

Mulk Anand's *Untouchable*: A Combination of "Insight and Detachment"

Renu Singh

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Delhi College of Arts and Commerce
University of Delhi

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) was born in Peshwar which is at present in Pakistan. His father was a traditional coppersmith and later became a soldier in the army. Mulk Raj Anand graduated from Lahore and did his additional studies at Cambridge and at London University. Anand began his career as a writer in England by publishing short notes on books in T.S. Eliot's magazine *Criterion*. He moved in intellectual circles such as the Bloomsbury group and among his friends were E. M. Forster, Herbert Read and George Orwell. He was influenced by European masters of fiction especially Tolstoy, Gogol and James Joyce, but the most important influence upon Anand was that of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi helped him in shaping his social conscience. Anand occupies a special place in Indian English Literature.

Anand's themes were Indian, derived from Indian realities. It was the keen awareness of the human plight and a desire for change that promoted him to write. Anand's burning passion for change was further ignited by his own personal experiences of his childhood. During his childhood he was close to the society of untouchables and poor peasants. As Iyengar puts it, "Mulk Raj Anand as a child had mixed freely with the children of sweepers attached to his father's regiment and such association cutting across caste divisions had continued during his boyhood and youth" (quoted in Sharma 12). Therefore, he had a feeling of tenderness and sympathy for them which motivated him to portray their exploitation. The major themes of his novels are based on social evils like casteism and human suffering caused by a variety of factors, political, economic, social, and cultural.

The human exploitation based on caste was portrayed by Mulk Raj Anand first in *Untouchable*, the short novel with which Mulk Raj Anand launched his literary career. According to Naik, "Anand's *untouchable* which came in 1935, was possibly the earliest attempt to deal with the lives of the depressed classes, not only in Indian English literature but in modern Indian literature in general also" (250). Therefore, in this case Mulk Raj Anand was the first novelist of modern Indian literature to have a Dalit as the hero of his

novel. In the novel *Untouchable* Anand projected the theme of Dalit exploitation in such a significant term that it includes issues like loss of identity and rootlessness.

Anand's love and concern for the exploited is very much visible in his works. The central theme of *Untouchable* is the age-old injustice done by traditional Hindu society upon a whole class of people whom they think are sub-human. Traditional Hindu society, according to *Manusmriti* is divided into four Varnas, i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudras. Among them Brahmins are at the top and Shudras are at the lowest rung. The untouchable is below the Shudras in the caste hierarchy because they deal with human waste and dead bodies. They are considered as 'Panchmas' the fifth varna.

Untouchable is the story of a boy named Bakha who is a sweeper. Bakha lives in the midst of surroundings which may have changed a bit from the days of Manusmriti but their life is not yet less miserable. He is a child of the outcaste colony. The lower caste people were not allowed to live inside the village, so they had to live outside the village. Anand gives a graphic description of their colony in the opening paragraph of the novel:

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 carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. absence of drainage had, through the rains of various seasons, made the quarter a marsh, which gave out the most offensive smells. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery, which lay within it, made it an uncongenial place to live in. (9)

Such miserable conditions make their lives difficult but when these people come into social contact with the people of higher castes their living becomes more difficult.

Untouchable describes an eventful day in the life of Bakha. Bakha is an intelligent, "strong, able-bodied and sensitive young man of eighteen" (12). This day of his life in some respects is like many other days of his life but it adds some more torments to his life. He starts his day with his usual work, cleaning the latrines. After finishing his official work, he goes back to his house and then to market. In the market street he accidentally touches an upper caste man and is punished for polluting him. That man humiliates Bakha before others. The event opens Bakha's eyes, and he realizes with a sudden shock what he really is in society, an "untouchable". Further a temple priest tries to molest his younger sister, Sohini. When she screams the priest comes out running and accuses her of polluting him. As the day proceeds, the problems of Bakha increase. Later in a game of hockey with the

boys, a small boy gets injured. When Bakha helps him and takes him to his house, boy's mother charges him with both injuring her son and defiling her house by carrying him in his arms.

The story of Bakha is not only his story but it is also the story of many Dalits. By projecting Bakha's life Anand is throwing light on the lives of various other untouchables. Anand himself said, "In untouchable I meant to recreate the lives of the millions of untouchables through one single person in only one incident. The struggle of Bakha is also a struggle of many Dalits. Pain and suffering are the basis of this novel. After reading this work reader becomes either restless or angry. Through this novel Anand wants to show how untouchables are exploited socially, physically, and sexually. The Hindu religion has the concept of untouchability deep rooted in its caste system. The untouchables are the lowest in the caste system, so they are ill treated. They have their separate colony outside the village. They exist on the periphery. "This physical segregation signifies other separations also. Dalits do the work, live the life, eat the food and wear the garments which upper caste Hindu people will not" (Limbale 2). Untouchables are expected to have only shrouds for clothing. In the novel Bakha tries to live of like the Tommies, whom he saw in British Barracks:

Sleeping on low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets, eating eggs, drinking tea and wine in tin mugs; going to parade and then walking down to the bazaar with cigarettes in their mouths and small silver mounted canes in their hands and soon he become obsessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. (10)

But being an outcaste, he was not supposed to copy them and for this act he had to face comments. For example, the boys of the outcaste colony teases Bakha on his dressing and calls him "Pilpali Sahib". Not only children the elders also teased Bakha. Once Havildar Charat Singh said to Bakha, "you are becoming a gentleman" (15). Even his father was not happy with his British style of living. At night like Tommies, Bakha used to take a blanket, but as the nights of Bulandshar were cold a quilt was needed so it was difficult to sleep in a blanket. Bakha "could sacrifice a good many comforts for the sake of what he called 'fashun' " (10). His father says to Bakha, "Ohe, lover of your mother, take a quilt and throw away that blanket of the goras; you will die of cold!" (10). Bakha is fond of English life but accept clothes nothing is English in his life.

Untouchable are treated so badly that they are not considered ashuman. If their bodies even accidentally touch the high caste people, they must suffer thrashing and abuses for that. Anand also presented this picture of Hindu society in the novel. When Bakha was enjoying his Jalebis and absorbed in his thoughts, accidentally he touches an upper caste Hindu Lalaji. Lalaji shouted at Bakha, "Ohe low-caste vermin! ...Do you know you have defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself (40). Lalaji not only abused him in public but also humiliates him. In Hindu society untouchables are expected to warn the upper caste people of their arrival. In the market when Bakha touches Lalaji, he screams at Bakha, "Swine! dog! why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach"! He shouted as he met Bakha's eyes. Do not you know, you are brute, that you must not touch me!" (41). After abuses and humiliation when Lalaji left Bakha, he "automatically" starts shouting, "Posh, posh sweeper coming, posh, posh sweeper coming, posh, posh sweeper coming" (44).

What Bakha faces in the market street is just the beginning of insult and humiliation. Further there are more insults waiting for Bakha.

In Hindu society outcastes are not allowed to climb the stairs of the houses to go to the top where upper castes usually have their kitchen or in simple words this can be said that untouchable are not allowed to enter the kitchens. He cannot "insult the sanctity of the house... but had to shout and announce his arrival from below" (58) to get the food. Bakha shouts from downstairs, "Bread for sweeper, Mother. Bread for the sweeper" (58). But his call goes waste. He does not get any reply from the house. He sits down on a wooden platform in the lane. He was tired because of the day's work so he slept. When he was sleeping and dreaming, the voice of Sadhu breaks his sleep. Sadhu cried "Bham, Bham, bhole Nath. shaking the bangles of his arms..." (61). The lady comes out running after by hearing Sadhu's call. One can see the treatment given by the upper caste lady to an untouchable and to a Sadhu. She did not respond to Bakha's call but comes out running on Sadhu's call. When she comes out and sees Bakha on the platform outside the house she says:

Vay, eater of your masters... May the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you perish and die! you have defiled my house! Go! Get up! Eater of your masters! why didn't you shout if you wanted food? Is this your fathers' house that you come and rest here? (61)

After this she gave food to Sadhuji, and to Bakha she says, “VayBakhya, take this. Here’s your bread coming down, she flungit at him” (63). Bakha tries to catch it by keeping his broom aside but the pancake was thin like a paper it floated in the air and fell in the gully. Bakha felts very insulted, as to the sadhu she came down and gave the food while for Bakha she threw it from the top as if Bakha is not human.

Fromthe above incidents one can see that untouchables are not allowed to enter the upper caste Hindus’ houses. Mulk Raj Anand also presents the fact that the lower castes are not only allowed to enter the caste Hindus’ houses but also not even allowed to draw water from the same well. Either they have their separate well, or they must wait for someone of upper caste who can help them and can draw water for them. In the novel Anand also says:

The outcastes were not allowed to mounthe platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the waterpolluted. Nor werethey allowed access tothenearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream.They had not well of their own because it cost a lot of money todig a well in such a hilly town as Bullandshar. Perforce they had to collect at the foot of the caste Hindu’s well and depend on the bounty of some of them superiors to pour water into their pitchers. More often than not there was no caste Hindu present.... So the outcastes had to wait for chance to bringsome caste Hindu to the well, for luck to decide that he waskind, for fate to ordain that he had timeto get their pitchesfilled with water. (20-21)

The social exploitation faced by untouchables is not new, this is ageold. Centuries over centuries these people have faced lot of insult and humiliating conditions. Untouchable are not allowed to enter anywhere except latrines. The root cause of the exploitation of the outcastes is religion. It isreligion which is responsible for thesegregation of society. The motivating factor for the religion based social exploitation in the greed and desire for superior status. Uppercaste Hindus satisfies this desire of theirs by ill-treating lower castes. Uppercastes Hindus want to prove themselves superior, so they behave badly with outcastes or low castesAnandis not unconscious of the fact that not all the upper casteHindus believes in exploiting the lower castes. For Anand, all upper castes Hindus are not tyrants. His “enlightened” characters are far away fromsuch things. For example, Havildar Charat Singh has no caste prejudices.He offers Bakha tea and gives him a brand-new hockey stick and a “clean new shirt and a white turban”. He does not complain when

Bakha fill his "chilam". He even asks Bakha to clean his tumbler. Havildar Charat Singh was totally impressed by Bakha's activeness and efficiency in doing his job. For Charat Singh, Bakha feels, "I wouldn't mind being a sweeper all my life. I would do anything for him" (90).

Another character in the novel who has feelings for untouchables is a "heavy" woman whom Bakha meets when he goes to collect food from the houses. When Bakha was sleeping on a wooden platform and a lady comes out, on seeing Bakha she abuses him and curses him and later throws a chapatti towards Bakha from the top, on the contrary this heavy lady kindly says to Bakha "My child you should not sit on people's doorsteps like this" (62) and hands a chapatti to Bakha. Iqbal Nath Sarashar, a young poet, is another enlightened character of Anand. He has affection for the Bakha, untouchable he says "Well, we must destroy caste. We must destroy inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations! We must recognise an equality of rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone!" (130).

In the novel through a single day of Bakha's life, which is a series of depressing experiences along with moments of joy, Anand has presented various forms of exploitation like social exploitation, physical exploitation and sexual exploitation faced by outcastes. Though Anand is an outsider for outcastes because he belongs to an upper caste, he has understood them fully. He has been privileged to understand both the upper castes and the outcastes. He has the opportunity to enter into both the spaces and he takes the advantage of this. "His picture of relationship between them is objective and balanced" (Naik 31)

Even E. M. Forster in his preface to *Untouchable* has said: *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 trouble. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity. Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position. By caste he is a Kshatriya, and he might have been expected to inherit the pollution complex. But as a child he played with the children of sweepers attached to an Indian regiment, he grew to be fond of them, and to understand a tragedy which he did not share. He has just the right mixture of insight and detachment... (Forster 6).

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