

## Humanism and the Downtrodden in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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### **Abstract**

Literature often embarks on the essential task of imitating life in its various forms. The novelists of the early twentieth century delved in capturing the reality of the society they lived in so as to bring about a change in the already dynamic India during its freedom struggle. The province of Mulk Raj Anand is in his depiction of the society he lives in “as it is”, through a humanist perspective. He seeks to draw on the situation of the subaltern so as to make them aware of the importance of their rights and so that they can learn to live in the hostility they are brought up in, and rise above it. This paper will provide a glimpse into the depiction of such atrocities through the chief protagonist of the novel, Bakha. The plight of the downtrodden has been vividly explored by Mulk Raj Anand in an objective yet sensitive manner bring out the depth of his vision.

**Keywords:** Humanism, Subaltern, Caste, Literature, Realism, Untouchable

Literature is best understood as the reflexion of life in all its diverse forms. It is therefore, a mirror to life and the society that is onto display. The writer, being the creator, has the ultimate decision of deciding where exactly he is to place the mirror that will display the aspects of the society he wishes to depict. The different dimensions of the relationship between man and society have been delved into for centuries. These dimensions keep changing as a result of the change of the age. Every age has its own specific attributes, its own problems, challenges, drawbacks, fears, and aspirations. The stage for the penning down of the perceptions of the age has been set up since time immemorial and the various forms of depicting the same have been presented in numerous forms of literature. Due to its ability of capturing a huge panorama within one text the novel genre has emerged as an apt and powerful medium of letters. With its immensely descriptive manner, it represents, in great depth, the social, political, economic, and historical circumstances of the society. Literature therefore manages to capture historical events and the impact of those events on the society of that time preserving it for the future generation to remember. The readers, having been

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influenced by the text, seek to make the changes they can to better the conditions, subconsciously changing the present times. Thus, history and literature are closely linked to one another and one cannot help but find the intricate linking of their webs in the writings of treatises, essays, stories, poems and novels.

The reality of the immediate society and changing theoretical perspectives has always found its depiction in Indian English literature. The earliest Indian English novels are notable for their addressing the social issues of the day. Bankimchandra Chatterji's novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, which is hailed as the first Indian English novel was a social novel that described the consequences of a bad marriage between Matangini and Rajmohan. The earlier writers, being social reformers, followed the realistic mode of representation and chose to display the social evils that they wished to criticise through their novels. Similarly, writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao sought to dwell into the lives of the down-trodden, and the middle class. Their fictional works were primarily concerned with the expressing of the cultural ethos of the nation.

The works of Mulk Raj Anand display the realist situation of his time. He took upon himself the task to chronicle the lives of the deprived. His earlier novels- *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, explore the lives of the under-privileged who are exploited by those in power. The caste system which was invented by the Aryans had begun as a classification based on the type of work performed by individuals. It eventually decayed into a rigid stratification with the Brahmins forming the top of the pyramid, followed by the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas with the Shudras forming the base. Thus, it was a group system that was based on services and functions and was meant to be an all-inclusive order without any common dogma and allowed the fullest latitude to each group. This, however, turned out to be appalling for those who were placed at the bottom of the pyramid. The plight of the Shudras is focused on throughout the scenes of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. In his preface to the novel, E. M. Forster comments on this aspect of the novel:

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.

The "sweeper" therefore appears to be someone that renders nothing but disgust with his presence. This has been described taking place in several instances like the scene at the well, the events at the temple, Bakha's humiliation in the marketplace and the attempt on Sohini's honour. Anand also stressed on the fact that "defilement" and the "pollution" are not related to a sense of hygiene in the Hindu community but are in fact instigated by religion. An interesting instance may be noted in the beginning of the novel, when Bakha is cleaning the toilets, the novel states- "and though his job was dirty, he remained comparatively clean." This means that although Bakha was a clean and hygienic person, his being born in a

specific caste made him accountable to cleaning the filth of others and kept him at the receiving end of abuses. The caste Hindu, whose dhoti Bakha accidentally touches shouts, “Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! Offspring of a pig!”

The opening paragraph of *Untouchables* exemplifies the wide divide between the different residents of the community:

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 ... 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.

Anand has depicted the presence of a clear line of demarcation that survives within the Indian society. On the outside, it appears like a united whole, with people celebrating various religious festivals together, but when one seeks to delve into the daily affairs of the people, they can see the stark contrast between various categories of people. The society belongs to those who are from an upper caste. The people who do not belong to this class are segregated and made to live outside the boundaries that surround the upper castes. These subaltern, in *Untouchables* are the “scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters” and other outcastes who belong to the Hindu society. They are those unfortunate who are denied access to the “hegemonic power” (Ashcroft 215). The blatant divide between the living conditions of the people belonging to different castes resonates the little power the downtrodden have due to the reins of power lying in the hands of the upper castes. The downtrodden are often subjected to brutal exploitation on the individual, social, economic, and political level.

In the large backdrop of the caste contradictions within the Hindu society that have unsuccessfully stifled the healthy growth of a considerable section of the Indian community for centuries, Mulk Raj Anand deals with the ghastly evil of untouchability touching the Hindu society of the pre-partitioned era. Anand vibrantly depicts the wretched lot of the unfortunate untouchables and suggested that they can only rid themselves from the manacles of killing orthodoxy and tradition only if men instil some sympathy and tenderness into their hearts and if the men who are humiliated as untouchables muster enough courage to live bolder and fear free lives.

It is important for one to understand Mulk Raj Anand’s take on humanism in order to analyse his intentions behind his novels. In his book, *Apology for Heroism*, he states:

I believe, first and foremost, in human beings, in Man, in the whole man ... The humanism which I prefer does not rest on a Divine Sanction... but puts its faith in the creative imagination of man, in his capacity to transform himself, in the tireless mental and physical energy with which he can, often in

the face of great odds, *raise himself to tremendous heights of dignity and redeem the world from its misery and pain...*

Anand, a believer of the dignity of man and the equality of all men, is certainly disturbed by the inhumane way the people belonging to the superior castes treat the “pariahs”. The degradation and humiliation inflicted on the unfortunate sections of the society is highlighted through the often repeated refrain of Bakha- “Posh, Posh”. This is just a small example of how the subaltern finds ones way into being institutionalised. Bakha follows the Indian method of ablution, keeping himself clean just how everyone else would. However, he is still condemned to continue the tradition his ancestors have been made to pursue. He has been conditioned to consider himself to belong to the meanest lot of mankind; one who is not appropriate to touch others. This can be noticed with the way the confectioner throws the *jalebis* towards Bakha so that he doesn’t have any physical contact with him. More amusing is the splashing of water, on the coins Bakha places on the board, by the assistant as a way of cleansing the coins that were once touched by an outcaste. In addition to this is the way through which a Hindu can rid himself of the sin of accidentally touching an untouchable which is to "cancel it by touching a Mussulman passing by". The touch of a caste Brahmin alone unleashing an invasion of abusive words along with the physical assault of Bakha underlines the sad plight of the downtrodden.

Apart from segregating them from their properties and abstaining from their touch, there were other necessities that were denied to the outcastes, like water:

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 to access to the nearby nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream.

The intensity of the deep rootedness of the evil of the caste system can be understood through the way in which the untouchables weren’t granted access to even mount the platform that encircled the well. They had to wait for hours to have the Hindus belonging to the upper caste pour water into their pitchers. Ironically, the touch of the Hindu boys with which Bakha played Hockey did not raise any eyebrows.

This issue of touch and the plight of the outcastes in *Untouchable* resonates itself in the debut novel of Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*. In the novel, Velutha was not allowed to enter the house of the upper castes nor was he allowed to touch anything that they were to touch, just like Bakha in Anand’s novel. Roy writes-

Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians wouldn’t defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint.

Both Bakha and Velutha faced similar situations, however, Bakha was someone who was filled with more anger against his wrongdoers, unlike the calm and composed Velutha.

Throughout the novel, the Hindus are shown treating Bakha worse than people treat their animals; the food Bakha asks for is thrown at him several times. The verbal and physical insults showered on him by the upper caste are only as a result of his birth as an untouchable. The community that is presented in *Untouchable* is one which is ridden deep with superstitions and stinks of hypocrisy. The Hindu Brahmins are depicted as being the worst of the caste Hindus as they follow the tradition of untouchability, while themselves embarking on chances to molest girls that belong to a lower class, as was the case with Bakha's sister, Sohini. This brings to surface the plight of the down caste woman as it far exceeds the plight of a down caste man. A woman who doesn't belong to an upper caste is oppressed more than a man is since she is susceptible to falling prey to not just the unfair patriarchy that exists in the society but also to the shadows of silence that she is to adhere to, for her birth is in the unfortunate circle of a caste that is to overcome all the hurdles of life by never fighting back.

Through the depiction of the unbridled exploitation of the outcastes at the hands of the upper castes through the figure of Bakha, Mulk Raj Anand questions the traditional assumptions on which Hinduism practices the evils of untouchability. In his novel, he embarks on recording the movements against the practice of untouchability which were gaining momentum in the historical setting in which Anand writes. He brings to focus the Humanism that he feels that certain practices threaten through the internal monologues that have Bakha question his behaviour and the limitations for outbursts that his position in society provides. Mulk Raj Anand, therefore, through *Untouchable* explores the deplorable conditions of the downtrodden and exposes the exploitation of the untouchables in the name of religion. The novel depicts the awareness within the author of the contemporary human condition, which he uses to champion against the hurdles of attaining progress, fighting for modernity to envelop the Indian society of that time while keeping the history and tradition of the society that is considerably harmful and circumferences around the notion of humanism alive.

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