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UNTOUCHABILITY AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

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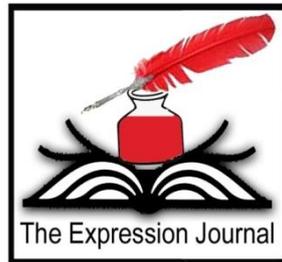
Abstract

Indian social stratification was based on the *Chaturvarya* System in ancient time and our society was divided into four main *varnas* i.e. the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Their works were assigned to people according to their *varnas*. Among these *varnas*, the first three were considered in the category of the upper castes while the fourth *varna* was considered at the bottom level in the social hierarchy. With the passage of time, a new group of people was formed by the upper caste people and the people of this group were called untouchables. These people of the lower castes were called untouchables and the life of these people has been very pitiable. The women belonging to this category had to suffer a lot in their life just because they had to remain triply marginalized due to caste, class and gender. Indian Writing in English has so many texts which deal with the theme of untouchability, caste prejudice and gender discrimination. In his paper, I have tried to analyse Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* (1935) from Dalit and gender perspectives. It has also been tried to analyse Dalit women's life through the character of Sohini in M. R. Anand's novel *Untouchable* how the girls of the untouchables have to suffer both in the home being a female and outside home being a Dalit girl.

Keywords

Dalits, Untouchability, Caste, Gender Discourse, Marginalization, Exploitation.

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Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan are called three pillars of Indian Writing in English who have enriched Indian literature with their outstanding works. Mulk Raj Anand is considered the messiah of the underdogs and his works are centered for the poor, labourers, marginalized and the Dalits. Anand's well-known work *Untouchable* was published in 1935. This novel depicts how a central protagonist of the novel Bakha and his family have to live their life as outcasts and marginalized. Bakha is an eighteen-year-old "strong and abled-bodied" (9) boy who is the in-charge of the three rows of latrines.

The novel depicts the life of the untouchable sweepers who do the work of cleansing the sewerages, streets and especially public latrines of the people. Mulk Raj Anand has given a realistic portrayal of the life of the Dalits. There are so many incidents in the novel which describe how Bakha and his sister remain the most marginalized characters in this novel.

So far as Bakha's life is concerned, he is merely a teenager and his father's behaviour and language towards him is not good. His father Lakha has the responsibility of cleaning the public toilets and he puts the pressure of work on his son to clean the toilets. He used to abuse him and forced him to do this work, "Get up, oh you Bakhya, you son of a pig....Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoys will be angry (12). Bakha was deprived of his education, otherwise in this age he should have been studying in a school but being an untouchable, his father orders him to take the work of cleaning the toilets. "Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten!" (13). But when Bakha was seriously ill, his father requests doctor to save his life. This shows that his father also had a tender heart.

Bakha had high aspirations in his life and he also wants to live his life like other English men. He accepts modern ways of dressing as "he has secured a pair of old breeches and from a sepoy a pair of old boots; he would, if he could, like to look the

white foreigner and so be in the fashion” (Iyengar 336). He wanted to go to school but his father tells him that the schools are only meant for babus, not for the bhangis. Bakha gets humiliation from the upper caste people. Sometimes Havildar Charat Singh also talks rudely with him otherwise his behaviour with Bakha remains usually good. He says:

“Oh Bakhya! Oh, Bakhya! Oh you scoundrel of a sweeper’s son! Come and clean a latrine for me.... Why are not the latrines clean, you rogue of a Bakhe! There is not one fit to go near. I have walked all around! Do you know you are responsible for my piles? I caught the contagion sitting on one of these unclean latrines!” (13-14)

Though Havildar Charat Singh outwardly shows a bit rough behaviour towards Bakha but he is very kind to Bakha. When Bakha goes to Charat Singh’s place, he gives Bakha a hockey stick. When Bakha comes to know that he will get a hockey stick, he becomes extremely thrilled and does his work with double energy singing a song.

And he slowly slipped into a song. The steady heave of his body from one latrine to another made the whispered refrain a fairly audible note. And he went forward, with eager step, from job to job, a marvel of movement dancing through his work. (17)

Mulk Raj Anand can be called the pioneer of the proletarian novel and Bakha remains the most endearing character who believes in his hard work. He is called the maker and breaker of world. Mulk Raj Anand admires Bakha and even adores him just because he is a representative of the underdogs and untouchables.

Bakha and other outcaste have obsession for the food but Bakha is quite different from others and he thinks differently. When he reaches home exhausted, hungry and thirsty, he remains less interested in food and more about telling the pitiable stories about the injustice done with the untouchables. Their family lives from hand to mouth. One day when he reaches home, he finds that his brother Rakha has gone to bring food from the barracks. His father show much selfish attitude when the latter says to Sohini, “Whether you want to eat or not, I must” (83). When Bakha notices his father’s attitude, he gets angry and says, “I feel hungry too,” he thought, “Perhaps much hungrier than he does. He has been sitting here all day” (83).

Bakha gets irritated when his father abuses him even in the morning. He gets angry to see the attitude of his family members. His brother’s unclean habit of not washing his hands and running nose irritates him and he does not want to eat food. It is his mother who urges him to eat, “Bakha got up from his chair unwillingly and, crouching by the kitchen, casually dipped his hand in the basket. There was a heap of food there, broken pieces of chapattis, some whole ones and lentil curry in a bowl” (93).

Bakha’s family members do not use different plates for each person like other upper caste people. Mulk Raj Anand has depicted the problem of untouchability in this novel how the lower caste people are not allowed to pull water from the upper caste people. The women have to wait for some upper caste people who can draw water for them from the well because Dalit women were not

allowed to touch the bucket of the well. They are forced to implore the upper caste people who usually ignore them.

Though Bakha's job was dirty but he would remain clean. He did not even let his sleeves dirty and he looked much sensitive, intelligent and sincere to his work. He wants do work hard in his life and high dreams like other upper caste people. He is interested to eradicate untouchability from India that's why he goes to listen to Mahatma Gandhi's speech and is filled with enthusiasm that untouchability will come to an end soon.

Mulk Raj Anand has described both Bakha and Sohini as positive characters but their father Lakha has been narrated like an ordinary sweeper of that time who is uneducated and vulgar. Bakha's brother Rakha had a dirty face and flies congregated on his face to taste his saliva and he was ugly. He also was like his father.

He seemed a true child of the outcaste colony, where there are no drains, no light, no water; of the marshland where people live among the latrines of the townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere; of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night pitch-dark. He had wallowed in its mire, bathed in its marshes, played among its rubbish-heaps; his listless, lazy, lousy manner was a result of his surroundings. (84)

Bakha was aware that he belongs to an untouchable community and he would keep distance from others. He had had some bitter experiences in his past that even the touch of an upper caste people will be very bad to him and he may be beaten and abused. He gets frightened to imagine that situation, "I have erred... I forgot to call. I beg your forgiveness. It won't happen again!" (35). Bakha would maintain a safe distance from the upper caste people. He has always these words in his mind that he is an untouchable and he must keep himself away from the upper caste people. He had to warn other upper caste people by telling that he is an untouchable, "Posh, posh, sweeper coming!" (66). Mulk Raj Anand Has depicted the anguish of an untouchable through Bakha. These words of Bakha are quite moving:

It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-Untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the world! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (43)

Bakha's sister Sohini also is the victim of untouchability and marginalization. Her beauty becomes a curse to her because even the village women also feel jealous of her due to her beauty. When one day there was no water in the house, she goes to bring water from the well where there was a long queue of women. Among them, there was a woman named Gulabo who starts abusing Sohini without any rhyme and reason just because she stars thinking Sohini her rival in beauty. She says:

"Think of it! Think of it! You Bitch! You prostitute! Wanton! Now your mother hardly dead. Think of laughing in my face, laughing at me who am old enough to be your mother. Bitch... Ari, you bitch! Do you take me for a buffoon? What are you laughing at, slut?" aren't you ashamed of showing your teeth to me in the presence of men, you prostitute?" (21-22)

Bakha's sister Sohini was very beautiful.

She had a sylph-like form, not thin but full-bodied within the limits of her graceful frame, well rounded on the hips, with an arched narrow waist from which descended the folds of her trousers and above which were her full, round, globular breasts, jerking slightly, for lack of a bodice, under her transparent muslin shirt. Bakha observed her as she walked along swaying. She was beautiful. He was proud of her with a pride not altogether that of a brother for a sister. (22)

Not only this when Pandit Kali Nath was drawing water from the well, his eyes fall on the beautiful body of Sohini. He calls her and to fill her pitcher with water and orders her to come to his house to clean his toilet. He says, "Oh, you Lakha's daughter, come here. You have been patient and the reward of patience, say the holy books, is supreme. Get away, you noisy curs, get out of the way!" (25). Sohini faces many problems in her home after the death of her mother. When she brings water from the well, her father abuses her and tells her to give him food to eat. He says, "I thought you were dead or something, you daughter of a pig! No tea, no piece of bread, and I am dying of hunger. Put the tea on and call those sons of a pig, Bakha and Lakha, to me" (27). All this shows his selfish nature. He is careless also who does not think even for a moment that sending Sohini alone at pundit's house may be risky for Sohini. But he does not think from that perspective. When Sohini tells that she will have to go to clean the family house of Pundit Kalini Nath, her father carelessly allows her to go alone. He says, "Well then go and do so. *why do you eat my head?*" (27). Thus, using these words for an unmarried girl are not good by a father.

The next day when Sohini goes there, Pundit Kali Nath tries to molest her. Sohini's cries reach her brother's ears and Bakha comes running to save the honour of his sister. He feels shocked to hear that the pundit was putting the blame of Sohini and the people were taking the favour of Pundit Kali Nath just because he belonged to an upper caste. Bakha becomes enraged but he knew that he cannot harm Kali Nath. In fact, the Pundit Kali Nath was the lover of Gulabo, the washer woman in her youth.

Thus, Mulk Raj Anand has attacked on untouchability through this novel. Varun Arya writes, "The evil of untouchability is the main theme of the novel *Untouchable*. It draws our attention toward the miseries faced by the untouchables" (27). It is a social evil that must be uprooted from the human society. Bakha and his sister Sohini have to face problems just because they are poor untouchables. Bakha's poverty becomes a stumbling block in his marriage with a girl of his caste. He is humiliated, threatened and sometimes beaten for being an untouchable. The wrath of an upper caste man has been depicted in the following words:

Keep to the side of the road, you low caste vermin! Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach? Do you know you have touched me and defiled me you cockeyed son of a low-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning! (39)

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