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Treatment of the Agonised in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract:

Untouchability exists in India from time immemorial. During the Pre-Independence times, the British Colonial rule made the stratification in the name of caste system, and also in the name of 'divide and rule', but after Independence, the practice has continued more for the political existence by using the same as Vote Bank. Art.17 in the Constitution of India regarding Abolition of Untouchability. After 70 years of Independence, the practice of Untouchability is still prevalent in some parts of the country. Mulk Raj Anand's several writings inspired the country and left a strong impact on the minds of the people.

This article is focussed on the works of Mulk Raj Anand and the issues of Untouchability. Caste exploitation has been prevalent in India throughout the ages. Lower caste people are looked down upon and ill-treated. It talks about the struggles of one day in the life of Bakha, the protagonist of the novel. It aims to talk about the issue of Untouchability as one of the major issues which is prevalent till date. The struggles of Bakha and his sister in the story and his agony over the caste system. Undoubtedly, the implications of caste system in the novel depicted the pitiable state of Bakha and his denunciation of pleasures and desires due to it. This article discusses social problems and caste exploitation in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*.

Keywords: Bakha, Caste exploitation, Mulk Raj Anand, Social problems, *Untouchable*.

Untouchable, Untouchability:

The author Mulk Raj Anand was a visionary and wanted to highlight the atrocities committed on the lower castes in the garb of 'Untouchability' by the upper caste Hindus through this novel. The treatment meted out to an untouchable was worse than an animal. It was grossly repressive and regressive that a human was categorised or stigmatised as an untouchable by

virtue of being born in a certain household. The system was deep rooted and ingrained in the social fabric and psyche of the people.

Parliament passed the 'Untouchability' (offences) Act in 1955, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is a poignant tale on the life of Bakha, who was subjected to immitigable social indignities only because of his lowly birth. Bakha, the central character of this novel, is the representative of all the down-trodden in our society during Pre-Independence India. The book highlights the oppression, injustice and humiliation done to the whole community of the outcastes in India. Like Bakha, the protagonist there are other characters in the novel like his sister Sohini who also suffers because of her lowcaste. The paper brings out the agony that Bakha undergoes. The fact that he is an untouchable is portrayed as his fate; there is no way out of his appalling existence as an outcast in the system. He is a victim of the society and his fate is determined by his heredity. His sufferings are resultant of his downtrodden caste and he tries to attain freedom from these social injustices, inequalities. The novel details one day in the life of 'Bakha' who is a sweeper by profession. The day begins for Bakha when his father abuses him and asks him to go and clean the latrines. His day is made up of a series of incidents, some sad, some happy which alternate with studied regularity to evoke varying responses from him.

Caste system was prevalent from time immemorial. All ancient texts viz., Vedas, Upanishads, Samahitas, Smritis, Epics, Puranas and other works clearly mentioned the division of caste system in the society. Shudras were badly and inhumanly treated. As a result, untouchables remained helpless sufferers in their ill-fated condition since centuries in our society.

Dr Ambedkar dedicated his life to uplift the oppressed beings from the clutches of upper-caste Hindus in the form of injustice and cruelty. He became a role-model for them and renamed them as Dalits and motivated them with his message "Get Education, Be United, and Fight for Rights" This had brought about a tremendous change among the Dalits. Also a leader like Gandhiji who was born in an upper caste family but fought over the evil of untouchability with a humane approach motivated them to redeem themselves. The Mahatma called the untouchables as Harijans and toured across the country to mitigate the evil system of untouchability.

The author talks about the life of Bakha, an 18 year old strong and able-bodied, the son of Lakha, the Jemadar of all sweepers in the town. His day starts with cleaning the three rows of

latrines at barracks several times singlehandedly. Yet, he remains comparatively clean. In spite of his reveries, he wanted to become and lead a life like ‘Tommys’ (Englishmen).

In Untouchable, the high caste Hindus do not allow the outcastes to use the nearby well because they think the well would get polluted. The outcasts were not even permitted to draw water directly from the well. Anand describes their cry for water.

Bakha’s sister Sohini, is attractive and young, sits patiently near the well waiting for her turn, gets undue attention from Punditji.

‘Oh, Lakha’s daughter, come here, he said, you have been patient and reward of patience, say the holy books, is supreme. Get away all you noisy ones, get out of the way!’ (Anand 23)

Bakha has become a social outcast. He has to face insults even while buying sweets from a shop.

The shop owner throws the packet of jalebis, like a cricket ball for Bakha to catch to avoid being polluted by the touch of Bakha. He also collects those four annas with the help of his assistant only after splashing some water on them.

When Bakha accidentally touches a man while enjoying his sweet, he was showered with a barrage of insults

‘Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach!’...Do you know you have touched me and defied me, cock eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion!

... Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. (Anand38)

Bakha stands dazed and utterly embarrassed. The viciousness of the verbal attack caught him unawares. The tonga-wallah, a Muslim man, also an untouchable consoled and comforted Bakha. Though he was a human being like the upper castes but by virtue of being born as an untouchable he had to announce or shout out that he was approaching.

‘Posh, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming.’ (Anand41)

Bakha was mentally stressed with all the happenings and unconsciously mounted the temple steps when the pooja was on as he was supposed to clean the surroundings of the temple courtyard. The moment this was noticed he was humiliated and shouted at by the priest and the devotees:

“Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our

whole service! You have defied our temple ...Get down, get away, dog!"

(Anand50)

Bakha learned that his sister Sohini was molested by the old priest. He seethed with anger and rushed towards the temple courtyard. The large crowd retreated looking at his blood shot eyes and rage to kill the priest. But the priest disappeared from the crowd. He asked his sister:

"Tell me, tell me, that he didn't do anything to you!

Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if..." he shouted. (Anand51)

Sohini replied:

'He-e-e just teased me,' she at last yielded. And then when I was bending down to work, he came and held me by my breasts.'(Anand 51)

Bakha was furious and wanted to teach the molester a lesson, but Sohini did not let him go.

The lower castes were dependent on the upper castes even for their basic sustenance. In the afternoons, Bakha, his brother Rakha and his sister Sohini had to go to collect bread from the houses of the other Hindu caste people and from the barracks. Bakha cries like a beggar:

"The Sweeper has come for bread, mother! (Anand55)

Bakha was tired of the shouting and sat down to take a breather and in the bargain got abused for having sat near the door step

'Forgive me, mother .I shouted for bread, but you were busy and dint hear me. I was tired and sat down.'(Anand58)

On seeing his son, Bakha very disturbed, Lakha, who has been a sweeper all his life, consoles him and tells him that all upper castes are not the same and that there are some generous souls amongst the caste Hindus.

Though the society at large does not treat Bakha at par, he continues to be humane. While playing a hockey match. the Burra Babu's son gets injured in the game. Bakha lifts him and carries the boy to his home. But instead of receiving appreciation for this humanitarian act, Bakha receives assault and insults, for he had polluted the injured boy with his touch. Even the mother of the injured boy does not spare him and says:

'Vay, eater of your masters!..What have you done? You have killed my son!'.....

'Give him to me! Give me my child! You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son!'

(Anand 94)

Bakha was crestfallen and angry when his father ordered him to leave the house. His father accused him of being disinterested in his duties and wasting his time playing games as a sahib or an upper caste. Bakha laments:

‘Unlucky, unlucky day! What have I done to deserve this?’ (Anand97)

Bakha happens to meet Colonel Hutchinson of the local Salvation Army, who tries to console him. Bakha was very fond of trousered and hatted men, who donate their clothes to untouchables (servants) and treat them with kindness. Colonel tries to evangelise Bakha and attract him towards Jesus Christ and Christianity:

‘He sacrificed himself out of love..... for Brahmin and the Bhangi.’ ‘Yessuh Messih makes no difference between the Brahmin and the Bhangi.’ (Anand105)

But due to ill treatment meted out to him by the Colonel’s wife’s and her attitude towards the untouchables, Bakha slips away despite the Colonel forcing him to stay back.

Then Bakha hears Mahatma Gandhi, speaking in a public meeting. The Mahatma stresses on the fact that all Indians are equal, and he gives an example of a Brahmin doing a sweeper’s job. This touches Bakha and gives him hope and courage. He also realises that flush system to clean the toilets is the only thing which can redeem him and his brethren. No messiah or self sacrifice from anyone was required other than simple flush system. The introduction of water closets (WC) and main drainage throughout India will slowly but surely eradicate this barbaric system called untouchability.

Bakha had a lot of unanswered questions about the machine which will end the suffering of his.

‘I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us’(Anand128)..and he proceeded towards his home.

The novel Untouchable offers three probable solutions to the treatment meted out to the down trodden like conversion to Christianity, the introduction of the flush system and Gandhi’s appeal to the Harijans to give up the bad habits and join the mainstream of India slowly but surely.

This paper portrays a stark image of the deep rooted exploitation meted out to the lower caste Hindus. The agony and exploitation of Bakha in the story is the suffering of thousands of untouchables in India.

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