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## **A BRIEF STUDY OF UNTOUCHABLE**

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# A Brief Study of Untouchable

Archana Grover<sup>1\*</sup> Dr. Chhote Lal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Faculty of English, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan

**Abstract – *Untouchable* (1935) is a sociological novel which seeks to stress the evils of untouchability by focusing attention on the miserable plight suffering, poverty and degradation of a large section of Indian society. This evil has been high lightened by studying what happens to the soul of Bakha on a single eventful day. Sakha as an untouchable seeks his freedom in the infallibility of caste discrimination, with its hypocrisy, cruelty, deceit and in humanity. He stands passive and bewildered at the immensity of horror, hoping for a change. Bakha, thus, is a symbolic figure, a universal figure, a larger than life figure, which stands for a large segment of Indian society which has been doomed to suffering since times immemorial. To stress the universal nature of his theme, the novelist has called it *Untouchable* and not 'The Untouchable'. It is the story not of Bakha's suffering alone, but of the sufferings of all untouchables as a class. This novel deals with the lives and fortunes of humble scavenger.**

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Anand, on the threshold of a literary career, makes an effective protest against the stigma of pollution attached to untouchables. M. K. Naik says:

"He exhibits a sure grasp of the psychology of both the caste Hindu and untouchable.... his picture of relationship between them is objective and balanced."<sup>1</sup>

Thus in **Untouchable**, Anand is deeply concerned with a social problem of national dimension and he takes up a role of a writer committed to the eradication of the evils of society. As Srinivas Iyengar points:

"The novel presents the picture of a place of a society, and of certain persons, not easily to be forgotten: a picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy."<sup>2</sup>

The novel remains a telling document of relevance even today in view of recent atrocities being committed on Harijans by caste Hindus. The untouchability, the social evil is shown with its deep roots. In other words, it reflects the deep-rooted prejudices, the barbarism and the cruelty with which men inflict human beings who are still non -entities in the eyes of society. Anand has attempted a fictional depiction of felt experiences of this dehumanizing social evil, which results in loneliness, loss of identity and ruthlessness. Anand himself says:

"The book poured out like hot lava from the volcano of my crazed imagination during a long week-end. I remember that I had to finger exercise in order to ease the strain on my right hand, and I must have slept only six hours in three nights, while writing this drama. And even during the six hours, I kept on dreaming about

several strains in the central character of Bakha, almost as though I was moulding his personality and transmutating it from actuality into the hero of a nightmare."<sup>3</sup>

Anand's views and attitudes which condition his novel **Untouchable** are the result of a number of influences that operated upon him from his childhood onwards. His heredity, his social milieu, his education, the books he has read and the people he has met have all influenced him to write such a novel on untouchability.

No doubt, by caste, Anand is a kshatriya, but as a child, he played with the children of the sweepers attached to an Indian regiment, he grew to be fond of them and to understand a tragedy which he did not share with them has just the right mixture of insight and detachment and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy, has given him depth. Thus Bakha is a living character whom he met in his childhood. Therefore, there was little about his hero in his life that Anand did not know.

An attitude to protest against this type of exploitation, which is based on casteism first developed in his mind when he was very small. Once Bakha, the real life prototype of the hero of **Untouchable** carried Anand bleeding from a hit on his head by a stone thrown by fellow friends and brought him home. Anand's mother snatched away her son from a tender embrace of Bakha and instead of saying thanks, she berate him for polluting her son by his touch. Anand confesses that this inhuman treatment of his childhood friend lay in his inner consciousness.

There is another incident which actually made Anand realize the meaning of untouchability. Once he himself was separated on a board ship by some westerners and with a shock he realized 'what it meant to be an untouchable.'

Through **Untouchable** Mulk Raj Anand draws our attention to a number of questionable customs and social ways of the Hindu Society of the thirties particularly the caste system. It is socially conscious to the various problems of the untouchables who are ill-treated, underfed and exploited by the upper strata of our society.

Mahatma Gandhi's influence on Anand's writing cannot be ignored. Anand admits that when he had read a story of an untouchable boy, Uka, written by Mahatma Gandhi, he was influenced by this sensitive and emotional character of Uka that he himself decided to write a novel on the life of untouchables. And when he presented his novel to Mahatma Gandhi, he was asked by the old man about the subject of the story. Anand replies-

I have written a novel about a day in the life of Bakha—about how he is slapped on the face by a caste Hindu.... as you have done in your story about the sweeper, Uka."<sup>5</sup>

One more factor which shocked him badly was religious bigotry, hypocrisy and formalism and degeneration of institutionalised religion into an instrument of exploitation based on caste and class. There is an incident—temple incident—which shows how Anand is deeply acquainted with the religious diplomacy and his emotions towards such situations are clearly pictured:

"As if by magic, he (Bakha) is drawn towards the temple and mounts the first two steps. But the oppressed underdog in him exerts itself and he retreats to collect the litter. The urge to see his gods becomes over-whelming as the temple stood challenging before him and then 'seemed to advance towards him like a monster.'"<sup>6</sup>

With a sudden onslaught, he captures five of the fifteen steps another push and he is on the top step, crouched like a dog at the door of a banquet hall.

However, unable to suppress his curiosity, he goes near the temple-door and catches just a glimpse, of the dark, sanctuary and its idols. He is moved by the chorus of devotees. The smell of incense, the ritualistic chanting the hoarse shouts of triumphant worshippers overpower him and his hands joined unconsciously and his head hung in the worship of the unknown God.<sup>7</sup> But the next moment, Bakha's homage to his God is answered with the crisis of "Polluted, Polluted, raised by the temple priest. The whole crowd takes up the cue and starts shouting the same words. Bakha is unnerved. Another torrent of abuses overpowers him. As it all this was not enough, priest shouts now from

near the temple that he too has been polluted, more severely so because he has been defiled by contact of Sohini, Bakha's sister. As Bakha manages to take Sohini away from the courtyard she tells him how the priest had made improper suggestions to her when she was cleaning the courtyard. Bakha is furious that the Brahmin dog should be vile enough to accuse his sister of polluting him when he had actually tried to seduce her. When he hears the truth, he moves in giant strides to avenge the insult of his sister. But the poltroon crowd takes to his heels. Only the Gods remain secure in their individual inches, rebuking Bakha with their cold, impersonal stares. Everything in the episode is exact: we have the sweeper's pre-occupation with his job, the sinister appeal of the temple to the uninitiated (something akin to Forster's Malabar caves) his obeisance to the Gods, the hypocrisy of the priest, the cowardice of the 'twice born' Hindus, the hero's immediate impulse to avenge the insult and his eventual failure to do so.

Actually untouchables were being treated in the same way in those days. Religious diplomacy and hypocrisy were real instruments to exploit the untouchable class. As in this incident, priest (Brahmin), the so-called custodian of religion is on the one hand ready to have physical relation with a beautiful untouchable girl, Sohini, and on the other hand, Bakha, Sohini's brother is not allowed even to touch the steps of the temple. Anand tries to uncertain such religious bigotry in his novel **Untouchable**.

Because of all these factors, the old age injustice perpetrated by traditional Hindu society upon a whole class of people within its fold has become the central theme of **Untouchable**. To make a sweeper the hero of his novel was a revolutionary departure for an Indian writer of the nineteen-thirties. Indian fiction in most of the Indian languages was then a fiction about and higher classes for the middle classes by middle class writers and if Indian writer wanted to write about so ugly a subject, he would hardly have known the life of his protagonist in detail, but in contrast with this, Anand was well-equipped to embark upon this revolutionary departure, Anand does not eliminate the ugly aspects of human nature from his picture of life. He knows that filth and dirt is as much a part of life as beauty, cleanliness and decency. He had a first acquaintance with the life of untouchables who were being compelled to live and work in such ugly places. Because of such deep knowledge about the life of untouchables, he became able to write **Untouchable**. E. M. Forster remarks:

"**Untouchable** could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however, sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity."<sup>8</sup>

In **Untouchable**, Anand is on sure ground as he is denouncing an aspect of traditional Hindu society which deserves whole sale condemnation.

Anand's condemnation of untouchability derives its effectiveness from a total control of all the aspects of this problem. In his dealing with the untouchable, the caste Hindu is armed with the feeling of six thousand years of social and class superiority—a feeling which refuses to accept the fact that the untouchable is a human being, but insists on treating him like a sub-human creature, to be ignored or bullied or exploited as the occasion demands. It is this which makes the temple priest Pundit Kali Nath treat Sohini like a juicy morsel of girlhood to be molested with impunity; and the same attitude prompts the betel leaf seller from whom Bakha buys cigarettes to fling the packet at the untouchable "as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop."<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, six thousand years of suppression have left deep marks upon the untouchable's life and psychology.

M. K. Naik says in this context, "Weakness corrupts and absolute weakness corrupts absolutely."<sup>10</sup> An untouchable, due to his suppression is caught in a vicious circle from which there is no escape. Compelled to clean dung and live near dung he has to depend for water and food on the mercy of the caste Hindus. Cleanliness can hardly be a value in a life led in this fashion—a fact which helps perpetuate the social ostracism to which the untouchable has already been condemned. But it is his mind and soul which have really suffered far greater damage. Eternal servility is the price of untouchability Bakha's father cannot even dream of harbouring any resentment for the treatment he receives from the world. When Bakha reports him about the Pandit's attempt to molest Sohini, Lakha's reaction shows how far the son has advanced ahead of his father. Father who has accepted his situation says:

"You did not abuse or hit back, did you?" he (Lakha) asked.... "No, but I was sorry afterwards that I didn't replied Bakha. "I could have given a bit of my hand." "No, no, my son, no", said Lakha, We can't do that. They are our superior. One word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kind."<sup>11</sup>

That is why; the servility of centuries which is ingrained in Bakha also, paralyses him even when he vaguely thinks of retaliation. When he accidentally touches and pollutes a man on the street, a crowd gathers round him. Then, "his first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, far away from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skelton-like bodies of Hindu merchants, but a morel one."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, when at the temple, Sohini tells Bakha about her molestation by the Priest, his first reaction is: "I will go and kill him." Next moment, however.

"he felt the cells of his body lapse back chilled. His eyes caught sight of the magnificent sculptures over the doors extending right up to pinnacle. They seemed vast and fearful and oppressive. He was cowed back. The sense of fear came creeping into him. He bent his head low. His eyes were dimmed. His clenched fists relaxed and fell loosely by his side. He felt weak and he wanted support."<sup>14</sup>

Through these incidents, Anand wants to show how the servility of centuries has affected this large section of society. In the very beginning of the novel, Anand depicts the picture of the colony in which untouchables were compelled to live, and how they have accepted their situation. It is situated far away from the city where the upper caste Hindus live and also from the barracks in the cantonment area. It is a colony of mud-balled cottages huddled together in two rows. There live the scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass cutters and other out-castes from the Hindu society.

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## Corresponding Author

**Archana Grover\***

Research Scholar, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan