close to the colony in nearly journalistic detail. Rather of being decorative, these descriptions serve to highlight Bakha's material circumstances.

> *"Anand's realism is not a decorative technique but a moral weapon, forcing the reader to confront the indignities which polite society prefers to ignore,"*
>
> K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (Indian Writing in English 338).

Bakha's interiority is also a major component of Anand's storytelling style. Anand humanises Bakha, a character who would otherwise be viewed as less than human by documenting her thoughts, fears, and desires. Bakha, for example, aspires to look like Englishmen because he admires their attire:

> *"Bakha looked at himself in the glass, pleased with the effect of his smart English clothes. He felt almost a sahib."*

This self-awareness moment demonstrates Bakha's desire for individuality and dignity, which his caste status has denied him. Ironically, though, society still views him as little more than a sweeper, regardless of how Westernised he seems. In addition to portraying tyranny from the outside, Anand is realistic in his portrayal of Bakha's own psychological problems. Another important component of Anand's realism is language. The novel uses structures, idioms, and rhythms that mimic the cadence of Indian vernacular speech despite being written in English. Even though Anand recognised that translating Punjabi vernacular into English was challenging, he felt compelled to be true to his characters' mentalities. As a result, the novel is distinctively Indian in English due to linguistic hybridity. "Anand's English is purposefully Indianized, not to exoticize but to authenticate the voices of the marginalised," as Meenakshi Mukherjee notes (The Twice-Born Fiction 115).

Additionally, the story combines intensely symbolic passages with documentary realism. The violence of exclusion is dramatised by the frequent cries of "Polluted! Polluted!" which take on a ritualistic, almost theatrical tone. In a similar vein, Gandhi's appearance towards the conclusion raises the discussion of national reform above the particular tale of Bakha. As is characteristic of his storytelling style, Anand skilfully transitions from the specific to the general in this way.

Lastly, the novel's humanity and realism are inextricably linked. Anand offers Bakha ambitions, feelings, and dignity rather than just depicting him as a victim. He is incredibly human because of his affection for his sister, his interest with cricket, and his embarrassment after being humiliated. "I write of the underdogs, because I am one of them," Anand once said. The story is shaped by this identification with the oppressed, which gives it realism and empathy.

> *"Anand's realism is a realism with a heart; it is not cold reportage but impassioned advocacy,"*
>
> M.K. Naik (A History of Indian English Literature 236).

Thus, the combination of stark realism, psychological nuance, and moral urgency constitutes Untouchable's narrative method. Anand shows that Bakha's humiliations are not isolated occurrences but rather signs of a system that is deeply ingrained by condensing a universe of agony into a single day. His story is both poetic and documentary, specific and universal, which makes Untouchable a timeless piece of art as well as a protest novel.

Conclusion

Untouchable by Mulk Raj Anand is still regarded as a classic of Indian English literature. Anand exposes readers to the harsh realities of caste and the pressing need for social reform by portraying Bakha's situation with great empathy and realism. The book forces readers to consider institutional oppression, religious hypocrisy, and the promise of modernity without providing simple answers. Anand's work is remarkably pertinent since caste-based discrimination still exists in modern India, even after laws have outlawed untouchability. One of the first and most persistent initiatives in Indian English literature to put the marginalised voices of Dalits at the forefront of narrative and moral concern is Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable. By condensing the events into a single day in Bakha's life, Anand shows that untouchability is a system that governs the oppressed people's every waking moment rather than an isolated act of cruelty. Marginalisation is already etched into physical space in the novel's opening description of the outcaste colony, where the "mud-walled houses" stand for social and geographic isolation. Bakha, who is imprisoned in the colony he considers home, is subject to psychological restrictions that match this spatial division. Bakha's everyday humiliations, such as being denied water, being thrashed for unintentional

contact, and witnessing his sister being wrongfully convicted of pollution, highlight how caste serves as a degrading mechanism. In Bakha's sour reflection, Anand encapsulates this injustice:

> *"They think we are dirt because we clean their dirt." According to Iyengar, this paradox that necessary labour results in dehumanization—is a prime example of "the grotesque irony of caste civilisation"* (Indian Writing in English 340).

Religion, which ought to offer moral guidance, is portrayed as supporting exploitation. When a priest attempts to harass Sohini and then labels her as polluting, the temple—which is intended to be a place of purity—becomes the scene of his duplicity. Gandhi's subsequent appearance presents a reformist worldview, denouncing untouchability as a "sin" and calling untouchables "Harijans." However, Anand does not offer Gandhi's arguments without question. The name "Harijan" contains paternalism, which exposes the boundaries of reformist rhetoric. The rationalist's support for the flush system and the missionary's assurance of Christian equality broaden the scope of potential, but both approaches have drawbacks. In order to convey the idea that freedom is complicated and cannot be accomplished by a single intellectual solution, Anand purposefully leaves Bakha indecisive. Untouchable is more than just a social essay because of Anand's storytelling style. His realism "is not passive documentation but an act of moral engagement," as Mukherjee observes (The Twice-Born Fiction 115). Anand humanises Bakha by fusing his inner awareness with outward details, revealing his love of cricket, his appreciation of English attire, and his desire for respect. Bakha's reality is further authenticated by the novel's linguistic hybridity, which combines English with Indian idioms to produce a distinctively Indian voice in English. Bakha is presented as a fully realised person who embodies both sorrow and aspiration, rather than being reduced to a victimisation symbol because to Anand's humanism.

In Untouchable is a book that both expresses outrage and optimism. It forces readers to face the cruelty of caste while simultaneously imagining a society where equality and decency might be achievable. The story is still vitally relevant almost a century after it was first published because caste inequality still exists in contemporary India in many forms. Anand has succeeded in transforming the actual experience of humiliation into a global call for justice. "I write of the underdogs, because I am one of them," he said. The novel's authenticity and moral force are derived from its identification with the downtrodden, which makes it a timeless record of human tenacity in the face of systematic persecution as well as a significant work of Indian English literature.

In the end, Untouchable is more than just Bakha's tale; it is a voice for innumerable oppressed people who have been silenced by societal institutions. "I write of the underdogs, because I

am one of them," Anand wrote. The novel's lasting relevance in literature and social discourse is guaranteed by this humanist perspective.

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