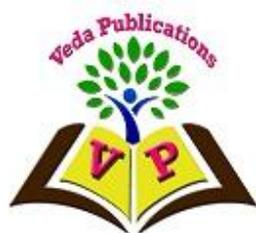


**OPPRESSING THE 'OTHER' IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE***

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Mulk Raj Anand's widely acclaimed fiction *Untouchable* is a viable testimony of the prevalence and problem caused by the caste system. Anand realistically portrays, through his protagonist Bakha, the untouchable, the various stigmas that are associated with manual scavenging. This paper attempts to analyse the novel *Untouchable* as a modern novel that deals with the experience of oppression of the 'other' as a result of the practice of untouchability.

Keywords: *Caste system, Oppression, Other, Untouchable*

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The caste system which is prevalent in the Indian society is perhaps one of the world's oldest forms of social stratification and division of people into well-layered groups is. The system is a rigid hierarchical group-division of Hindu believers based on their *karma* (work) and *dharma* (the Hindi for religion or also duty) is believed to be more than 3,000 years old. Many believe that the division of groups originated from Brahma, the God of Creation in Hinduism. The system divides Hindu believers into four main categories - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. Each caste is again divided into numerous sub-groups, "each with a definite unalterable social status deriving its sanction from religion" (Pruthi 5-6). Each caste was bound with a specific work or profession. Brahmins constitute the priestly class. They rank highest in the social hierarchy whose main job is to perform sacred rituals and practices. The Brahmins are considered to be the inheritors of divine knowledge as they have access to the sacred texts like the Vedas. The Kshatriyas

primarily constitute people in the ruling or administrative work like kings, soldiers, and warriors whose primary profession is to protect the motherland and fellow human beings by fighting against mortal enemies. Below these two upper castes are the Vaishyas who are usually engaged in business and trade. Sudras, who were given the name Harijan by Mahatma Gandhi, constitute the lowest strata of this caste based hierarchy their task is to serve those people who belong to the three upper castes. The Shudras comprise of sweepers, scavengers, peasants, masons, artisans, etc. whose involvement in displeasing menial laborious work prods other members of the society to look down upon them as the worthless 'other'.

The shudras, untouchables or harijans were denied many basic fundamental rights. Their freedom was restricted in many ways. For instance, they could not use the public well to draw water along with the other people of the higher caste. They were denied permission to own any plot of land that they could



call their own and had to merely work as peasants on the farmland of other wealthy farmers. The right to education was denied to them as schools and colleges were a restricted area for them as they were not allowed to intermingle with the children of those who belong to the upper castes. In order to avoid contact of any kind with the other castes, they had to announce their arrival from a distance by beating on any object that produces a loud sound. Mulk Raj Anand's seminal work *Untouchable* which was published in is a social-political treatise as it deeply delves into the issues that affect the lives of an untouchable.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), considered to be one of the triumvirs of Indian writing along with R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, is distinguished for his representation of the caste-oppressed lives in the traditional Indian society. In other fictional works namely *Coolie* (1936) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) Anand deals with the theme of the oppression that exists in social and political structures. As in *Untouchable*, the novel *Coolie* revolves around a young boy, Munoo, and the depiction of his sorry plight due to destitution and overt exploitation which are aided by the rigid political and social structures. In *The Sword and the Sickle*, the last of the trilogy which included *The Village* and *Across the Black Waters*, and whose title was suggested to Anand by George Orwell, specifically deals with the rise of communism as a protestation against the evil oppression of the existing political structures.

In *Untouchable*, Bakha the protagonist is an eighteen year old untouchable, who resides in a fictional Indian town of Bulashah. The novel, which is set in the colonial period, is a one-day chronicle of the life of Bakha, a young Indian sweeper, son of the head of all of Bulashah's sweepers, Lakha. Over the course of Bakha's day various major and minor tragedies occur, causing him to drastically change and turn towards self-examination and introspection. The novel begins with Bakha who is awoken by his berated yelling father who urges him to get out of bed and begin the work of cleaning the latrines of high-caste townspeople. Bahka goes into town to sweep the streets and at one point in the novel accidentally brushes his body against a high-caste man, who becomes furious that he has been touched by an

untouchable. The berated man aggressively hits Bahka until a Muslim vendor, who has no regard for the Hindu caste system, saves the boy. Bahka walks to the temple, where he finds the priest accusing his sister Sohini of "polluting" him. His distraught sister Sohini, tells Bahka the priest sexually assaulted her but the helpless Bahka quietly sends her home as he realized the futility of raising objections and protest. In the preface to the book, E.M. Forster writes

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 for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is disquieting as well as a disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming (5-6).

As Bakha had already served the British soldiers, he was enthralled by the western lifestyle and habits "and caught by the glamour of the 'white man's' life" (9). The attitude of the white skinned men towards him was starkly different from the way the Indian upper castes behaved towards him and those of his kind. This perhaps brought about some sort of fascination and attachment. Bakha's fascination grew to such an extent that he began imitating the western soldiers' ways of dressing notwithstanding the lack of warmth in the cold weather. Bakha willingly braves the cold in an attempt to be someone else; an 'other' within the 'othered' group:

The nights had been cold, as they always are in the town of Bulashah, as cold as the days are hot. And though, both during winter and summer, he slept with his day clothes on, the sharp, bitter wind that blew from the brook at dawn



had penetrated to his skin, past the inadequate blanket, through the regulation overcoat, breeches, puttees and ammunition boots of the military uniform that clothed him. He shivered as he turned on his side. But he didn't mind the cold very much, suffering it willingly because he could sacrifice a good many comforts for the sake of what he called 'fashun' by which he understood the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots, etc., as worn by the British and Indian soldiers in India (10).

Bakha perhaps tries to bridge the difference between himself and the British through this imitation but the dissimilarity and indifference with which he was treated by his own countrymen troubled him more. The shudras are treated like dirt because they clean the dirt of others. For the privileged high caste Hindus, Bakha's community represent the 'other'; the poor, doing menial jobs, bound to serve them and moreover, different from the image of the prototype 'self' as perceived by the higher castes.

Ever since he had worked in the British barracks Bakha had been ashamed of the Indian way of performing ablutions, all hat gargling and spitting, because he knew the Tommies (Englishmen) disliked it...He felt amused as an Englishman might be amused to see a Hindu loosen his dhoti to pour some water first over his navel and then down his back in a flurry of ecstatic hymn-singing. And he watched with contemptuous displeasure the indecent behavior of a Mohammedan walking about with his hands buried deep in his trousers, purifying himself in the ritual manner, preparatory to his visit to the mosque. (17)

The ablutions are an attempt to cleanse the dirt that they may have caught as a result of intercepting a shudra or untouchable. This practice is perhaps a form of acceptance and internalisation that an untouchable is an outcast sub-human 'other'. This

acceptance is narrated by Anand as such: "Charat Singh's generous promise had called forth the trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers, the weakness of the downtrodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indigent, suddenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog . . . the smile of a slave overjoyed at the condescension of his master"(9).

The untouchable community was deprived of many other privileges as cited in the novel. They were prohibited from mingling with upper caste children. Any recreation was to be restricted within their 'type' of people. However, Anand exposes the hypocrisy of the privilege caste where a Hindu priest secretly molests an untouchable girl. For an outcaste, it was a crime to smoke before people of other castes. Though they were used for cleaning the temple premises, entry inside the temple was denied for them. Bakha was accused of polluting the temple by going inside the temple. Bakha had a desire to retaliate but was thwarted by his father who forced him to internalise the inferiority of their caste and to treat the high caste people as their masters. Among the low castes themselves, there were various sub-categories and layers of castes. Sweepers were the lowest, while washer men and leatherworkers came above them in hierarchy. The feeling of other and the process of othering exist between all castes. The more the degree of separation, the more it is evident. After being humiliated in several instances, Bakha tries to distance himself from the upper castes, and even his friends who belonged to the next higher castes. When Ram Charan, the washerman's son offers him sugarplums, Bakha tells him to throw it at him and refuses to touch him. Caste thus plays a crucial role in the othering of the self.

In the novel, Mulk Raj Anand offers some solutions to put an end to the practice of untouchability and the suffering that it inflicts upon the victimized. Christianity is a religion that is followed predominantly in the western countries. The presence of foreign natives in the novel like Colonel Hutchinson is a testimony to this:

'I am a padre and my God is *Yessuh Messih*,' emphasized the Colonel. 'If you are in trouble, come to Jesus in the *girja ghar*.' ... Bakha was struck with



the coincidence. How did the padre know he was in trouble? ... 'Come, I shall tell you,' said Colonel Hutchinson. 'Come to the church.' And dragging the boy with his arm, babbling, babbling, all vague, in a cloud, and enthusiastic as a mystic, he led him away on the wings of a song:

'Life is found in Jesus,
Only there 'tis offered thee;
Offered without price or money
'Tis the gift of God sent free' (102).

The promise of a new lease of life unfettered from the shackles of the caste system through conversion to a different religion is perhaps one of the solutions that the Colonel offers the protagonist. Bakha was intrigued as he was once told by his father that "all men are kind and it is their religion which prevents them" (74) from intermingling with the lower castes. Bakha's interest was aroused as he was told by Hutchinson that Jesus, the son of God does not discriminate on the basis of caste and that all men are equal before him. However, Bakha's conviction in the Colonel's claims was short-lived as the latter could not give him precise answers to his questions about the Christian God, Jesus:

Bakha was baffled and bored. He did not understand anything of these songs. He had followed the sahib because the sahib wore trousers. Trousers had been the dream of his life. The kindly interest which the trousered man had shown him when he was downcast had made Bakha conjure up pictures of himself wearing the sahib's clothes, talking the sahib's language and becoming like the guard whom he had seen on the railway station near his village (104).

Thus Bakha's primal interest was economic and societal alleviation from his current lot through symbols of wealth and power to possess material affluence. Good clothes and other expensive earthly possessions are symbols of high social standing, respect, status and power.

In the colonial period, the independence movement was steered and spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation. Gandhi's non-violent philosophy and belief in the equal treatment of all human beings has had an impact on the Indian mindset. Gandhi was a champion of the rights of the untouchables and fought for their alleviation. He popularized the term 'Harijan', which literally means children of god, to refer to the untouchables. However, 'Dalit' is the word which is now largely used in the country as Harijan was contested to be derogatory. In the novel, a poignant episode is narrated wherein Gandhi gives his views about untouchables:

'I regard untouchability,' the Mahatma was saying, 'as the greatest blot on Hinduism. This view of mine dates back to the time when I was a child.' That was getting interesting. Bakha picked up his ears. ... 'While on my way to school, I used to touch the Untouchables; and, as I never would conceal the fact from my parents, my mother would tell me that the shortest cut to purification after the unholy touch, was to cancel it by touching a Mussulman passing by. Therefore, simply out of reverence and regard for my mother, I often did so, but never did it believing to be a religious obligation' (119,120).

Salvation, therefore, lied in the hands of the Mahatma who could perhaps unshackle the likes of Bakha and bring an end to the patronizing practice of untouchability.

Mulk Raj Anand also offers a more pragmatic and modern solution to deal with the social evil through the intervention of new-age technology in order to reconcile the centuries-old problem of discrimination faced by those belonging to the lower castes:

'Well, we must destroy caste, we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations. We must recognize an equality of



rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone. ... When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine, will be to introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone having to handle it – the flush system. Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society' (126-127).

A pragmatic approach by adopting the new flush system is what Anand advocates but the stigmatization of people based on uncontrolled events like pre-determination of caste on the basis of one's birth is a problem that can be curtailed only if there is an attitudinal change in order to establish an almost utopian 'casteless and classless society'. The human problem requires an empathetic understanding from the oppressors in order to end the oppression and discrimination of the helpless and powerless 'others'.

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