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UNTOUCHABILITY AND POVERTY IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

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Abstract

In ancient times, Indian society was classified into four *varnas*—Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras - on the basis of the nature of work people did. In the social stratification of *Chaturvarna System*, Shudras were considered the lowest class and their duty was to serve the society. They were considered so abominable that even their touch could defile the upper caste people. According to the distorted interpretation of the Vedas, the Priests or the Brahmanas possessed the authority to become a spiritual mentor and occupied the highest place in the Hindu sociological pyramid. The Shudras remained at the bottom of this social pyramid and the untouchables were not considered even part of the society. They were assigned such tasks which upper caste people did not do at any cost. Many Indian writers have written their works on caste prejudice, dalit issues or subaltern situations. Among them Mulk Raj Anand, who is also known as the messiah of the underdogs, is a pioneer writer whose novel *Untouchable* (1935) became a best-selling novel due to its appealing and moving theme. This paper explores the themes of caste discrimination, poverty, jealousy and untouchability in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* through two main characters of this novel Bakha and Sohini.

Keywords

Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, Indian Writing in English, Bakha, Sohini, Poverty, Dalits, Untouchability, Constitutional Laws.

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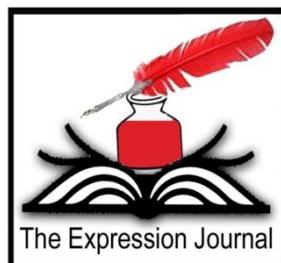
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Mulk Raj Anand' is one of the "Three Big" writers of Indian Writing in English. Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand are called the three pillars who laid down the foundation of Indian Writing in English. Mulk Raj Anand's novels have been written generally on those people who belong to the lower economic stratum of the society. He has written his novels on farmers, labourers, coolies, sweepers, low caste people and the untouchables. Indubitably, his novel *Untouchable* talks about a time when priests stood as middlemen between the worshipper and the worshipped and took undue advantage of their position. These were the religious people i.e. priests who created a gap between God and the worshipper and this gap paved the way for exploitation of the low caste people. Untouchability is the recurring theme of the novel. Varun Arya also writes about it, "The evil of untouchability is the main theme of the novel *Untouchable*. It draws our attention toward the miseries faced by the untouchables" (27).

Mulk Raj Anand's debut novel *Untouchable* can be called the best work that deals with the theme of suffering, humiliation and exploitation in the lives of the marginalised. He not only revealed the sufferings of these poor and marginalised people but also exposed the atrocities and cruelties these people had to face at the hands of rich and higher classes of society. Thus, casteism is the main theme of this novel. Uma Chakravarty writes about caste:

Caste is not merely the opposition between pure and impure but at a fundamental level it incorporates other kinds of oppositions such as domination and subordination, exploitation and oppression, based on unequal access to material resources. (Chakravarty 21)

The novel is about the central character Bakha, his sister Sohini, his father Lakha and their relationships with the low caste people. In the very beginning of the novel, the novelist has described the most degraded conditions under which the untouchables had to dwell. Bakha lives in a Bhangi Basti, an 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

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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, the main protagonist of the novel, is an eighteen-year-old "strong and abled-bodied" (9) boy who is in-charge of the three rows of latrines. Bakha is allotted work after work by his father without being given any time to take rest. Ignoring that Bakha is hardly in his teens, his father Lakha pressurises him to clean toilets in a very foul and abusive language. He shouts at him, "Get up, oye you Bakhya, you son of a pig....Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoys will be angry (12).

Bakha should have been in school at this age but his father, instead of sending him to school, makes him work so that he may help him in running the family. Not only this, Bakha's mother had died and he had to do all the domestic chores also along with his sister. But his father does not think about it and he merely offends him daily with his abusive language. He says, "Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten!" (13). In spite of these adverse conditions, Bakha is a highly ambitious boy who wants to become like English officers. He wants to go to school but his father tells him that schools are not meant for the untouchables and these are only for *babus*.

Bakha gets humiliated by many people in his life. Upper caste people humiliate Bakha for his low caste. Even Havildar Charat Singh also talks rudely to him,

"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 generally behaves roughly with Bakha but at certain times, he is considerate to him. He offers Bakha a hockey stick also. But these instances are rare cases otherwise he has to face humiliation everywhere. Bakha has to bring food from barracks and their poverty brings distaste and anger in the family. His brother does not wash his hands before his meals and his running nose irritates Bakha. His family members do not use separate plates for everyone. But Bakha is a bit different from other members of his family. Though he is involved in a dirty profession, yet he does not let even his sleeves get dirty.

Mulk Raj Anand has vividly depicted the problem of untouchability in this novel. Bakha has to keep distance from upper caste people. When he strikes with an upper caste man, he is badly humiliated and beaten. When Bakha thinks about that situation, he becomes very disturbed . At such times he has to apologise "I have erred... I forgot to call. I beg your forgiveness. It won't happen again!" (35). Bakha knows that being an untouchable, he must maintain distance from upper caste people otherwise its consequences may be dire. He feels very bad when he thinks about his caste, "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). He has to announce his arrival in the streets so that upper caste people may remain away from him. He makes his announcement like this, "Posh, posh, sweeper coming!" (66). Bakha's poverty and untouchability is a curse to him. He is threatened and even beaten for his untouchability. A man from the upper caste threatens him:

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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)

Bakha is not the only character who has to face this disgrace and humiliation, his sister, Sohini also has to face the sting of untouchability. When Sohini goes to bring water from the well, she finds that there was a rush on the well because all the low caste women were waiting for any man from the upper caste so that he may pull water for them. The women of their community were not allowed to touch the bucket of the well just because they belonged to a lower caste.

There was a washer woman named Gulabo who became very jealous of Sohini's beauty. Gulabo takes Sohini as her rival in beauty. She starts abusing Sohini without any reason. She says:

"Think of it! Think of it! You Bitch! You prostitute! Wanton! Now your mother is hardly dead. Think of laughing in my face, laughing at me who is 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)

Rana also comments in this context, "Again, in *Untouchable*, Sohini is expected not to show her teeth in the presence of men" (Rana 715). Mulk Raj Anand has depicted how beauty becomes a curse for the untouchable girls and women. Upper class women feel jealous and men find the opportunity to molest them. There are many instances in Indian novels and short stories where attempts are made to physically exploit beautiful dalit women. Here also Sohini's beauty becomes a curse to her. Persons like Gulabo start feeling jealous with her. Mulk Raj Anand describes Sohini's beauty in the following words:

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)

The novelist draws attention of the reader to how Sohini's beauty attracts the village pandit Kali Nath who passes that way and agrees to pull water for the untouchable women. When he notices Sohini's beauty, he immediately falls for her. 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). He fills her pitcher with water and invites her to clean the toilet at his home. Sohini, being an innocent girl, accepts his proposal.

When Sohini reached home, her father was waiting for her. He does not think about the mental condition of Sohini. He does not bother to ask what has happened with Sohini and why she may be depressed. He abuses her and orders 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). It shows Lakha's selfishness and carelessness as a father who does not provide facilities to his children.

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When Sohini tells him that Pundit Kali Nath has called her at the temple to clean the toilet of his house, he does not think for a while that a young beautiful girl is not safe in a man's house alone. He immediately tells her to go there, "Well then go and do so. Why do you eat my head?" (27). He sends his son also to clean the toilets instead of sending him to school. It shows that as a father Lakha is insensitive, money-minded, rude and careless. He is not a bit mindful of his children's future.

At the temple, when Sohini was cleaning the toilet, Pandit Kali Nath came and caught her from behind. His intentions were not good and he wanted to exploit her physically but Sohini understands his bad intentions and starts crying. People gather and Sohini's brother, Bakha also comes there.

It is a strange thing to note that people support Pandit Kali Nath. When Bakha comes to know about the whole scene, he is filled with rage and wants to hit Pandit Kali Nath. But Sohini prevents him from doing so because she knows that the situation is not in their favour. She says that he has not done any harm to her, he had merely touched her. Bakha feels a bit relaxed to know about it. On his way back home, he contemplates that it would have been better if his sister Sohini had not been beautiful because her beauty has become a curse to her.

Thus, this novel narrates how the extreme poverty, illiteracy and their low status forces Sohini and her brother Bakha to clean the toilets of the people. Lakha has accepted it as his fate but Bakha does not accept it and he wants to get rid of it by his hard work. His sister, Sohini has been depicted as a marginalised character who does not get equal status, respect and dignity in her home and in the society as well. Lakha's abuses irritate both Bakha and his sister, Sohini. Though being female Sohini is helpless but Bakha leaves his house in frustration due to his father's rough behaviour. Thus, Mulk Raj Anand has depicted how casteism and poverty affect the lives of an untouchable family in this novel. Dr M. S. Vimal also postulates about these two characters:

Through the character of Sohini, Mulk Raj Anand has tried to depict the heinous evil of untouchability and Dalit feminism. Bakha's untouchability remains the core theme in the novel at different places but Sohini was also an untouchable girl. (Vimal 79)

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