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Social Injustice Reflected In Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

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Anand started his literary career with the publication of his first novel *Untouchable* in 1935. The novel form has been a vehicle for conveying his deepest concern for the human predicament in contemporary India. Anand states that he felt interested in some people and they forced him to put them down in novels. His numerous novels and stories from a fictional chronicle is a record of his crusade against social, political, ethical and moral practices which result in the expression of the poor and downtrodden and also injustice against women, the weaker segment of society.

Untouchable follows a day in the life of Bakha, an 18 year old Bhangi boy. Bhangis are the lowest of the low caste and they are given the job of cleaning the latrines and sweeping the streets. This fictional story is set in an outcastes' colony outside an unnamed town during the British occupation. The story is narrated by Bakha who is a hard working boy who never disobeyed his father despite his repugnance for him and his life style. Bakha worked in the barracks of a British regiment and, was caught by the glamour of the 'white man's' life. The British or 'Tummies' as Bakha called them, treated him with respect despite his caste. Bakha tries to rise above his caste by westernizing, yet he receives insults from his friends about his dress. They chide him for dressing like a sahib and trying to appear to be something he is not.

This novel is centered upon Bakha whom he adored as a hero from his childhood. He was physically like a God, played all the games superbly and could recite whole cantos from the epic poem *Heer Ranjah* of Waris Shah. He was obsessed with the tragedy which lay in the fact that this extra ordinary talented boy was always consulted by most of the people because of his low caste, and could never get a chance to go to school.

Untouchable's central message is that Bakha and all Untouchables about "lift your heads to the sky". Anand creates a character in search of his own identity. The basic question the novel forces the reader to ask is how to alleviate the oppression of the Untouchable. He offers three choices to the Untouchable classes. Bakha's choices are conversion to Christianity, the rhetoric of Gandhi and the flesh system suggested by the poet. It discusses the social evil untouchability in our society along with other social injustices like caste, class, and Dalit female oppression in the novel. Seventy eight years after the first publication of the book *Untouchability* and caste still exist in India.

The Caste system is probably the longest surviving hierarchical system in existence in the world today; its root can be traced back to the *Manusmriti*, a sacred document of the Hindus,

dating back to the period between 200B C and 100 B C. the verbal meaning of the word “Dalit” is down trodden and depressed. In India Dalits are such communal groups of people who are denied the right to live as humans. They are compelled to lead a miserable life as they are the last men of society; they are treated as beasts, their shadows on streets during the day time are considered obscene, so they are not allowed to walk in the streets during the day time. An untouchable can himself be polluted by the touch of another untouchable belonging to a lower caste and may be outcaste if he takes food for him. They are also commonly referred to as “the depressed classes”, and are sometimes called the “outcastes” or “the outcaste Hindus” as distinct from higher castes, which are referred to as “caste Hindus”.

Caste is not merely a social institution but part of Hinduism, which on that account has been described as a social religious system. The four features of the caste have a significant bearing in the gender. First, the caste defines social division of labour thus lending status to one kind of work and status loss for another kind of work: secondly, it determines sexual intercourse through marriage alliance. Third, it structures groups in hierarchical relations thus labeling some castes as high and others as low and, finally the concepts of pollution and purity provide prescriptions and prohibitions about social interaction. All these features have negative and worse implications for gender equality and justice.

The story of women in India in general depicts a continued way of exploitation and discrimination. Society refuses to recognize their potentialities, hard work and contribution to the welfare of society. They are considered to be unequal and inferior to men. They have no independence. Women are possessions of man. Their life is to be lived for giving pleasure and comfort to their men. They are called ‘fair sex’ and are shown ‘unfair treatment’ and a Dalit women who fortunately has not fallen prey in to the net cunningly woven by Hinduism is freer and less independent. They are forbidden to remarry. Almost all Dalit spokesmen clearly recognize women to be the most oppressed of their groups, they: “Dalit among the Dalits and the downtrodden among the downtrodden”.

In Untouchable, the target of attack is the bigotry of Hindu Orthodoxy. It is a story of events of a single day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper –boy, by giving us his ‘streams of Consciousness in the manner of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. During the course of the day ,Bakha dozes in the morning sun, chats with his friend, sleeps at the silversmiths alley, watches religious rites at a Hindu temple, plays hockey, meets a Christian missionary and is present at a gathering addressed by Gandhi. This is not a criticism of Anand’s depiction of a day in the life of a sweeper: rather it is to illustrate the liberating effects of his profession. Because no one superior status will hold discourse with him and it is the reality of untouchable life that this is just about everyone. Bakha is free to move anywhere virtually invisibly.

Bakha is eighteen year old son of Jamadar, Lakha who gets a pair of breeches from an English soldier, and tries to be in ‘fassun’. But as the day begins, his work of toilet-cleaning begins. He is steady and efficient in his work. Bakha’s sister Sohini goes to village-well to fetch

water; Kalinath, the village priest of the temple out of the special favor draws water to fill Sohini pail, and feels attracted to her beautiful body, and driving away others suggests her to go to his house later in the day to clean the courtyard. When she goes to his house, he makes improper suggestions to her, and she starts screaming, he shouts 'polluted, polluted', and a crowd of people gather.

Bakha reaches there, and finds Sohini standing with her face-downward, attacked by caste Hindus who sided with Kalinath. Bakha understanding the situation, black with anger but remembering the thousands-year old slavery, controlled himself. Sending away Sohini, He goes to collect food from door to door. There also he meets with insult, people throw loaves of bread towards him as if he were a dog.

When he went through the way of high caste people they became angry and scolded him as polluted. Bakha shared this experience with his father:

"They insulted me this morning; they abused me because as I was walking along a man happened to touch me. He gives me a blow. And a crowd gathered round me, abusing and... He couldn't continue. He was possessed by an overpowering feeling of self-pity".
"They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt".

Even medicines were not provided to the outcastes. In childhood, Bakha experienced such a situation when he fell ill with fever. The Hakkim refused to consult him. Lakha expresses his experiences to Bakha,

"I remained standing. Whenever anyone passed by I would place my head at their feet and ask them to tell the Hakkim. But who would listen to a sweeper? Everyone was concerned about himself".

In the afternoon, Bakha attends the marriage of his friend Ram Charan's sister, a washerman by profession; another friend, Chota, leather-worker's son and Bakha forget the difference of sub-caste and share sugar-plums. They plan to play hockey in the evening. Then, Bakha goes to Havildar Charat Singh, who unmindful of Bakha's caste treats him affectionately, and gives him a new hockey-stick. The hockey-match results into free-fight in which a little boy is injured and bleeds. Bakha carries the child in his arms, but the child's mother abuses him, because he polluted the child:

"oh! You eater of your masters what have you done?...Give me my child. You have defiled the house, besides my wounding son".

The novel shows that none of the western theoretical models of attaining social justice is appropriate to theorizing the tragedy of Bakha's deterministic existence and the stubborn order that is responsible for the creation of the Bakha's society. Ironically the temple priest, over

powered by his sexual desire for Bakha's sister Sohini, must have been terribly about the meaning of the words "purity" and "defilement". Untouchability is the major issue in our society.

Anand gives three choices to the Untouchables. There are conversion to Christianity, they rhetoric of Gandhi, and the flesh system suggested by the poet. The Christian missionary simply offers salvation from untouchability through converting to his religion. Bakha was turned off by this because he had no desire to change his religion and adopt the confusing teachings of this white man. The Christian missionary could not properly explain his religion because he was too busy singing hymns which were incomprehensible to Bakha. The only part of the missionary talk that he took interest in was the idea that God sees everyone as equal however, when Bakha meets the missionary's wife, he sees the scorn in her eyes and realizes that replacing one's religion with another will not change people's attitude. Then he happens to listen the modern flush system of the poet, Iqbal Nath. Bakha's day begins with his father's abuse and ends with Gandhi's speech. In the history of social movement in India it was Gandhi who organized a systematic mass movement against untouchability for the first time and he was the first modern leader who presented a sustainable program of action to root out untouchability. Gandhi tries to eliminate untouchability from society. But Caste system still persists in India.

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