

The Theme of Social Discrimination in the Novel Untouchable

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The novel *Untouchable* was published in 1935 by one of India's leading English authors Mulk Raj Anand. The book was inspired by the novelist's own true experience. The plot revolves around the caste system prevailing in India. The novel describes a day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper who is untouchable because he works as a latrine cleaner. The main theme of the novel *Untouchable* is the evil of untouchability. It draws the readers' attention towards the miseries faced by a particular section of the Indian society who are untouchables by birth or by their jobs. The injustice, humiliation and degradation is even visible in some parts of modern Indian society.

The untouchables perform jobs that are traditionally considered as dirty and for very little pay. *Untouchable* is a social novel. The Hindu society in the 1930s treated the untouchables as inhumans or servants. Mahatma Gandhi said that untouchability is the sin of Hinduism. He started the fight against the malpractice of untouchability to give them equal rights. He called the untouchables as 'Harijans' or the people of God.

Using Bakha's story, Anand argues for the education of untouchables. The novel is set in the fictional town of Bulandshahr. The high class people of the Hindu society forced the outcastes to live like beasts. Bakha is beaten in public when he touches a high caste Hindu polluting the holiness of the Hindus. The novel has given a voice to the Hindu oppressed class. The Dalit and subaltern class in the Hindu society are exploited by the upper class people depriving them of their every opportunity. They didn't enjoy the minimum human right and had to go through a constant struggle for their survival. The novelist expressed his love for humanity and his concern for the socially and economically oppressed. He wrote on behalf of those common people who are innocent and who suffered for no fault. The novel is realistic in nature.

Colonel Hutchinson hates untouchability. According to him, untouchability from India can be abolished by converting all the untouchables into Christians as Christianity doesn't practice the malpractice. But Bakha doesn't accept this solution. The sensitively written novel is a classic. Bakha overhears the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in their place. He joins the group of people to hear Mahatma speak. Bakha loves hearing someone speaking on behalf of their caste. After Mahatma departs, a couple of educated Indian men discusses about Mahatma's speech. A poet mentions the immediate arrival of the flushing toilet in India, a machine that could mean the end of untouchability. With this hope, Bakha hurries home to share news of the Mahatma's speech with his father.

E.M.Forster comments- "The sweeper (untouchable in this case) is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he can't escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disquieting as well as a disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming. No wonder that the dirt enters into his soul, and that he feels himself at moments to be what is supposed to be." (U,p.6-7)

The opening paragraph of the novel – "The outcastes' colony was a group of mud walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcastes from the Hindu society." (U,p.9)

A high caste Hindu shouts at Bakha- "Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow-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. (U,p51). Dirty dog! Son of a pitch! Offspring of a pig! I'll have to go and get washed. I was going to business and now, on account of you, I'll be late." (U,p.51)

The novelist describes Bakha's misery- "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 skeleton-like bodies of the onlookers, but a moral one. He knew that contact with him, if he pushed through, would defile a great many more of these men. And he could already hear in his ears the abuse that he would thus draw on himself." (U,p52)

In his speech, Gandhi clarifies- "As you all know, while we are asking for freedom from the grip of a foreign nation, we have ourselves, for centuries, trampled underfoot millions of human beings without feeling the slightest remorse for our iniquity. For me, the question of these people is moral and religious when I undertook to fast into death for their sake, it was in obedience to the call of my conscience." (U, pp 160-61)

A solution to the evil of untouchability is offered by a poet- "Well, we must destroy caste, we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations. We must recognize an equality of rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone. The Mahatma didn't say so, but the legal and social basis of caste having been broken down by the British Indian penal code, which recognizes the rights

of every man before a court, caste is now mainly governed by profession. When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine will be to introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone to handle it- the flush system. Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society.” (U.p.162)

In his essay, *On the Genesis of Untouchable*, Anand observes –“ In retrospect, I feel that, under the tutelage of the Mahatma, who didn't pretend to be an artist, I was able to exercise all those self-conscious literary elements which I had woven into the narrative in anticipation of what the critics might approve. He thought that the paragraphs of high-sounding words, in which I had tried to unite the miscellaneous elements, in what was essentially a walk through the small town of my hero, must go. Also, the old man suggested the removal of my deliberate attempts at melodramatic contrasts of the comic and tragic motifs, through which the spontaneous feelings, moods and lurking chaos in the soul of Bakha, had been somewhat suppressed.”

E.M.Forster says- “ Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted; sometimes grand, sometimes weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive: we can recognize his broad intelligent face, graceful torso, and heavy buttocks, as does his nasty jobs, or steps out in artillery boots in hopes of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in his hands.”

At the beginning of the novel when Bakha is cleaning the toilets, we are told- “And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean. He didn't even soil his sleeves handling the commodes, sweeping and scrubbing them....Havildar Charat Singh, who had the Hindu instinct for immaculate cleanliness, was puzzled when he emerged from his painful half an hour in the latrines and caught sight of Bakha. Here was a low caste man who seemed clean.”(U.p.17)

The masterpiece *Untouchable* is a modern novel. Anand critiques not only Hinduism but the other religions as each of them offers only a partial solution to the problem of untouchability. The novel portrays the beginning of the free natural man era, enslaved by circumstances and a revolt against the suppressions. The trinity of the early Indian English novelists are Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. With Anand's *Untouchable*, Narayan's *Swami and Friends* and Rao's *Kanthapura*, the Indian English novel found its place in the field of great Indian literature.

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