

# De- humanization in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*



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## Abstract

Dr. Mulk Raj Anand is one of the most important novelists in Indo-Anglican Literature. He performed pioneering role in this field. He was deeply concerned with the under privileged and down trodden people of India. Anand made the beginning of his career with his first novel *Untouchable* (1935). In this novel there are many heart touching scenes which pervades the minds of the readers. The rude behavior of Bakha's father with his son, waiting of Bakha's sister Sohini at the well for water, humiliating Bazaar scene, scolding of the child's mother and the sufferings under British rule in India. All this brought into sharp focus the De-humanizing paradoxes within colonized Indian society. The present research paper is a humble attempt to study, how many social issues and aspects are reflected in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*.

**Keywords:** Pervades, De-humanizing, Colonized.

## Introduction

The term De-humanization which emanates from the term Humanization as a substance of humanity, brings into force those qualities of man by which all will be treated equally for the system of life when their inequality in behavior, in manner, in social customs, in cultural issues, in progression, in social values, in emotional attachment etc. emerges humanization.

For both moral psychology and public policy de-humanization is a topic with extensive ramifications. The study of de-humanization has various implications in areas as diverse as conceptions of what it is to be humane, ideas of race and racism, war and genocide. Under this idea, it is surprising to discover that there has since long been very little attention given to the de-humanization by the thinkers.

## Aim of the Study

By the means of this research paper, I would like to exhibit the new aspect of Anand's writing and also to explore the theme of De-humanization comprehensively.

## Untouchable (1935)

In *Untouchable*, the outcastes were living in mud- walled huts. These were huddled in a colony and the people who lived there were the scavengers, the leather workers, the washer men, the barbers, the grass – cutter and the other outcastes. These people were subjected to inhuman treatment which was really shocking. Though one can only share their aches and agonies by perceiving them with human feelings. Their plight was so dire that even for the fulfillment of basic needs like water and food; they had to depend on the mercy of high caste Hindu. Here Anand writes:

"*Untouchable* was in its sources a ballad born of the freedom I had tried to win for truth against the age-old lies of the Hindus by which they upheld discrimination. The profound thoughts of the upper orders in ancient India about caste were often noble. Someone is the great *Mahabharata* had cried, "Caste, caste – There is no caste!" And I wanted to repeat this truth to the "dead souls" from the compassion of myself explanation in the various Hindu hells, in the hope that I would myself come clean after I had been through sewer, as it were."<sup>1</sup>

In the novel the mode of de-humanization continues. Mulk Raj Anand has painted the picture of untouchables and outcaste people so clearly that the onlooker feels humiliated, in himself, by other caste Hindu. We can well find from the description of the novel that it looks like Anand himself spending a day with Bakha and minutely observes it to reality. Bakha's day begins, as Anand writes in his novel:

Bakha thought of the uncongeniality of his home as he lay half awake in the morning of an autumn day, covered by a

worn-out, greasy blanket, on a faded blue carpet which was spread on the floor in a corner of the cave like, dingy, dank, one-roomed mud house. His sister slept on a cot next to him and his father and brother snored from under a patched, ocher-colored quilt, on a broken string bed, further up.<sup>2</sup>

The above text reveals the mental agony of Bakha for the poor condition of his home. Bakha while moving in the colony must have seen the reasonable furnishing of other dwellers. In their comparison Bakha's home was a store house of rubbish for which he should naturally be ashamed, and he is while lying half awake in the morning of 'that' autumn day. He is covered only by a worn-out, greasy blanket..... her sister sleeps on a poor cot and father and brother snore from under a patched quilt.....

The above clearly demonstrates the wretched condition of Bakha's thinking pattern. It is totally inhuman and unbearable for a person like Bakha.

It is the factual reality of what one can see in the hut of an untouchable like Bakha. Mulk Raj Anand observes the above fact and presents the picturesque reality of the place. The description is so realistic that the reader visits the hut along with the writer and feels that where to look at and where not to. The description of Lakha, the father of Bakha scolds him in such terms which the reader will never like to get repeated in his whole life. But what can be done? Nothing, absolutely nothing in the Indian conditions of that time. Bakha dreams to have everything like Britishers but the reality shatters his dreams. Here Anand starts narrating that is very much real to the colonial mind of Indian untouchables:

Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement when he first went to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncle. He had had glimpses, during his sojourn there, of the life the Tommies lived: sleeping on strange, low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets; eating eggs, drinking tea and wine in tin mugs; going to parade and then walking down to the bazaar with cigarettes in their mouths and small silver-mounted canes in their hands. And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Anand is such a great observer of the fact that he very forcefully peeps into the mind of Bakha who lives and suffers under those conditions at the Punjab cantonment town. Bakha wants to copy Tommies in his life. He thinks that these white people are from some other planet who appear on earth to demonstrate how one should live gracefully. Bakha looks at their way of life with amazement. He is compelled to dream of living and copying their ways of life but to utter disgust he always falls flat under the shower of abuses and humiliations which evaporate all his dreams. But Bakha has a heart of steel which

does not buzz a little and wants to copy their way of living in sleep, in works, in eating and even roaming on the streets like Britishers. Bakha is a day dreamer. Whatever he dreams that is away from reality. But he is obsessed to live like Britishers and to copy their life. In this regard Dr. Anand describes the circumstances when his father rudely orders him to get up:

Get up, oh you Bakhiya, oh son of a pig!' came his father's voice, sure as the daylight, from the midst of a broken, jarring, interrupted snore. Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoy will be angry.<sup>4</sup>

The textual citation shows two images; 'The son of a pig' and the 'latrine'. The two images let down the sanctity of man. First Bakha is linked with wretched animal pig and his work has been linked again with carrying the latrines of man. What a nice images author has used for the degradation of man's dignity, at the same time shows the process of de-humanization.

It so happened that the son of a high caste Hindu is hurt in a quarrel. This quarrel takes place after a match. The wounded boy is known to Bakha and out of sympathy of friendship he takes the boy to his house. The boy's mother instead of thanking Bakha shouts at him for defiling her son and the house. It is a great shock to Bakha who expects the thanks but gets brick-bats. It is not enough, Bakha returns home in the afternoon to face abuses from his father for absenting his afternoon latrine cleaning work. Utterly given up to despair he goes out and sits under a pipal tree cursing the day. Colonel Hutchinson, a priest from the church finds him lonely and takes him to the church to confess his sin so that he can convert to the Christian religion. On the contrary the colonel's wife shouts at him for bringing a 'Bhangi' at her house. Bakha runs away from the church.

The realistic picture painted by Anand is appreciated at one hand for his narrative art, and on the other hand make us compassionate for the ill treatment with untouchables. Gulaboo the jealous washer woman abuses Sohini:

Think of it! Think of it! Bitch! Prostitute! Wanton! And your mother hardly dead. Think of laughing on my face, laughing at me who an old enough to be your mother. Bitch!' the washer woman exploded.....

Ari, 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, prostitute?<sup>5</sup>

Anand has always been very realistic in drawing the pictures of de-humanization and humiliation by calling the lower caste strata of society members, by addressing them, like bitch, prostitute and other humiliating adjectives. In the above referred lines even washer woman who herself belongs to a lower caste, humiliates Sohini, the sweeper girl, with adjectives like bitch, prostitutes and wanton. The washer woman is angry, because she is marginally

ahead of sweepers and can't tolerate the beautiful laughing face of Sohini. She explodes with these words on her lips. She wants Sohini to be ashamed because she has so much in her heart against lower caste people which she gathers by getting humiliated by upper caste people. Thus, she makes some solace in her heart by spitting on Sohini. Mulk Raj Anand gives us a very clear picture what happens in such matters in India. E.M. Forster anticipated such criticism in his preface to *Untouchable* when he wrote:

It seems to me indescribably clean and I hesitate for words in which this can be conveyed. Avoiding the rhetoric and circumlocution, it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it.<sup>6</sup>

Another burning problem of 'water drawing power', which shows inhuman behaviour meted out to the lower caste people by upper caste social hoodlums. For centuries the lower caste people were prevented from drawing water from common village well, streams or ponds. These sources of water were captured by upper caste people and lower caste, could get water only by their permission or when they are kind enough, to be lenient to give them some water. Mulk Raj Anand has drawn very realistic picture when Sohini has to wait for a long time at village well where upper caste women or men were fetching water. The poor girl requests everyone and with great difficulty gets some water with the kind help of a woman. How small she must have felt while waiting for water and getting a denial from everybody. The denial is particularly disappointing because the upper caste women are jealous of her beautiful young face and body showing youthfulness symptoms which Sohini cannot hide even after best efforts. Anand has observed these 'socio-moral' aspects of the behaviour in the society and made that a part of his novel to expose the ills of the society:

Joining their hands with servile humility to every passer-by; cursing their fate and bemoaning their lot, if they were refused the help they wanted; praying, beseeching and blessing, if some generous should condescended to listen to them or to help them.<sup>7</sup>

The textual citation with its phrasal form, 'Servile Humility' denotes two factors: the elite mentality and the mentality of proletariat. This is meant for the slaves or the class that is being exploited and the other is meant for the class which exploits. That is why the novelist has used the epithet such 'servile humility'.

This is a cruel irony of life that for water, the primary requirement of human existence, the sweepers have to be dependent upon the mercy of the upper castes Hindus. As the novel progresses we go through a very ironic situation in which some untouchables gather to at the foot of the well making a sincere appeal to an illiterate Sepoy who happens to pass that way:

Oh, Maharaj! Maharaj! Won't you draw us some water, please? We beg you, we have been waiting, here a long time, we will be grateful, shouted the chorus of voices as they pressed towards him some standing up, bending and joining their palms in beggary, others twisting their lips in various attitudes of servile appeal and abject humility as they remained seated separate.<sup>8</sup>

Bakha's sister Sohini is waiting at the well for water along with other girls. She, folded hands requests a passerby, a Brahmin, to help her get water because she cannot draw water herself being a low caste. Showing great mercy Maharaj (a caste Brahmin) obliges her not due to her earnest request but for her sheer young beauty and good looks. It's all very humiliating for Sohini but there is no other way out to get water.

When Bakha's young good looking sister Sohini attends the requirement of water, at a village well, she has to hear indecent words of upper caste Hindus because she belongs to a lower caste. The custom is so orthodox that it does not allow her to take water from the well herself and so she has no other way but to request the other caste people for obligation. Therefore, she has to depend on some other gentleman who can give her water? At last, for her good looks, Pandit Kalinath agrees to give water to her. Anand writes:

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the Plat form surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. They had no well of their own because it cost a lot of money to dig a well in such a hilly town as Bulandshahar. Perforce they had to collect at the foot of the caste Hindu's well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers.<sup>9</sup>

The text quoted here brings into force two aspects: the 'Outcastes' and 'Water pollution'. The outcaste is meant for caste system and pollution. Water pollution is human degradation i.e. also be called the process of de-humanization.

Suffering by humiliation, for the lower caste Hindus by higher castes Hindus is a common thing. The unfortunate part of it is that they have accepted it as an old age tradition. Even Sohini has to wait a lot for her turn for a pot of water at the well. There is nothing new in it. It is a common feature. Other outcaste, like Sohini also has to wait because they cannot touch the well. Therefore, when some class Hindu, by his kindness gives them water out of sympathy. Dr. Anand writes:

She had come as fast as she could to the well, full of fear and anxiety that she would have to wait her turn since she could see from a distance that there was already a crowd. She didn't feel disappointed so much as depressed to realize that she would be the eleventh to receive water. She had sensed the feeling in her brother's soul. He was tired. He was thirsty. She had felt like a mother as she issued from her home to fetch water, a mother going out to fetch food and drink for her loved ones at home. Now as she set in a row with her fellow sufferers, her heart sank. There was no sign of anyone passing that way that could be a possible benefactor.<sup>10</sup>

If the reader goes through the above lines carefully he would find himself in the condition of Sohini. Sohini has come to fetch water from village well. There are ten people before her in the line and she would be eleventh but she is clearly anxious about her brother waiting for water. He is thirsty and tired. It is inhuman for anybody to let him wait for water but Sohini can do little to get the water before the ten waiting persons get it, such inhuman conditions are well explained by Anand in his novel.

Dr. Anand describes the incident about Sohini when she is provided water by Kali Nath, a Brahmin. He gives water to Sohini out of turn leaving other water seekers waiting. He does it particularly to call Sohini at his quarters to clean his house and courtyard. Sohini goes there, Kali Nath tries to molest her. Sohini cries to save her chastity. With fear of being exposed, Brahmin Kali Nath cries out, "Polluted, Polluted" and accuses her of defiling the platform and polluted him by her physical proximity to him.

Thus, cunning and hypocritical nature of Kali Nath's behaviour is exposed by Anand. Brahmin priest feel proud of their religiosity and perform ugly things and behave indecently. Such brazen insolence of the Brahmin priest is tolerated by the Hindu society because in the caste hierarchy Brahmin comes at the top in superiority to everybody else. It so happens that Bakha reaches there and understands the whole situation. He hears the abuses of Kali Nath and sends Sohini back home to avoid further humiliation.

Dr. Anand is very sensitive while describing various humiliating scenes and sights that Bakha has undergone in the Bazaar. He gave it in detail to create Indian atmosphere. Bakha is passing through the market. He drifts towards a cloth shop. A benign Lala clad in an immaculately white, loose muslin shirt and loin cloth, is busy writing something, in curious hieroglyphics on a scroll book bound in ochre-coloured canvas. His assistant is unrolling bundles of Manchester cloths, one after another for inspection by an old couple from a village. Couple is talking incessantly and the assistant was trying to impress them that they are being shown, the best cloth which will suit them well. Bakha is very much attracted by the woolen clothes that are flanked in the corner of

the shop. That is the cloth which Sahibs used for making suits, the other clothes that he has seen lying before the yokels, Bakha could imagine turning soon into tunics and helmets. All this is being noticed by Bakha carefully. But woolen cloth is so glossy and warm and, may be so expensive looking that Bakha's craze for fashion comes to surface. He starts imagining that he would look like a Sahib if he wore them.

By chance Bakha has some annas (coins) in his pocket and he wishes very much to buy some sweets to eat. He asks the shopkeeper to give him Jalebies for four annas. The shopkeeper cheats Bakha and, though he knows it, he will not be able to utter a single word of complain. The sweet seller throws the packet like a cricket ball places the coins on shoe board for his assistant to put some water on them so that he may accept them. Bakha walks away ashamed and embarrassed. While Bakha is eating the sweet with delight, incidentally he touches a man unconsciously the man abuses him thoroughly and a crowd gathered there around him and says that he should be warned of his approach.

Anand shows that the ill treatment with Bakha by caste Hindu is very harsh. He has to pass through the 'Inferno' created by the social hierarchy. Anand narrates the differences between low caste and higher castes by the real words which are utmost reality of our society. He has to keep physical distance from caste Hindu and has to shout 'Posh, Posh, Sweeper Coming', so that others may save themselves from being defiled by the touch of an untouchable. This ritual or tradition is ages old in India.

Bakha is slapped by a caste Hindu for 'polluting' him. He fails to announce himself as usual and 'pollutes' a caste Hindu though unconsciously and in return receives the torrent of abuses:

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 bowlegged 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!<sup>11</sup>

He further insults him by saying:

You swine, you dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach! he shouted as he met Bakha's eyes. Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!<sup>12</sup>

In these incidents Bakha is made aware of his status as an untouchable in the society. He feels utterly isolated and rushes to the courtyard of the temple announcing his arrival in a loud voice. At the time of roaming outside the temple, he curiously looks into the temple. A Brahmin sees Bakha on the steps and shouts at him for polluting the temple. Bakha climbing down the steps finds his sister Sohini standing in the courtyard frightened. She was speechless. She informs Bakha about the priest's attempt of molesting her while she was cleaning his courtyard. Further she tells him that she screamed out

of fear and the priest comes out shouting that he has been defiled by an untouchable girl.

Bakha is out raised and decides to look for the priest but Sohini stops him. Both of them realize their helplessness, due to the limitations of their caste, they decide to give up the matter. Bakha sends Sohini home and goes out an alley nearby to beg for food.

#### **Conclusion**

The picture of de-humanization presented in the novel, is on the one hand, appreciated for Anand's art of narration and on the other hand makes the reader compassionate for the ill treatment with the untouchables. So it can be said that Mulk Raj Anand has used his imagination and creative skill to transform facts into fiction to present a realistic vision of life.

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