

**SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE NOVEL ‘UNTOUCHABLE’ BY
MULK RAJ ANAND**

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English language in India is as much as Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu or any other Indian language Indian writing in English is a way in which India expresses itself. Initially Indian writers had a major concern with regard to their identity about Indian writings in English. In fact, at one point of time Indian writers spoke in borrowed voice, by doing so they lost the use of their own voice. As time passed, they discarded the foreign themes and style and developed an original style and subject matter. English being a flexible language readily yielded to their handling. After a hundred years of domicile, English adapted itself to the Indian soil and become just another of India's many languages and an effective vehicle to express Indian thought in typically Indian idiom.

Indo-Anglian fiction took a significant turn in the 1930's with the appearance of the big three, the three great novelists of Indian literature Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K.Narayana. Each

revealed in his own characteristic way the various possibilities of Indo-Anglian fiction. The eldest of the three, Mulk Raj Anand, has been the most prolific and the most variegated in the choice of the themes. From his father, the coppersmith, Anand inherits the industry of the craftsman and his meticulous attention to detail. From his peasant mother he inherits the sturdy common sense as also compassion for the waifs and strays of humanity; in all his novels one can observe powerful pleas for the underdog.

No writer is alien to the circumstances and happenings of the period to which he belongs. The imperialistic rule of the British, the cruelty and hypocrisy of feudal India, shackled by the barriers of caste and creed, encrusted with superstitious religious practices had a deep impact on the writer. But the humanism in Anand was reinforced by the Gandhian wave. Multifaceted literary personality Mulk Raj Anand in most of his works criticizes the baser elements in the



Indian tradition like untouchability and exploitation of the under-privileged. He champions the cause of modernism as a cure for the Indian malaise.

Untouchable is Mulk Raj Anand's first novel. It is also by far his best novel and certainly the most popular of his works. It is a sociological novel written in the stream of consciousness technique so that the interior monologue enables the reader to have a good peep into the sufferings and ups and down in the hero's emotions as a result of a series of traumatic experiences. Anand has been able to highlight the miserable plight, poverty and degradation of the so-called depressed classes.

Anand takes up only a single day in the life of the untouchable sweeper boy Bakha, but in that brief length of time we are given a marvelous insight into the thoughts and feelings of the outcaste. Anand points out that the very environment in which the sweeper's life does not contribute to a refined mentality. The sweeper's colony at the outskirts of the barracks is a picture of insanitation and health hazards. Even the brook running nearby is heavily polluted with the filth of the public latrines.

There is no drainage system and stench greets the passerby's nostril all over

the place. It is in this ugliness and squalor that the hero of the story lives. The one-room hut is dingy and dark and the inmates have very little protection against the cold of the winter. But work requires Bakha to get up early, and get the public latrines cleaned up before dawn so that they may be in a usable state. Bakha receives only abuses from most of his customers with the exception of rare souls like Charat Singh. But then though he works with dirt Bakha himself manages to keep himself free from dirt. He does his job skillfully, implying that, however demeaning task may be considered by others, an individual can derive job-satisfaction.

As the day progresses Bakha has to face a series of humiliations, because he is an outcaste. He cannot walk through the streets like a free citizen. Contact with his body is supposed to produce defilement in individuals of the higher castes. So he has to keep crying "posh, posh, sweeper coming." Twice he omits to make this cry and suffers thereby. In the bazaar he happens to touch the Lala who curses him for polluting him. A crowd gathers and it is only the intervening by a Muslim Tongawala that saves the situation-but not before the Lala manages to give him a slap and vanish.



The second humiliation is at the temple. Despite his lack of education Bakha is enchanted by the elegance of the temple architecture and the grandeur of the rituals carried on inside the temple. Forgetting his position Bakha mounts the temple steps and is gazing intently on the glory before him, when he is taken aback by shouts of ‘polluted, polluted’. The crowd takes up the cry of the priest, thinking that the presence of the untouchable has defiled the sacred place. Bakha’s humiliation turns to wrath when he discovers that the priest is only trying to camouflage his indecency to Bakha’s sister, Sohini. He takes giant strides towards the priest, dragging Sohini behind him, but the crowds as well as the priest vanish.

Indeed Sohini’s humiliation is of a deeper hue than that of her brother. The hypocritical priest, Pandit kalinath, is fascinated by her beauty and angles for her by filling up her pitcher first at the well. He asks her to do the cleaning of his courtyard in the afternoon. It is when the innocent girl goes to do the sweeping that he tries to molest her. The incident at the well tells us how the untouchables have to wait on the mercy of a high caste Hindu even for a pot of water. The incident at the temple, on the other hand, illustrates how

mean-minded and selfish the high castes can be. Both Bakha and Sohini are treated by society as if they were chattel.

The third humiliation of Bakha is in the silversmiths’ lane where food is thrown at him as if to a street dog. The upper-caste folk make use of the service that only the sweepers can do, but reward the sweepers with inexcusable contempt.

A further insult awaits Bakha when as a Good Samaritan he takes the wounded little son of the Babu to his home. The mother of the child, instead of thanking Bakha, abuses him for defiling her son and her house. Again Bakha feels a little relieved when Colonel Hutchinson treats him as a human being ignoring his caste and colour. But the colonel’s wife pours scorn on her husband for hobnobbing with the Blackies. Bakha is made to realize that his untouchability is a handicap in almost all places.

The contempt of the upper classes and the injustices they heap on him make Bakha long for a professional solution. He is convinced that others treat his people as dirt because they remove dirt. So he seeks a way out in the philosophy of Gandhiji and the mechanical facility offered by the flush-latrines. But Bakha is an exception among the untouchables. His father, Lakha, for instance, has accepted the



exploitations and injustices as part of the scheme of things. He does not even think that another state of affairs is possible. He consoles the sensitive Bakha by narrating the humiliation he himself has received. He tries to make the best of a bad situation by pointing out that some people like the Hakim can be kind despite their orthodoxy. The fact is that slavishness has stained Lakha's very blood and he cannot think in terms of breaking off from the chain. Even Bakha suffers to some extent from this inferiority complex. He thinks of returning the slap of the Lala but the next moment shrinks back with the thought that he would be only compounding his crime by touching the Lala once more. Pollution has become as deep rooted an idea with him as with his upper-caste oppressors.

How far this virus of caste gradation has spread is illustrated by the incidents at the well. Even though all the waiting women are outcastes, they have to acknowledge inferiorities and superiorities among themselves. Gulabo, the washerwoman, considers herself head and shoulders above the sweeper girl Sohini on the caste-scale. She takes it as her birthright to abuse Sohini in the queue waiting for the water. Sohini accepts the hierarchy and conducts herself with

remarkable modesty towards the vile-mouthed washerwoman.

Mulk Raj Anand has artistically focussed the reader's attention not only on the plight of the depressed classes, but also portrayed their feelings by the 'stream of consciousness' method. The record of the doings and feelings in a single day of Bakha brings home to us the inexcusable inhumanity of man towards man. Anand does not descend into gross propaganda but evokes the reader's sympathy for the downtrodden by presenting us all the aspects of the problem and enabling us to see the problem from the points of view of different types of the oppressed as also of a few types of the oppressor. He is able to bring home to us the painful truth that eternal servility is the price of untouchability. The protagonist Bhaka is presented not as an individual but as the representative of a large segment of Indian society condemned to in human trials and tribulation. This perversion of human values takes away the dignity of both the victim and the victimizer. It provides the weakest link in the chain of Hindu society and we must remember that the strength of a chain depends upon its weakest link. Hence, unless the sufferings of the untouchables are removed outright, there cannot be any social progress in India,



despite her rich, centuries-old culture heritage.

Though much has been done to eradicate this evil institution that has been be fortified by thousands of years of use and wont it has become a part of daily life. Though legislation has been enacted to stop this evil, it alone can't control this problem. This is an issue which can be solved only by convincing millions of hearts and minds through self education. Untouchable is one such novel which explores the plights and predicaments faced by people who undergo social discrimination and search for their identity in Indian society. Mulk Raj Anand has presented the case against this social evil with a force that comes from true art.

References:

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