



**MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE* : A TRUE PICTURE
OF INDIAN SOCIETY**



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ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand is doubtlessly a remarkable and towering personality in the sphere of Indian English literature who is basically known for the realistic portrayal of his characters because of his first hand knowledge about the scenes and situations portrayed in his novels. *Untouchable* is a novel which has earned tremendous name and fame all over the world as it presents a true and crystal clear picture of Pre Independence Indian society where the condition of the untouchable of the subalterns was very pathetic because of their marginalised status. Anand is popularly known as a novelist of the lowly and the lost and in this novel he has presented the sorrows and sufferings of a low caste protagonist Bakha who is a subject of all torture and humiliations by the so called guardians of the Indian society. The novel evokes in the mind of the objective reader the horrifying social malady that existed in the colonial days and in the subsequent decades and creates a tale of socially manipulated woe to the downtrodden in the Indian society.

KEYWORDS

Untouchability, Downtrodden, Marginalised, Discrimination, Caste System

RESEARCH PAPER

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a place of pride among the Indian English writers whose literary career extended to nearly four decades. He has a strange capacity for depicting realistically the sad and miserable plight of the low classes. His novels are full of sympathetic feelings about the people and places he knows from his first hand knowledge. He is a marked realist and has a profound imaginative and sensitive apprehension of the Indian society in all its ramifications. His novels are faithful documents on the contemporary social set up as it presents a real picture of the rural India. He is a lover of mankind and his novels reflect his responsibility towards society, especially those who are marginalized, oppressed, and the subalterns who suffer at the hands of the colonial masters, and the so called representatives of the upper class of the traditional Hindu society. His faithful account and realistic presentation of the prevailing orthodox Hindu society are quite valuable in bringing a positive change in the society.

Mulk Raj Anand was born on December 12, 1905 at Peshawar, now in Pakistan, was educated at Lahore, London and Cambridge with a Doctorate Degree in Philosophy. He is the recipient of many prestigious awards - 'Padma Bhushan', The International Peace Prize and Sahitya Academy Award. With the transfer of his father's regiment in army, he moved from place to place, gained new experiences about Indian and European society and from his peasant mother derived compassion for the lowly and the poor people. His most popular novels are *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), *The Sword and The Sickle* (1942), *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts* (1943) *The Big Heart* (1945), *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953) and *The Death of a Hero* (1963). His major novels reveal his basic concern for the downtrodden and the characters he opts for his novels are reflections of the people from the life around him. He was an exceptional creative artist who delineated the life of poor Indians in touching and realistic manner with a tinge of political commitment and moral dedication. He was a novelist of the common people, poor, orphan, untouchables and miserable labourers who were the sons of the soil and lived in villages. A noted Indian critic, Pramod Kumar Singh rightly comments, "Anand has deep concern for the low caste people of India and his novels throw light on the existing sorrows and sufferings of the downtrodden. His novels reflect close pictures of the traditional Hindu society with special focus on the miserable condition of the have-nots (Singh 23).

When Anand started writing in the 1930s, India was in a state of transition, a change was coming in every field of life and simultaneously the struggle for political freedom was gaining momentum on one side and fight against poverty, illiteracy, casteism, superstition, untouchability was also being condemned by the writers of the age as they thought that without economic and social independence political freedom was incomplete and meaningless. He is truly the novelist of the lowly, the lost and the underdog. Not that he was the first to voice in his novels the sufferings of the poor and the downtrodden. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra and Munshi Premchand had also done it in their novels. Through his novels he documented the abuses of the exploited class. He certainly is the revolutionary and representative voice of the people belonging to the lower strata of society i.e. poor, destitute and the have-nots. The trauma of the untouchables has been artistically delineated in Tagore's *Chandalika*. But Anand's most famous novel, *Untouchable* has a tremendous descriptive quality and has been able to draw the attention of the readers to their pathetic condition. He has strongly and forcefully presented the desires, hopes, sorrows and sufferings of this class of society in a realistic vein.

Untouchable is indeed a touching cry of the sufferings of the low class people under the British rule and also under the pressure of outdated Hindu/Brahmin customs and oppressive traditions. The Indian society had been suffering under the burden of slavery for the past two hundred years. Age old practices of discrimination on the basis of caste and class continued to crush the free spirit of man and also continued to separate man from man. The society suffered at different levels but could not think of uniting, free of any bias, under one banner of humanity. They remained disintegrated under different flags. To a sensitive heart like his, this discrimination was digging at the roots and was eating away the vitality of the country. Anand could see and understand that discrimination prevalent in society was weakening the nation. Thus *Untouchable* is a pathetic and also a heart rending cry of the author against the cruelty and prejudice of the higher caste people towards the lower castes, the dalits and the subalterns. It is his ruthless attack against the hitherto rigid, gradually crumbling caste-system in India.

In this novel, the emphasis is laid on social protest to pinpoint the major flaws in the Indian society. The focus is on the untouchable community known as the Harijan in Gandhian terminology and as Dalits in the present day. There are four major caste divisions in the traditional Hindu Varna System - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishayas and Shudras. Though this caste division was originally based on division of labour in society but with the passage of time, a drawback entered into this system and the caste of a person was considered from the

family genealogy in which the person takes birth. This gave rise to many evils as some castes and the work they did, was considered to be low and the Shudras were called the low caste by the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishayas. They were existing at the lowest level of the hierarchal system and they had to observe a different code of conduct, different way of walking, talking and appearing in the public. J. H. Hutton remarks:

In The Indian Caste system, Hinduism was the backbone of the purity-pollution complex, and it was the religion that influenced the daily lives and beliefs of the Indian people... (Hutton 48)

Hutton means to say that in the age old Indian caste system, Hinduism has the supreme authority to decide the contention of pure/impure because Hinduism is that religion which determines the beliefs of the people and it even allotted the task of every man since birth.

In the Manu Smriti, the authentic law book of Hindu social and domestic code and conduct, the Shudras or the fourth Varna or the untouchables are not allowed to acquire knowledge of Vedic literature and other scriptures. They have no right to go to the temples, no liberty to even listen to the Mantras or the incantation of the Vedas. They are also deprived of the right of studying Sanskrit as it was the language of most of the religious books. This caused the deterioration and downfall of this great language and it has become almost a dead language today. It is important to mention here that the sweepers and the scavengers are regarded as untouchables because of the filthy work they have to do. The so-called upper caste people believed that a touch by a sweeper or a scavenger would pollute them. Religion plays a vital role in our country and Hindu religion emerges as the major dominating force. The presence of an untouchable was considered to be a bad omen to the Brahmins. The most ironic thing about the entire issue was that it was these so called untouchables who worked in the land for providing food and other essential things of life to the Brahmins but these high caste guardians of morality tried to exploit and crush these down-trodden in the powerful social structure.

In *Untouchable*, Anand chose his hero from the lower class of society and presented real India because he firmly believed that the people of real India do not live in bungalows and palaces, but in villages and in poor huts. The realistic picture of India can be seen among untouchables, carpenters, poor farmers, destitute women and impoverished children. He made these victims of society more powerful with every novel written later on, and through every character he tried to represent the miseries of their gender, caste and class in which they suffered. In the context of *Untouchable*, Walter Allen comments:

It is only through the character of Bakha that the novelist can succeed in arousing the sympathetic comprehension instead of aesthetic function in our readers. (Allen 17)

The novel reflects the unsympathetic and callous attitude of the ruthless caste system of Hindus as he brings to the forefront the trial, tribulation, humiliation and pain faced and felt by the subalterns in the Indian society. There is great inequality and social anarchy in a land that proclaims that all people living on this earth are like a family whereas in practice, one section of the family is not allowed to have equality with the others. The faithful picturization of the facts, vivid and graphic details and accuracy lead to the orthodox and rotting social order. Anand was obsessed with the tragedy which lies in the fact that this extraordinarily talented boy was always insulted by most of the people due to his wretched class. He could not get the admission in a school as he would defile his classmates by his touch. The novel highlights the social wrongs and the injustice meted out to this deprived and dispossessed class of society.

Bakha's beautiful sister Sohini represents a docile and meek woman who used to go to fetch water from the village well in the pitcher where she has to wait much for the arrival of a high caste Hindu who may help to draw water as she is strictly prohibited not to pollute the water with her touch. This wretched condition of the untouchables is very distressing as they have to be on the mercy of the high caste Hindus for getting water from the public well. The low caste people were so poor to have their own wells, therefore they were compelled to live in dirt, dust, filth and thirst because of their subalternity. As Anand narrates:

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. (14-15)

The well episode in this novel is a vital evidence for understanding the social problems of the Dalit or subaltern community. Anand castigates Hindu caste system and the evil designs of the privileged class to think that only they can enjoy the basic amenities of life. Sohini is supposed to have the virtues of patience, meekness, docility and submission to the wishes desires and whims of the lecherous upper caste people like Pandit Kali Nath. While filling the pitcher from the village well Pandit Kali Nath kept an evil eye on this girl and he invites her to clean his house where he tries to molest her and when she resists, Pandit began to cry, "Polluted, Polluted!" Anand shows the hypocrisy, pretence and sham of the Hindu society when two persons are begging food at the door step of a house, one is a Sadhu or a holy man who is treated with full devotion because his blessings will benefit them, and on the other

hand, an untouchable Bakha is begging for food but he is treated with contempt and abuses as the lady of the house says in anger:

You eater of your masters... You have defiled my house! Go! Get up, Why didn't you shout if you wanted food? You have defiled my religion! Now I will have to sprinkle holy water all over the house. (63)

Conclusively, there is no doubt that in the novel *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand has presented a true and realistic picture of traditional Brahminical Indian society where the condition of the low caste people was quite miserable and wretched. So through Bakha's character, Anand wants to develop a kind of awareness in the conscience of the out-castes and exploited people. The novel evokes in the mind of the objective reader the horrifying social malady that existed in the colonial days and in the subsequent decades and creates a tale of socially manipulated woe to the downtrodden in the Indian society. The novelist has presented the picture of pre-Independence India with rare power of realism and he has become very successful in presenting the graphic and vivid portrayal of Indian society.

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