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REVIEW ARTICLE

CASTE AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS BY MULK RAJ ANAND

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¹Madhu Bala ²Dr. Balram S. Sorot

¹Research Scholar, Singhania University, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India

²PHD, Supervisor, Singhania University, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India

OVERVIEW

The Story of a Young Bhangi Untouchable follows a day in the life of Bakha, an 18 year old Bhangi boy. Written by Mulk Raj Anand in 1935 the fictional story is set in the outcastes' colony outside of an unnamed town during the British occupation. The story is narrated by Bakha who is a hard working boy who never disobeys his father despite his repugnance for him and his lifestyle. Bakha had worked in the barracks of a British regiment and, "had been caught by the glamour of the 'white man's' life ". The British, or 'Tommies' as Bakha called them, treated him with respect despite his caste. "Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement ... and he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life ". The simplest way for Bakha to imitate the Tommies was through 'fashun', "by which he understood the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots, etc.. ". Bakha is trying 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. However, it seems to be the only way he can remove himself from his caste. This Story was very well written and kept my attention throughout.

Bhangi's are the lowest of the low caste and they are given the job of cleaning the latrines and sweeping the streets. The dirty nature of the Bhangi's work furthers the view of them as impure. However, they are unable to maintain good hygiene because they are not allowed to access the local well, as there use would render it impure.

No matter the skill or intelligence of the person he is confined by caste to his job. Bakha is a very dexterous workman, passerby's often marveled at his skill saying he is, "a bit superior to his job, not the kind of man who ought to be doing this [cleaning toilets] ". Despite Bakha's skill and work ethic he has no chance of moving up in his life. He is forever confined to his dirty, demeaning job. Each day Bakha saw the Brahmin boys walk to school and he dreamed of going with them. "How nice it must be to be able to read and write! One could read the papers after having been to school. One could talk to the sahibs"

Again Bakha expresses interest in the West, by being educated and able to talk with the sahibs he would rise above his caste. However, he has no chance for education as outcastes were not allowed in school because "the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man's son ". Bakha's desire to be educated like the sahibs was strong and he offered to pay another boy to teach him to read. Bakha did not have much money so his offer to pay was indicative of his desire for education. Education was denied to people like Bakha and by becoming educated Bakha hoped to distance himself from the stigma of his caste. A lot of Bakhas actions are motivated by his desire to distance himself from the outcastes. He tries to dress western, he wants to be educated, and he becomes disgusted with the filth of his brother.

Bakha endures one of the most humiliating and depressing days of his young life in this story. From sunrise on he is forced to deal with discrimination, hatred and hypocrisy. He is woken this early morning by his fathers shouts. The first chore of the day is to clean the latrines before the rest of the community gets up to use them. When Bakha sleeps in he is chided by a local Hindu man who wants to use the toilet, "Why aren't the latrines clean, you rogue of a Bakhe! There is not one fit to go near! ". Bakha takes this customary abuse in stride and begins to clean the toilets. The local man is thankful for Bakha's work and offers him a hockey stick in a rare display of generosity. This gift pleases Bakha greatly as he has "the smile of a slave overjoyed at the condescension of his master, more akin to pride than to happiness".

Bakha is compared to a slave a number of times throughout this Story. As the above quote shows Bakha is more proud that he satisfied the needs of the local Hindu man then he is happy that he got a new hockey stick. Despite Bakhas hatred for his job and lifestyle he still feels pride when serving the higher castes. Bakhas duty in life seems to be imbedded into him. As much as he wants to separate himself from his outcaste position, it is the only one he has had in his life. He has been conditioned to do his duty and to do it well. That is why he takes pleasure when the higher castes compliment him on his job or show him some other sign of courtesy. As

much as Bakha hates the work he recognizes that it is his duty, so he does the work with no complaint.

More humiliation is in store for Bakha before his day is out. His curiosity takes him to a local temple, where he climbs the steps to get a glimpse of the wonders inside. Untouchables are not allowed to see the inside of the temple for purity reasons. While Bakha was peering through the window he was interrupted by the priest shouting, "Polluted! Polluted! ". Soon a crowd had gathered and they all berated Bakha saying they would need to perform a purification ceremony now. "Get off the steps you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service!," shouted the crowd. Bakha ran down to the courtyard where his sister was waiting. Here he got a shock as the priest claimed, "I have been defiled by contact". Sohini explained the priest's claim saying, "That man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled." Bakha was enraged by this and flew into a tirade. Unfortunately the priest had gone and the crowd had dispersed. This is an example of the hypocrisy of the other castes in their attitudes towards the untouchables. The higher castes view them as impure and make them do all the menial labor, yet they are not adverse to sexual relations with them. It seems the idea of impurity is only there to when it suits the higher castes desires.

The story goes on to show even more examples of the harsh treatment of untouchables. Reading this story has given me an even better idea of the realities of the untouchables. Nothing in their lives is made easy, and it reminds me of all that we take for granted. At the end of Bakha's day he finds himself following a crowd of people who are going to hear Gandhi speak in town. Bakha listens attentively to Gandhi's speech and much of it strikes a chord in Bakha's heart. Gandhi tells the untouchables to stop accepting this treatment, he wants them to refuse the leftovers of the high castes. The road out of untouchability is to purify their lives, they need to improve their hygiene, and get rid of their vices.

This story serves to ask the question how to alleviate the exploitation of the untouchable class in India? The Christian missionary, Gandhi, and the local poet who debates Gandhi's speech afterwards offer views on this question. However, the views are not satisfying because none of them offer the possibility for the untouchables to take action against their oppression. The Christian missionary simply offers salvation from untouchability through converting your 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 are incomprehensible to Bakha. The idea that Bakha was born with sin turned him away. The only part of the missionary's 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 for him

and realizes that replacing one religion with another will not change people's attitudes.

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