

## Reading Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* as a satire on Class Discrimination

N. M. Sri Prasanna<sup>1</sup> & Dr. L. Ronald David<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of English, PSNA College of Engineering and Technology,  
Dindigul, Tamilnadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of English, Bishop Heber College, Trichy Tamilnadu, India

### Abstract

*Mulk Raj Anand is prolific Indian writer whose novels bring out the common issues that haunt the society, especially the underprivileged sections of the Indian society. His novel Untouchable portrays the pathetic plight of the underprivileged class who are treated like menials with hatred, maltreatment, discrimination that are fuelled by the mainstream society and its belief that foster casteism and communal man-made hierarchy. This novel unearths the cruel practices of the upper class and critically examines the double strandedness of the upper class people which makes this novel a satire on the society in general and upper-class in particular. The novel beautifully displays the experience of a underprivileged boy Bakha who is branded, torn and tortured by the fangs of upper class sentiments, class discrimination and social ostracization. Nevertheless, it exposes the weakness and frailties of the upper class, rendering the novel a satirical tone.*

Key words : Class discrimination, doublestrandedness, untouchable, satire ,underprivileged.

### Introduction:

The English language, though not of Indian origin, cannot be written off as an alien language for in the multilingual Indian situation, Indian writing in English both fictional and non-fictional opens up newer ways of absorbing the old ideas which become a significant device in the creative assimilation that has characterized Indian culture from the beginning. The Indian English writer can thus turn his situation to great advantage by drawing more actively from the rich reservoir of Indian language and literature.

The socio-cultural perspective is a theory used in various fields such as psychology and is used to describe awareness of circumstances surrounding individuals and how the social displacement, ambience and cultural factors affect the behavioural patterns of an individual. The rationale of this paper is that in a much developed and modernized society, there are still well pronounced acts of untouchability and discrimination that seldom surfaces to the mainstream since it is considered natural and acceptable by mainstream society. This makes this text more appropriate and pertinent for commenting on the social and cultural perspective of the modern day civilization through the novel *Untouchable*. One cannot deny the influence of race and ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, family traditions, peer groups, and age someone's behavior.

Imagine you happen to see a man speaking earnestly to a tree, what conclusions might you draw? You may argue the man could be suffering from mental illness and needs medication or treatment in a mental institution. But would your opinion change if you knew the man was Native American, and Native Americans who believe in a spiritual philosophy that trees can speak if you listen to them. The context of culture makes a difference in how you view the behaviour, and the socio-cultural perspective takes that into account.

The socio-cultural perspective can also help explain how a similar behaviour can be interpreted differently in two cultures. Japan is a small island nation with a very large population. Those conditions have helped shape the behavior of the people in Japan. Workers who are hired on the public train system may have the job of pushing commuters onto the crowded train so the doors can close without the commuter getting trapped in the doors.

Because there is little space on the trains, the Japanese people who are shoved onto the train often thank the employee who pushed them. They understand the train employee is helping them. If you believe a commuter in New York City would respond differently to being pushed onto a subway train, you are using the socio-cultural perspective to understand behavior. It's easy to see how the lens of culture gives us a different view of similar behaviors.

British novelist such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf used the techniques of the 'stream of consciousness' and the interior monologue. There are several occasions when Bakha's inner thoughts and feelings flow on like shapeless objects flowing in a turbid stream. Listening to Gandhi's public address in Gol Bagh, Bakha thinks of the pros and cons of Gandhianism. Such stretches of stream of consciousness are few and far between. External events dominate internalization.

Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* closely adheres to the Aristotelian divisions of drama. He has used many contrastive characters in order to add to the effectiveness of the novel. The novel spins around a single day's events in the life of Bakha, an eighteen-year-old boy who is the son of Lakha, a sweeper. These two prominent characters are carefully used by the author to criticize the ugly nature of caste-conflict; a conflict which spoils the core of Hindu religion and shuns the path of peace and prosperity. Though this dangerous disease of caste-conflict was on its summit before Independence, it is still well pronounced in almost every state of India.

The untouchables, the socially isolated people who form the most vital part of a nation have to lead a deplorable and miserable life beyond description. In his voluminous novel *Ulysses* James Joyce records the happening of a single day. Mulk Raj Anand mimics this device in two of his novels, *Untouchable* and *The Big Heart*. *The Big Heart* records the events of a single day in the life of Anantha, the coppersmith. *Untouchable* is Mulk Raj Anand's first novel and it brought to him immense popularity and prestige.

This novel analyses the caste consciousness that is prevalent in the society and renders a faithful picture about the predicaments of the under privileged and subaltern community who are forced to live in a mental ghetto though modernization claims to have blurred the lines of caste and class divisions. The story of this novel springs out from the events that happens in the life of a sweeper boy who represents all down trodden society in pre-independence of India. The protagonist of this novel is subjected to torture and discrimination since he hails from a low caste. (*Untouchable*, p. 51) With Bakha, the central character, there are other characters who also were torn apart by the fangs of caste and class conscious society. They are forced to live in mud-walled cottages huddled colony that houses scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes. The big divide is well portrayed by Anand in the opening chapter of the novel. (*Untouchable*, p.9)

Mulk Raj Anand brings out the hypocrisy of the upper class through the characters like pandit Kali Nath who enjoys the touches of Harijan girls. Mulk Raj Anand exposes all this hypocrisy and double dealing through the activities of Kali Nath. In this novel, Bakha represents the subaltern communities or the outcastes in India who are subjected to oppression, injustice, and humiliation. Bakha has been exploited and he has been forced to live life sans any basic privileges much like an animal devoid of any personal stature, emotion or compassion. His anguish and humiliation are not of his alone, but the suffering of whole outcastes and underdogs.

At its core *Untouchable* is a tale about class struggle. The paralyzing and polarizing differences between the various caste levels shape Bakha's day and fuel the narrative. Class and caste play a role in every interaction Bakha has over the course of his day. When his hero Singh speaks with him in the morning, it is with a "grin symbolized six thousand years of racial and class superiority." When Singh promises to give Bakha a hockey stick, he calls forth a "trait of servility" embedded in Bakha that he inherited from his forefathers. Bakha is "queerly humble" and passively content like a "bottom dog". This portrays how caste can be internalized and then manifested in one's personality and demeanor (*Untouchable*, p. 17).

Inter-caste inequality is not only reflected in personal interactions but also fueled by a set of rules that limits and prescribes the rights of outcastes, particularly the untouchables. For example, the outcastes are not allowed to

draw their own water from the public well because this would make the water polluted in the eyes of the upper-caste Hindus. They must prevail upon the charity of higher-caste people drawing water to share some with them. They must take care not to touch those of other castes, and the worst part is that any untouchable should shout a warning about their presence wherever they go. In other words, they were treated as a dreaded disease and a curse.

Mulk Raj Anand critiques the internal fractures amidst the untouchables which jeopardizes their right to freedom, if any, making things worse for the outcastes. Though Caste struggle forms the bedrock of the novel *Untouchable*, it also portrays intra-caste conflicts. Gulabo, Ram Charan's mother, is a great illustration of this. Though she is an outcaste like Bakha and his family, because she and her family are washer people, they occupy a higher place within their shared outcaste status than the sweepers. Gulabo uses her higher station to terrorize Bakha and Sohini. Thus the stratification of the castes isn't only an "inter" issue but also an "intra" one.

Poet Iqbal Nath Sarahar and barrister Bashi discuss Gandhianism. Bashir says that Gandhi is a fraud and that his chakra-spinning is outdated and cannot solve the problem of poverty. Poet Iqbal disapproves of Gandhi's anti-mechanization stand. He says that latrines must be equipped with the mechanical device of the flush. The machine will clean the latrine and no humans will be involved in the dirty work. Bakha thrills on hearing this solution. He rushes home to inform his father of this godsend. The stars 'throbbing' in the sky symbolizes the new age in the offing.

As in R.K. Narayan's novel, *Waiting for the Mahatma* in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*, Gandhi appears personally. He addresses a huge crowd, touching upon several burning problems. He squarely blames the untouchables for their backwardness. They can improve their lot only if they maintain physical cleanliness and refrain from eating carrion and drinking liquor.

Next Gandhi blames high-caste Hindus for keeping their Harijan brethren depressed. He appeals to them to throw open schools, temples and public places to untouchable Gandhi's stand is naive. It is like the proverbial appealing to the peacock to shed a feather. Gandhi defense Hinduism. He blames only the Hindus. He says Hindus misbehave, only they should be blamed, Hinduism.

Of the prime concerns of a great author is to highlight the cause of the dumb and the deserted, the lowly and the lost of an adverse society. The author also flings a harsh irony on the snobbery and hypocrisy, ostentation and fabrication of the aristocratic people who, sometimes stoop low to achieve the end. A writer, the prince of the pen, is the true voice of the million mass particularly of the untouchable and the vulnerable victimized by undeserved tyranny and injustice from the time immemorial. And this is what prompted Mulk Raj Anand to present the deplorable description of the destitutes.

Anand's novel *Untouchable* expresses his great advocacy of the marginalized and defenseless against their age long humiliation, persecution and oppression. It is to be noted that untouchability is one of the greatest evils of our country. The untouchables have been bearing brunt of social persecution from the time immemorial. In the "Manusmriti", the law book of Hindu social code and domestic life, we see the pathetic plight of the untouchable, who are deprived of gaining knowledge particularly the Vedic knowledge.

An untouchable, this book says, has no right to go to the temples; no liberty to listen to the incantations of the Vedas or the other great scriptures. They are also deprived of the right of reading and studying the language, Sanskrit which is supposed to be the richest language of the world. And this resulted in the deterioration of this language which has come to almost a standstill these days.

So one of the causes of the degeneration of the Sanskrit language is untouchability and perhaps this is why Mahama Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar, R.N. Tagore and Swami Vivekananda, Maharshi Dayanand – all have given a scathing attack on the casteist mentality of India. Mahatma Gandhi even went to the extent of saying the untouchable "the Horizon"; that is, the man of God. Truly speaking, the caste division mentioned in the Vedas (Purush Sukta: Sukta) and in the Srimad Bagavad Gita was not to create breaches among various castes but to run the society easily and smoothly.

The novels dealing with social realism were ushered in by famous novelists like Munshi Prem Chand in Hindi and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in Bengali during the 1920s. The direct involvement in values and experience in the Indian context now became apparent. The problems of social life of the common people soon became amalgamated with burning public issues of the day, particularly by the Indian Freedom Struggle, which provided rich and ready material for the writers. The purely social reform novels were inflamed by politics, since any desire to improve the lot of the people was bound to be linked with political independence.

“All these heroes as the other men and the women who had emerged in my novels were dear to me because they were the reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth. And I was only repaying the debt of gratitude I owed them for much of the inspiration –they had given me to mature into manhood, when I began to interpret their lives in my writings. They were not phantoms.

They were the flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood and obsessed me in the way, in which certain human beings obsess an artist’s soul. And I was doing no more than what a writer does when he sees to interpret the truth from the realities of his life.”

The title of the novel reveals that the discrimination is still prevalent in the so many hamlets in the Indian Sub-continent. Anand has deliberately avoided the definite article “the” in the title since it is not about the untouchable Bakha but it is about the status quo of the society in the modern day world. Anand has artistically exposed the socio-cultural perspective of the oppressor and the oppresses through his novel *Untouchable*. He suggests that any orthodoxy and tradition that discriminates human must be killed and men should grow and nurture kindness and sympathy towards each other. *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand clearly intends to show that Hindu religion is meant to perform on this Vedic Mantra rather than the fictional creation of some people.

## References

- 1) Mulk Raj, Anand. *Untouchable*. New Delhi:
- 2) Penguin India books,2001. Print.
- 3) *Classical Arts Universe*. 'Mulk Raj Anand
- 4) *Untouchable Summary and Analysis*. Web.
- 5) 30 Dec 2019.