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Human Dignity and Resistance: A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract:

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935) is still one of the most important works of fiction that deal with caste injustice in Indian English literature. The novel takes place over the course of one day in the life of Bakha, an 18-year-old sweeper boy in colonial India. It deals with the degrading effects of untouchability while looking at how people can regain their dignity through self-awareness and social transformation. This study contends that Anand's work employs a realist aesthetic rooted in empathy, however moderated by political critique, utilizing narrative immediacy, interior monologue, and symbolic encounters to elucidate the lived experience of caste discrimination for both Indian and international audience. The present analysis is rooted in writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Gandhian ideology, and postcolonial literary theory. It explores how untouchables frame dignity not as a moral concession from the upper castes, but as an intrinsic human right that must be defended via resisting caste systems. The conclusion of the novel, frequently interpreted as an ambivalent call for reform, reflects the conflict between liberal humanism and dramatic social change. This study interprets Untouchable as a locus for the re-conceptualization of human dignity through narrative form, positioning Anand's work within the extensive context of anti-caste discourse and the politics of representation in colonial India.

Keywords: Untouchability, caste, human dignity, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Gandhi, social realism, postcolonial literature, social reform, resistance

Introduction:

Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* portrays the living conditions of untouchables in isolated from the caste Hidus localities. Bakha, the protagonist of the novel is at the bottom of the caste system. He has to clean latrines, sweep streets, and keep a ritual distance from 'touchable' Hindus. The story of the novel takes place over the length of one day, yet that day is a condensed version of decades of persecution. People typically laud Untouchable for being kind and realistic about society, but it is also a political statement. Anand's choice to concentrate on the subjective experience of an untouchable youth, as opposed to the viewpoints of reformist elites, signifies a transition from abstract social discourse to the tangible, embodied realities of caste. This is a bold deed in colonial India in the 1930s, when most English language novels didn't talk about caste at all or made Dalit characters seem unimportant. The novel prompts us to contemplate two interrelated inquiries: What does it signify to exist with dignity when societal frameworks consistently obstruct it? And how may narrative structure serve as a means of resistance to such denial? This study posits that *Untouchable* addresses these inquiries by integrating realism narration with instances of symbolic rupture, so dramatizing the conflict between gradual transformation and the systemic eradication of caste.

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Human Dignity, Caste, and Storytelling

In the framework of caste, human dignity cannot be diminished to mere courtesy or tolerance from the privileged. According to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste*, dignity comes from structural equality. No society that keeps caste hierarchy can give it without first breaking down the system itself. Anand's work comes out before Ambedkar's comprehensive plan, but the way Anand personally interacted with progressive thinkers, like Gandhi, affects the political vision of the narrative. Gandhi's battles against untouchability, especially his work with the Harijan Sevak Sangh in the 1930s, provide the ideological background. Nonetheless, Gandhi's focus on spiritual elevation over political equality is scrutinized in the novel's concluding scenes, where his address to Bakha provides moral solace yet postpone systemic transformation. It is so because Dr. B. R. Ambedkar explain it categorically that the Hindus are privileged:

> The Hindu has a Code of life, which is part of his religion. This Code of life gives him many privileges and heaps upon the Untouchable many indignities which are incompatible with the dignity and sanctity of human life. The untouchables all over India are fighting against the indignities and injustices which the Hindus in the name of their religion have heaped upon them. A perpetual war is going on everyday in every village between the Hindus and the Untouchables. It does not see the light of the day. The Hindu Press is not prepared to give it publicity lest it should injure the cause of their freedom in the eyes of the world. The existence of a grim struggle between the Touchables and the Untouchables is however a fact. Under the village system the Untouchables has found himself greatly handicapped in his struggle for free and honourable life. It is a contest between the Hindus who are economically and socially strong and the Untouchables who are economically poor and numerically small. That the Hindus most often succeed in suppressing the Untouchables is due to many causes. The Hindus have the Police and the Magistracy on their side. (States and Minorities, 426)

Postcolonial theory, especially the work of Ranajit Guha and Gyan Prakash, shows us that colonial modernity makes the idea of dignity more complicated. The colonial state made caste legal and administrative while purporting to promote equality. *Untouchable* resolves this conflict by immersing the reader in Bakha's consciousness, illustrating how both indigenous hierarchies and colonial frameworks sustain his degradation. This framework enables us to perceive Anand's realism not solely as documentary but as a political decision by depicting caste via the embodied details of a single day, he reasserts narrative authority for the most oppressed. Anand's realism pulls you in. The narrative starts with Bakha waking up to the duties of his job, which pulls the reader into the sensory world of the sweeper colony – the smells, textures, and rhythms of the place. These subtleties are not just for show; they are proof of politics:

> 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, but outside their boundaries and separate, from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters, and other outcastes from Hindu society. (1)

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Anand's descriptions of Bakha's clothes, including second-hand army pants and a ripped coat, show how the colonial economy works, where even old imperial cast-offs become valuable in the poorest areas. Bakha's delight in these garments shows that he wants to be treated with respect, but the fact that they are second hand shows how the lack of resources affects his life: "Bakha was a child of modern India. The clear-cut styles of European dress had impressed his naïve mind. This stark simplicity had furrowed his old Indian consciousness and cut deep new lines where all the considerations which made India evolve a skirty costumes as best fitted for the human body, lay dormant." (2-3) Wondering at the life style of the Tommies, "he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life." (3) This focus on materiality is in line with Anand's notion that literature is a way to record social events. But realism also serves as a form of resistance by showcasing the intricacies of a sweeper's daily life, Anand challenges the casteist invisibility that characterizes Dalit living.

Anand's use of translated idioms, hybridized syntax, and internal monologue in *Untouchable*, conveys the rhythms of Bakha's cognition in ways that challenge the linguistic dominance of the colonizer's language. The work alternates between third-person narration and Bakha's inner thoughts in a stream of consciousness, letting readers feel the embarrassment, pride, rage, and longing that make up his day. This interiority is essential to the respect Anand gives Bakha – he is not just a thing to be changed, but a person with wants, opinions, and inconsistencies. For example, after a caste Hindu smacked Bakha for "polluting" him, he felt both humiliated and angry, showing that he knew it was wrong but couldn't figure out how to fight back. Anand writes such dumb situation of Bakha:

> 'You swine, you dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach!'…Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!'
> Bakha's mouth was open. But he could not utter a single word. He was about to apologise…
> 'Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig!' he shouted, (38-39)

Language is not just a means of communication; it is also a place of battle. The contrast between the narrator's refined English and Bakha's informal inner language reflects the broader gap between reformist rhetoric and the actual experiences of Dalits. Bakha finds himself in a conundrum that fears him much. He begs them for their forgiveness but no one listens to his entreaties. The crowd round him pressed "staring, pulling grimaces, jeering and jeering, was without a shadow of pity for his remorse. It stood unmoved, without heeding his apologies, and taking a sort of sadistic delight in watching him cower under the abuses and curses of its spokesman." (40)

The Politics of Space and Public Humiliation

The spatial separation of caste is one of the most important topics of Untouchable. The sweeper colony is not part of the main town, and Bakha has to continuously proclaim his presence when he moves through public space by saying, "*Posh, posh*, sweeper coming!," (44) This forced self announcement is a performance of inferiority, taking away dignity even as you move through space. Anand's story shows how this kind of politics works through the body, like Bakha's stance, stare, and tentative steps in the market. The harshness of spatial hierarchy becomes clear when he accidently bumps with a high caste

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man, and is humiliated in front of everyone. The smack he receives is not just an insult; it is a traditional way of reaffirming caste boundaries and cast hegemony. In such helpless condition, Bakha questions himself "Why was all this?"…But why couldn't I say something? Couln't I have joined the hands to him and the gone away? The slap on my face!... Not one of spoke for me. The cruel crowd. All of them abused, abused, abused…Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I came here. I tires of working on latrines every day." (42-43)

Anand's portrayal of these instances foreshadows Ambedkar's subsequent assertion that social and spatial isolation are fundamental to the preservation of caste supremacy, and that dignity necessitates the eradication of untouchability and the entitlement to occupy public space free from fear.

The Priest, the Colonial Officer, and Gandhi

Bakha's day is made up of a succession of events that function as narrative and thematic nodes. The temple incident, in which Bakha is accused of desecrating the sanctum, shows how caste and religion can come together to make people feel like they do not belong. Later, when he talks to the British colonial officer, who is friendly to him, we get a glimpse of how social connections could be different. However, this is made more problematic by the officer's function in an imperial system that thrives on Indian divisions. Anand does not make the colonizer seem romantic; instead, the story shows the contradiction of finding dignity in a relationship based on wider oppression. The last meeting, with Gandhi, brings up the moral rhetoric of reform. Gandhi's speech against untouchability recognizes Bakha's humanity, but his solution is more about improving morals and sanitation than breaking down caste as a system. Gandhi says:

> But if I have to born be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, suffering and the affronts leveled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable condition. Therefore, I prayed that, if I should be born again, I should be so, not as a *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra*, but as an outcaste, as an Untouchable. (138)

Bakha was disappointed listening to Gandhi who mentions of modern sanitation technology as a possible answer to relieve Bakha from cleaning of latrines, which is both practical and politically inadequate as Bakha ponders over Gandhi's talk: "The Mahatma had talked of a Brahmin who did the scavenging in his *ashram*. 'Did he mean, then, that I should go on scavenging?' Bakha asked himself…'Yes,' came forceful answer. 'Yes,' said Bakha, 'I shall go on doing what Gandhi says. 'But shall I never be able to leave the latrines? 'came the disturbing thought." (147)

In *Untouchable*, the interactions between the priest, the colonial officer, and Gandhi show how the three power structures—religious orthodoxy, colonial administration, and nationalist reform—work together to control Bakha's environment. Each character represents a distinct ideological machinery asserting dominion over the lives of the oppressed. Nonetheless, their collective existence reveals the limitations and difficulties of these systems in eradicating caste inequality. The Hindu priest, as a keeper of orthodoxy, represents the religious justification for untouchability. When Bakha accidentally touches

him, the priest's anger is not only personal but also based on religious reasons. This moment exemplifies what Louis Althusser refers to as the ideological state apparatus—religion sustaining hierarchical authority under the pretense of divine mandate (14). Anand's depiction of the priest's wrath is not an overblown caricature; it is grounded on known historical attitudes towards Dalits, illustrating how religion was weaponized to sustain social hierarchy. The priest's authority is not based on physical force, but on moral and ritualistic authority to decide what is pure and what is dirty.

The colonial officer, on the other hand, is the repressive state is coercive arm—an example of administrative control and judicial authority. But Anand does not want to make the British presence seem like a simple source of justice. The colonial government did punish upper-caste maltreatment of Dalits from time to time, but these punishments were random and self-serving, and they were more about keeping order than getting rid of systematic inequalities. The colonial officer's authority is bureaucratic and impersonal; illustrating that colonial justice could exist alongside, and even derive advantages from, established caste hierarchies. Anand's insightful portrayal demonstrates that British colonialism, while sporadic displays of equity, ultimately perpetuated systemic inequality by declining to contest its economic and social underpinnings.

Gandhi is not a direct player in the story; instead, his speech is what brings him into it. His voice is a political and moral force that puts Bakha's suffering in the context of the greater fight for national self-determination. Gandhi's focus on "cleanliness" and "self-purification" serves as a moral critique of caste-based untouchability; yet, Anand delicately highlights the ambivalence of this intervention. Gandhi's concern on reforming Hinduism from the inside ignores Ambedkarite aspirations for the complete destruction of caste through conversion or legal abolition. Bakha hears Gandhi's words with hope, but Anand makes the reader wonder if moral persuasion alone can end oppression that has been going on for hundreds of years. Anand critiques overlapping systems of authority by putting these three people next to each other. The priest delivers exclusion based on tradition, the colonial officer offers selective justice in an empire that takes advantage of its people, and Gandhi offers moral elevation without changing things too much. Bakha is in the middle of these two groups. He knows what they promise, but he is not sure if they can protect his dignity. This triangular shape shows that freeing the oppressed needs more than just words or actions that are meant to be moral. It needs a real change in society that none of these people, by themselves, are willing or able to make happen. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar suggests an ideal society based on *Liberty*, *Equality* and *Fraternity* to address this caste monster: "An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words there must be social endosmosis." (57)

From Silent Rage to Change in the Structure

The issue of resistance in *Untouchable* is complicated. Bakha does not start a big rebellion; instead, he shows resistance through minor refusals, moments of self-respect, and the novel's concentration on his subjectivity. Anand's depiction of Bakha avoids both martyrdom and complacency, showing him as a person who is waking up to the possibility

that things may be different. Anand's reality pushes back against the upper caste liberal idea that dignity is something that kind people give to others. Bakha's dignity is his own—his need for clean clothes, his pride in hockey, and his sensitivity to beauty. It is not diminished by anything he lacks; rather, it is diminished by social structures. The book suggests that political organization is needed for structural transformation, not just moral persuasion. Dr. B .R. Ambedkar's vision of mass mobilization and legal change is more radical than Gandhi's gradualism in this way. The novel does not resolve this issue. Nicholas B Dirks does not hesitate to state that caste does not fade away or be diagnosed as benign:

> Caste did not die, it did not fade away, and it could no longer be diagnosed as benign. At the same time, caste remains the single most powerful category for reminding the nation of the resilience of poverty, oppression, domination, exclusion, and the social life of privilege. And some of the most eloquent expressions of political community now come in the form of movements that take caste as a primary focus of social mobilization. (16)

Anand's colonial setting adds another level to the topic of dignity. The colonial state asserted its role as a civilizing entity while also institutionalizing caste systems under administrative law and census classifications. Bakha's meeting with the British officer shows this contradiction: colonialism may give people respect, but it works best when there is institutional inequity. The ending of the book, which talks about flush toilets as a technological answer for untouchability, shows both the hopefulness of modernist progress and its constraints. Technology can eliminate the physical interaction with waste that characterizes Bakha's labor, however it cannot eradicate the ideology that undermines his humanity. *Untouchable* presents how colonial modernism is both good and bad at the same time. It gives people means to make things better, but it also makes things worse. At the end of the novel, Bakha's dignity is not restored by any societal change; he is still a sweeper child in an untouchable colony. However, the story has restored it in the reader's mind. The paradox of literature as resistance is that it can make the oppressed feel more human and bring people together in their imaginations, but the practical systems that take away their dignity stay the same. Anand's accomplishment consists in rendering dignity apparent as both a tangible experience and a political assertion. He urges readers, especially those who are not Dalit, to recognize caste as a real institution that makes life worse for people every day, not just as an abstract evil.

Conclusion

Untouchable is a landmark in Indian English writing not only for its subject matter but also for its narrative ethics. By focusing on Bakha's consciousness, Anand asserts that human dignity is intrinsic rather than contingent. The novel's realism, based on sensory detail and psychological depth, makes sure that caste oppression is neither hidden or abstract. The book also shows the political disputes of its period, which were between reformist moralism and structural change, but it does not try to come to a single conclusion. This transparency makes readers think about their own part in the ongoing fight for dignity. Anand's decision to write about the life of a sweeper boy in English in 1935 was a way of fighting against both colonial literary conventions and the erasing of caste. *Untouchable* still says that writing should do more than just tell the truth. It should also make people uncomfortable, involve them, and encourage them to work for a society where dignity is not

a privilege but a birthright. *Untouchable* is still important because caste persecution still exists in India today, even though it looks different now. The novel's depiction of Bakha's quest for dignity—through the adoption of British customs, the guidance of Gandhi, or the consideration of technical advancement—reflects the persistent discourse over the avenues to Dalit emancipation. Anand does not provide a definitive answer; nonetheless, by endowing Bakha with a fully developed interior life, he posits that the initial step towards justice is acknowledging the humanity of those dehumanized by the social order. In the twenty-first century, as Dalit literature has grown in size and importance, *Untouchable* is still recognized as a groundbreaking work and a reminder that the fight for dignity and the fight for equality are two sides of the same coin. Its aesthetics of resistance—grounded in realism, empathy, and political urgency—illustrate that literature may both mirror and influence social consciousness. Anand's tale, in its subtle but persistent way, strives toward that social democracy by making readers think about the unfairness of caste and picture a better future.

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