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Social Exclusion and the Struggle for Human Dignity in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) presents a powerful account of caste discrimination through the experiences of Bakha, a young sweeper whose life is governed by inherited notions of purity and pollution. Although the novel is frequently appreciated for its humanitarian concerns, its representation of untouchability also reveals the relationship between compulsory labour, social exclusion and psychological humiliation. This paper examines how Mulk Raj Anand transforms the ordinary experiences of Bakha into a critique of the social structures that deny dignity to marginalized communities. Through a close reading of selected episodes, particularly the marketplace humiliation, the exploitation of Sohini and Bakha's encounters with religious and political reformers, the paper investigates the contradictions of a society that depends upon the labour of sweepers while treating them as inherently impure. Furthermore, it argues that while Anand successfully exposes the injustice of caste hierarchy, the novel's unresolved conclusion reveals the limitations of moral reform and technological modernization in the absence of fundamental social transformation.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchable, caste discrimination, Bakha, human dignity, social exclusion, Dalit agency

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand occupies an important position in Indian English fiction because of his sustained engagement with the lives of socially marginalized individuals. His first novel, *Untouchable* (1935), presents the experiences of Bakha, an eighteen-year-old sweeper whose existence is shaped by inherited social distinctions. By concentrating upon a single day in Bakha's life, Mulk Raj Anand exposes the cruelty of a society in which an individual's dignity is determined not by character or conduct but by birth. The significance of *Untouchable* lies in its representation of caste as a system that regulates almost every aspect of everyday life. Bakha is compelled to perform sanitation work, denied equal access to public spaces and repeatedly humiliated because his body is regarded as polluting. Ironically, the society that depends upon his labour refuses to recognize his humanity.

Susheila Nasta observes that the novel emerged from the intersection of Anand's involvement with British literary modernism and his engagement with Gandhian social concerns. She further explains that its publication was controversial because Anand brought the life of a sweeper into the foreground of literary representation. This historical background demonstrates that the novel challenged not only caste discrimination but also established assumptions about appropriate literary subjects. However, the representation of suffering does not necessarily amount to the representation of resistance. Arun P.

Mukherjee questions the limitations of Anand's humanitarian perspective, particularly its treatment of the agency of oppressed communities (37-39). The present paper therefore examines how Anand portrays the relationship between caste, labour and human dignity while also investigating the limitations of the alternatives suggested at the novel's conclusion.

Caste and the Degradation of Human Labour

The opening pages of *Untouchable* establish the relationship between inherited occupation and social degradation. Bakha belongs to a community responsible for cleaning latrines and removing human waste, and the same occupation becomes the justification for his exclusion from society. Mulk Raj Anand describes the outcaste settlement through images of poverty, and unhealthy surroundings. Although the inhabitants perform work essential to maintaining public cleanliness, their own living conditions reveal the neglect imposed upon them. Bakha's identity is inseparable from these surroundings. The narrator presents him as a young man whose physical strength and personal aspirations contrast sharply with the environment in which he has been compelled to live. His condition is not simply an expression of economic poverty; it reflects a social arrangement that makes occupation hereditary. Sukhbir Singh draws attention to the importance of Bakha's physical and psychological endurance. Rather than considering him merely a helpless victim, Singh argues that Anand attempts to emphasize Bakha's capacity for survival and self-assertion (1–3). This interpretation suggests that Bakha's strength must be understood alongside his humiliation.

The relationship between caste and occupation may also be examined through B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*. Ambedkar rejects the argument that caste represents an efficient distribution of occupations. Instead, he describes it as a "division of labourers" (sec. 4). This distinction is important because Bakha's occupation is not determined by individual choice. His inherited identity restricts his opportunities and subjects him to humiliation irrespective of his abilities. Mulk Raj Anand thus exposes a society in which the necessity of labour does not lead to recognition of the labourer's dignity. The opening description establishes an important contradiction: those who clean society's waste are themselves regarded as impure. The novel consequently questions whether notions of pollution possess any moral justification or merely preserve inherited inequalities.

The Marketplace Episode: Humiliation and Self-Recognition

One of the most powerful incidents in the novel occurs when Bakha accidentally touches a caste Hindu while walking through the marketplace. The man responds with anger, publicly accuses him of pollution and humiliates him before the assembled crowd. The incident is significant because Bakha has committed no deliberate offence. His only mistake is failing to maintain the distance expected of someone belonging to an untouchable community. Anand presents the marketplace as a space where ordinary movement is governed by unequal social rules. While caste Hindus may walk freely, Bakha must remain conscious of his body and its supposed capacity to contaminate others. The verbal accusation soon develops into physical humiliation. Bakha is slapped, and the surrounding crowd reinforces the hostility directed towards him. The victim is treated as though he has intentionally violated a sacred prohibition. The emotional effect upon Bakha is particularly disturbing. Although physically stronger than many of those

abusing him, he cannot easily retaliate because his position within the social hierarchy leaves him vulnerable to further punishment.

The novel describes him standing before the crowd with "joined hands" (Anand 42). The gesture reveals the contrast between his physical strength and his enforced submission. His later reflections indicate that the incident has compelled him to confront his social position with painful intensity. Instead of questioning only the aggressor's behaviour, he momentarily blames himself for failing to observe the restrictions imposed upon his community (43). This psychological reaction demonstrates how oppression operates beyond physical violence. The victim gradually becomes conscious of himself through the hostile judgments of society. Margaret Berry observes that caste functions as an organizing principle through which various forms of social and economic inequality are reinforced (44–46). Bakha's humiliation illustrates this interaction between inherited status and the unequal distribution of social power. Mukherjee, however, identifies a deeper contradiction in Anand's representation. Although Bakha experiences anger and resentment, the narrative offers limited opportunities for him to transform these feelings into organized resistance (37-39). The marketplace episode therefore presents two interconnected forms of oppression: the immediate violence of public humiliation and the psychological pressure that compels Bakha to accept restrictions he recognizes as unjust.

Religious Hypocrisy and the Exploitation of Sohini

The episode involving Bakha's sister Sohini and the temple priest Pundit Kali Nath provides another important example of Anand's criticism of caste hierarchy. Sohini must depend upon the assistance of caste Hindus to obtain water because members of her community are prohibited from drawing it independently. This dependence demonstrates that caste discrimination extends into the most basic requirements of everyday existence. Her vulnerability becomes more pronounced when Kali Nath attempts to exploit her sexually. The priest, whose social authority depends upon his association with religion and ritual purity, behaves in a manner entirely inconsistent with the moral status he claims. When Sohini resists his advances, he attempts to conceal his misconduct by accusing her of polluting the temple. Thus, the person claiming to protect religious purity becomes responsible for violating the dignity of a vulnerable woman.

Anand's treatment of Bakha's reaction reveals the complexity of his psychological condition. His anger at the priest's behaviour is intense, yet the narrator observes that the "slave in him asserted itself" (56). The expression is significant because it reveals how deeply inherited subordination has affected Bakha's ability to act. His anger cannot easily overcome the restrictions he has learned to observe. The incident exposes the selective nature of ritual purity. Sohini is regarded as socially untouchable, yet the priest does not hesitate to approach her when motivated by sexual desire. Through this contradiction, Anand demonstrates that religious authority may become an instrument of domination when it is separated from ethical responsibility. Sukhbir Singh discusses Bakha's reaction to the episode as part of a larger pattern of endurance under extreme social pressure (6). His interpretation draws attention to the difference between Bakha's internal resistance and his outward restraint.

The episode also reveals that caste oppression is not experienced identically by men and women. Sohini's inherited status exposes her to discrimination, while her gender increases her vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Anand consequently presents religious hypocrisy as a central mechanism through which inherited power is protected and moral accountability is evaded.

Psychological Resistance and the Desire for Recognition

Bakha's suffering does not completely destroy his desire for self-respect. Throughout the novel, he attempts to imagine an identity different from the one imposed upon him by caste. His admiration for British soldiers is particularly significant. He imitates their clothing, habits and manner of living because they appear to possess the freedom and confidence denied to him. The narrator explains Bakha's fascination with European clothing through his belief that outward appearance might help him acquire the prestige associated with the British (Anand 4). This desire should not be dismissed as youthful vanity. Bakha's attraction to British customs reflects his search for recognition within a society that considers him inferior. The clothes represent the possibility of becoming someone whose presence does not automatically invite contempt. Yet the contradiction remains that the imitation of a socially powerful group cannot transform the inherited hierarchy governing his life. Sukhbir Singh offers an alternative understanding of Bakha's behaviour. He regards the young sweeper's imitation of British soldiers as a psychological strategy through which he attempts to preserve his self-respect and distinguish himself from the humiliating identity assigned to him (12–13). It suggests that Bakha's apparently superficial habits also contain elements of resistance.

Nevertheless, the limitations of such resistance remain evident. Bakha may alter his appearance, but the social rules regulating his movements and relationships remain unchanged. The novel also shows how moments of kindness temporarily restore his confidence. The generosity of Charat Singh, who gives Bakha a hockey stick, provides an important contrast to the hostility he experiences elsewhere. Such incidents suggest that human relationships need not be determined entirely by caste. However, individual kindness cannot by itself remove the structures responsible for Bakha's humiliation. Anand thus distinguishes the desire for dignity from the actual achievement of social equality. Bakha possesses emotional strength and self-respect, but these qualities cannot independently overcome inherited discrimination.

Humanitarian Sympathy and the Problem of Agency

The relationship between sympathy and resistance constitutes one of the central critical debates surrounding *Untouchable*. Anand's narrative encourages readers to identify with Bakha's suffering. His humiliation, anger and uncertainty are presented with considerable emotional intensity. This technique challenges the social assumptions that reduce marginalized individuals to their inherited occupations. Saros Cowasjee's discussion of *Untouchable* emphasizes the novel's moral concerns and evaluates the different possibilities of reform suggested in its conclusion (199–211). His approach reflects the importance of Anand's humanitarian commitment within the development of Indian English fiction. However, later criticism has questioned whether humanitarian representation is sufficient. Mukherjee argues that Bakha's political possibilities remain restricted by the narrative itself. In her assessment, the novel contains a contradiction involving the "denial of power and agency to Bakha" (38). Her observation challenges the assumption that representing the suffering of marginalized people necessarily enables their emancipation. Although Bakha recognizes the injustice of his treatment, the novel gives comparatively little attention to collective resistance among oppressed communities. His future appears dependent upon the intervention of religious leaders, reformers and technological developments. Sukhbir Singh, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of Bakha's endurance. He argues that the protagonist possesses psychological resources that prevent him from surrendering completely to humiliation (17-19). These interpretations need not be regarded as entirely contradictory. Bakha's capacity for endurance demonstrates personal strength, while Mukherjee's criticism reveals the absence of a clearly developed collective strategy for social transformation. The distinction between personal survival and political

emancipation is therefore essential. Anand successfully presents Bakha as a human being capable of emotional depth and moral judgment, but the question of how he might challenge the larger system remains unresolved.

Gandhian Reform, Technology and the Unresolved Conclusion

The final movement of *Untouchable* introduces different possibilities for overcoming caste discrimination. Bakha encounters Christian missionary discourse, hears Gandhi condemn untouchability and learns about modern sanitation technology. Colonel Hutchinson attempts to introduce Bakha to Christianity offer the promise of spiritual equality. However, Bakha finds the missionary's theological explanations difficult to understand and remains uncertain about their relevance to his immediate suffering. Gandhi's speech has a stronger emotional effect because it publicly acknowledges the injustice suffered by communities considered untouchable. The speech offers Bakha a rare experience of recognition. For someone accustomed to humiliation, the knowledge that an influential national leader condemns untouchability becomes a source of hope. Nevertheless, the relationship between Gandhian reform and the structural criticism advanced by Ambedkar requires attention. Ambedkar maintains that caste cannot be eliminated merely through individual goodwill because its foundations lie in inherited social and religious beliefs. His criticism suggests that genuine equality requires a transformation of the institutions maintaining caste distinctions. The final proposal of modern sanitation technology presents a different possibility. The flush system appears capable of reducing the degrading labour associated with the manual handling of human waste. However, technological improvement does not necessarily guarantee social equality. Even if the occupation changes, the inherited prejudices associated with caste may continue to influence social relationships. Mukherjee's criticism becomes particularly relevant here. Bakha's possible emancipation depends upon reforms that others are expected to introduce rather than upon collective political action by the oppressed themselves (38-43). The novel concludes without establishing whether the proposed alternatives will transform Bakha's circumstances. This unresolved ending may be understood as an acknowledgment of the complexity of caste oppression. Anand exposes the injustice of untouchability while leaving readers to consider whether sympathy, religious reform and technological progress can overcome its deeper foundations.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* remains an important contribution to Indian English fiction because it reveals caste discrimination through the everyday experiences of a socially marginalized individual. By concentrating upon one day in Bakha's life, Anand demonstrates how inherited identity regulates occupation, movement, human relationships and psychological well-being. The marketplace humiliation exposes the violence through which caste hierarchy is maintained, while the exploitation of Sohini reveals the hypocrisy concealed beneath claims of religious purity. Bakha's fascination with British culture further demonstrates his desire to escape the degrading identity imposed upon him. Anand's humanitarian commitment gives the novel considerable emotional force. However, the critical perspectives of Mukherjee and Singh reveal a tension between Bakha's personal endurance and his limited opportunities for collective resistance. The novel's unresolved conclusion reinforces this tension. Although religious reform and technological modernization suggest possibilities of improvement, neither guarantees the abolition of inherited inequality. Ultimately, *Untouchable* demonstrates that human dignity cannot be secured through sympathy alone. It requires a transformation of the social relationships and institutions that convert inherited identity into permanent discrimination.

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