

# The Untouchable in Mulk Raj Anand's The Untouchable

## Abstract

*Untouchable*, a powerful novel, can be regarded as quintessential Anand, since it projects most of his characteristic concerns and fundamental issues of life. The novel, the writer focuses on the three given religions – Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. In addition to those is the fourth – preached by Gandhiji – the religion of humanity

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## Introduction

By presenting the life of Bakha, an untouchable, the novel shows that the idea of Indian nation / national culture emerging in the colonial period failed to include within its body the whole of the demographic mass that it claimed to represent. Partha Chatterjee in *Nation and its Fragments* (1994) argues that:

The formation of a 'national culture' was necessarily built upon the privileging of an 'essential tradition,' which in turn was defined by a system of exclusion. (Chatterjee 135) The novel opens with a description of the outcastes' colony which is excluded both from the town and the cantonment.

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 washerman, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and the other outcastes from Hindu society. (Anand 11)

However, the next paragraph describes Bakha, the untouchable, as a "strong and able-bodied" man, who "thought" the outcastes' colony to be "an 'uncongenial' place to live in," (Anand 13) and who was at the same time "caught in the glamour of the white-man's life." (Anand 14) Thus the writer humanizes the untouchable by seeing things from Bakha's perspective and by giving an access to his private thoughts and emotions. The impact of Bakha's sufferings is further accentuated by the near total identification of the narrative voice with that of the hero's. Saros Cowasjee remarks:

So strong is the identification with his hero that for the best part of the novel we forget the presence of the novelist. (Qtd in Rajan 29) The exclusion of the hero is further accentuated by the novel's episodic structure in which each episode serves as a form of community existence from Bakha is socially or emotionally excluded. (Niven 48)

For instance, Bakha's casual walk through the main street of the city becomes loaded with meaning when it highlights the humiliation that an untouchable constantly experiences. Even while paying for sweets Bakha's "head was bent [and] he was vaguely ashamed and self-conscious at being seen buying sweets" (Anand 51). This is followed by the crucial moment in the novel when Bakha is slapped for 'touching' an upper caste Hindu. The writer observes:

His [Bakha's] first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, far away from torment. But 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. (Anand 52)

The incident jolts Bakha into an awareness of his position in the social order. The moment is crucial because it is for the first time that Bakha becomes painfully aware of the fact that he is an untouchable

Like a ray of light shooting through darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. . . . A shock had passed through his perceptions, previously numb and torpid, and had sent a quiver into his being, stirred his nerves of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, all into a quickening. 'I am an Untouchable!' he said to himself. (Anand 59)



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His helplessness is further demonstrated in the next episode when his sister is molested and subsequently humiliated by the priest. Through these and other episodes, the writer shows marginalized status of the Untouchables in India.

Further, instead of a simplistic portrayal of a Hindu-Muslim divide, the novel shows the complexities of the problems involved in the emerging model of the nation by highlighting the alliance between the lower caste Hindus and Muslims; the lower caste Hindus and English; and the rifts within the Hindu lower castes itself. It is impossible for the outcastes' to organize themselves into any sort of a movement against the oppression of the upper caste Hindus since they are themselves divided into a hierarchy of castes. The exclusion of the lower castes shows the gaps in the model of the nation based on privileging an essential tradition: on the one hand a bulk of the population does not figure in the model of the nation and, on the other hand, the dominant Hindu religion faces a threat from within, since exclusion of the lower castes forces the formation of a possible alliance of the lower caste Hindus with the Muslims and the Christians.

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, also deals with a similar phenomenon. The native community begins to break apart after the arrival of the Christian missionaries, who admitted the outcastes into the church.

These outcastes, or *osu*, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would also be received. (Achebe 111)

Initially there is a protest against the inclusion of the outcastes, but Mr. Kaiga, who is in charge of the congregation, argues that:

Before God . . . there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers. (Achebe 135)

A similar issue is raised by the writer in *Untouchable*. Colonel Hutchinson, chief of the local Salvation Army targets the Untouchables as possible converts to Christianity. He was always seen "talking to some Untouchable in the rubbish heaps about divinity and trinity." (Anand 135) For the Untouchable Bakha, conversion into Christianity not only promises an equal status with other human beings but also in the bargain the hope of becoming a *sahib*. Bakha, even though the priest's song baffle and bore him, follow him

because the *sahib* wore trousers. Trousers had been the dream of his life. The kindly interest with the trousered man had shown him when he was downcast had made Bakha conjure up pictures of himself wearing the *sahib's* clothes, talking the *sahib's* language and becoming like the guard whom he had seen on the railway station near his village. (Anand 143)

Bakha though doubtful of the Colonel's designs on him, follows him because he is too much in awe of this *Sahib* who mixes with the outcastes and also because he feels that the Colonel might, out of kindness, gift him a pair of used white trousers. The farcical and comical aspects of conversion, as a possible solution for the outcastes to end their misery, are exposed to Bakha's inability to comprehend how

he is a 'sinner', (Anand 143) and Colonel's inability to break out his jargon to satisfy Bakha's curious and questioning mind.

Moreover, the Colonel's wife's outburst, "I can't keep waiting for you all day, while you go messing about with all those dirty *bhingis* and *chamars*," (Anand 145) shows Bakha that social snobbery would leave no scope for Christian tolerance and his dignity as a human being would suffer despite the act of conversion.

Throughout the novel, the Hindus are shown treating him worse than they treat their animals. The barrage of insults which are showered on his head by the upper-castes – men and women alike – are merited by the accident of his birth as an untouchable. We are shown a community which is ridden with superstition, false notions of class and hypocrisy. Though the novel is dominated by a Hindu population, considerable space is given to the Muslims. The population is unconscious of the Hindu bias against the outcastes as Islam treats all human beings equally; and therefore, has no practice similar to untouchability.

The novel ends on a hopeful note with a probable solution for the Untouchables but in the process it reveals, directly or indirectly, the various problems that were inherent in the model of the nation that was based on a system of exclusion of minorities, Untouchables and outcastes. The possible alliance of the lower castes with the Muslims and Christians was a serious threat to the Hindu community around which the model of the nation was apparently based. Though there is a glimmer of hope at the end of the novel, there is no genuine possibility of re-incorporation of outcastes into the Hindu community. Bakha till the end remains a passive spectator and not a doer: he can only hope for the introduction of the flush system but can himself do nothing about it:

'That machine' he thought 'which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it, I wonder what it is like? If only that 'gentleman' hadn't dragged the poet away, I could have asked him.' (Anand 174)

#### References

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