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## Social Criticism in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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### Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is considered as one of the most prominent writer of India. He has command over narrating his stories with effective beginning and binding conclusion. Anand in his *Untouchable* has presented the real picture of the society that discriminates between the caste-Hindus and the untouchables. Anand has written this novel with great social concern which focuses on the social consciousness and some of the worst customs and traditions which authorize the caste-Hindus to exploit the outcaste for their selfish interests. In the research paper an attempt has been made to look into the condition of the outcastes with special reference to *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand.

### Keywords

Outcaste; Mulk Raj Anand; *Untouchable*; Caste-Hindus; Social Criticism.



Mulk Raj Anand, an Indian writer, essayist, novelist, art critic, was born on December 12, 1905 in Peshawar, now in Pakistan. But at that time Peshawar was situated in the North West Frontier of British India. He studied in Khalsa College, Amritsar. He attended University College, London as an undergraduate and later Cambridge university and got PhD in Philosophy. It was the time when he attached himself with members of the Bloomsbury Group, which includes V. Bell, V. Woolf, Keynes, D. Grant, E.M. Forster and R. Fry.

Anand's father worked in Dogra Regiment of the British Army. His father's regiment had frequent transfers. So they did not stay at a place for longer period. Anand, who in the 1930s and 1940s spent his time half in London and half in India. He was attracted by Indian independence movement. He also worked as a novelist and journalist at the same time. He worked for BBC, London during the Second World War. He met George Orwell at that time. George Orwell also wrote some favorable review of Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942).

Anand returned to India in 1940 and continued to work as a writer. He wrote poetry and essays on a wide range of subjects. He founded a literary magazine, Marge. He also worked with the International Progress Organization (IPO). He participated in the conference of the IPO in Innsbruck (Austria) in 1974 and made a special influence on debate that later became known under the phrase of "Dialogue Among Civilization". Anand also gave many lectures on prominent Indians like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Rabindra Nath Tagore. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award, the best literature award in India, for *Morning Face*, an autobiography.

Anand married Kathleen Van Golder, an actress, in 1938 but this marriage did not go long and he secured divorce from Kathleen in 1948. He was awarded the International Peace Prize of the World Peace Council for promoting understanding among the nations through his creative works. He also represented India as an Indian delegate in many countries like china, Russia

and other prominent countries. He died of pneumonia in Pune on September 28 2004 at the age of 98.

*Untouchable* is the first great sociological novel of Anand, published in 1935. It is a story of a boy, Bakha, who is an outcaste. *Coolie* was the second great political novel published in 1936. *Coolie* has a universal significance as novel in India as it depicts the story of an orphaned hill boy, Munoo, who is 14 years of age living with his uncle Dayaram and aunt Gujri that symbolizes suffering and misery of the poor and exploited mass of India. Munoo is forced to go to town to earn his livelihood and he is ill-treated by other people there. He runs away from there and started to work in pickle factory. But there, he is also ill-treated by Prabha's co-partner, Ganpat. Munoo left his second employer and started to work as coolie but faced tough competition from other coolies. He is scared away from there because he has no license. He is helped by an elephant driver to reach Bombay. He earns his bread in a worst working condition.

*Two leaves and a Bud* is a dramatic novel published in 1937. In this novel Anand describes the wretched plight of workers on the tea-plantation of Assam. Gangu is the protagonist of the novel who is a famer by profession living in a village near Hoshiyarpur in Punjab. He is deceived by a tout. Gangu left for Assam with his wife, Sajani, and children, Leila and Budhhu. But, his temptations that attracted Gangu to leave village were entirely false. This Tea Estate in Assam is like a prison that has no bars, but it is nevertheless an unbreakable jail. Sajni dies of malariya and Gangu like other coolies felt plantation life is but a progression from today's bad to tomorrow's worse. Reggie, the assistant manager, kills Gangu and a trial follows. But, the court acquits him of the charge of murder. Thus, the injustice of the British Raj, and the misery and suffering of Indian masses is seen in the novel.

Anand wrote a trilogy of novels – *Village*, *Across the Black Water*, *The Sword and the Sickle* – dealing with the life of Lal Singh. These novels published during the years 1939-1942. This was the period of Second World War and the

era of the Gandhian struggle for independence. *Village* is a story about Lal Singh, a boy from a village of Punjab. He is molested by village people. He ran away from the village to avoid his disgrace, and then joins the army. At the village an ugly accident took place. His brother is hanged because of killing the landlord's son. His father, Nihal Singh, dies of heart failure. At that time World War I break out and Lal Singh is ordered to go across the seas to fight the German armies.

*Across the Black Water* is the second of Anand's trilogy which recounts the experience of Lal Singh abroad. He finds that there is discrimination between the *Angrzy Sahibs* and *Indian Sepoys*. However, there is no change in Lal Singh. He still remains a son of Indian farmer, and a farmer himself.

*The Sword and the Sickel* is the third novel of Anand's trilogy in which the last phase of Lal Singh life is dealt with. Lal Singh returns to India and takes an active part in India's struggle for freedom. Lal Singh is shocked after noticing the various conflicts, tensions, greed and selfishness are the characteristics of Indian society, even during the days of Gandhian period. Lal Singh is moved towards wisdom and maturity after having such experience.

*The Big Heart* is a stream of consciousness novel. It deals with the conflict between the hereditary Coppersmiths and the Capitalists. It is a story about Ananta, the coppersmith, a man of big heart who has been to Bombay where he has participated in the Gandhian freedom struggle and returns to Amritsar. He faces unemployment because Gokul Chand – a capitalist, sets up a factory. There is an element of romance in the story through his relationship with Janki. Ananta tries to help another worker in the factory and his head gets battered against the machine and he dies.

*Private life of an Indian Prince* is the study of contemporary political history with the personal history of a few individuals. The central character is the Indian prince named Victor. Victor has all the vices of royalty. He misuses his power. He lives a life full of luxury and sloth. Sardar Patel, the then Home Minister of India summons him to Delhi and makes him sign the instrument of accession.

In the end, Victor becomes mad and admitted to a mental asylum. This novel deals with the collapse of princely India after independence and the sufferings of the Indian princes.

*The Old Woman and the Cow* was published in 1968. The main character of the novel is Gauri who suffers not only at the hands of her mother but also at the hands of her mother-in-law and her husband. She meets with a city doctor who makes her know the importance of being a woman. After returning to her village, she is obligated to prove her chastity. But she goes to the city to lead an independent life.

*Untouchable* is known as the magnum opus of Mulk Raj Anand. It is also the most popular compact and well-knitted novel. After returning from the Europe he studied ancient monuments and lived in Sabarmati Ashram with Mahatma Gandhi and prepared the first draft of *Untouchable*. It is worth to mention that this novel did not appeal to the publishers so it was rejected by as many as nineteen publishers. All his friends tried to find a publisher for the book but all in vain. One can understand the plight of Anand at that time that if augmented Anand's frustration and led him to contemplate suicide but a young poet, Oswald Blakeston rescued him timely and facilitated the process of its publication.

The chief protagonist of the novel is Bakha, a young boy from the outcaste in Bulandshar. His father, Lakha, is the jamadaar of the entire sweeper in the town and the cantonment. Bakha has the responsibility to clean the dry latrines of the three rows of the roads. He is interested towards modernity and English culture. He likes to wear English clothes and also try to speak English. He likes the British as they are less severe and cruel to their caste compare to the caste-Hindus. He does not like his work of cleaning latrines. He likes to work in British Army. He is tall and handsome. But, as he is born as an untouchable, he leads a miserable life with his sister, Sohini, and brother, Rakha. He works very effectively and because of his work Charat Singh got impressed and he promises

him to give him a hockey-stick. Charat Singh says “You are becoming a gentreman, Ohe Bakhya!” (16).

The plights of untouchables are fully presented in the novel. They live a pitiable and miserable life. Bakha’s sister, Sohini, is molested by the pundit, Kalinath. Through the character of pundit Kalinath, Anand has shown the hypocrite attitude of Brahmin priests. When Bakha tries to avenge the temple pundit who has sexually assaulted his sister he is beaten because he has polluted the temple by entering it. All the people beat him badly. No one tries to save him. Iqbal Nath Sarshar, a Gandhian with a difference, supports modern machine, one of which is the flush system. He suggests the appliance as the solution to the problem of untouchables.

Anand’s novels are based on the ground realities of human society. They are focused on pre-independence Indian society divided into caste-Hindus and untouchables. He presents social evils of the society through his novels. Anand has used his characters as symbolic instrument to protest exploitation and injustice. He represents his characters in a way that they give expression to his anger and anguish. One thing which is worth mentioning is that Anand’s characters are not extra-terrestrial or heavenly creatures or those live in optimum luxury. They are real life characters. Anand has taken these characters from real life. They reflect the plight of the real poor and aggrieved people. Anand has condemned and disapproved the inhuman caste system. Bakha is a unique character from the very beginning of the novel. He has the ability to feel self-respect and self-consciousness. He is quite dexterous and dynamic at work. But centuries of servility has made him still and morally depressed. He does not like his work although he accepts the circumstances and everything as his lot. He is aware about the savagery and brutality of caste system. He wants to protest against the caste system but aware of his incapacity. He knows that the caste-Hindus are more powerful than the outcastes. Anand has many more characters

in *Untouchable* like Bakha's father, Lakha and his brother, Rakha, but they are devoid of self-respect and self-consciousness.

Anand, through his novels, has presented the real picture of the oppressed and marginalized sections of India. He is not like other novelists who are busy in a mere fantasy or a fairy tale, wholly and solely a means of relaxation, a harmless opiate for leisure time and vacant minds. Anand is determined to educate people and reshape their opinions. In *Untouchable*, Anand through Bakha has made a great impression on the readers about the prejudiced and biased caste-Hindus against the outcasts.

Although the character of Bakha is unique due to his intelligence, sensibility and dexterity, his position is that of a tiger at bay. He hates untouchability but he cannot protest because he knows that the Hindus would crush him. He is despised by the caste-Hindus and he is forced to shout from a distance to announce his approach so that a caste-Hindu could avoid pollution of being touched by an untouchable. Being humiliated and beaten for the English clothes there is nothing English in his life. His expression to wretchedness becomes poignant when he learns that he cleans dirt therefore he is untouchable: "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt" (79).

Bakha is aware of human dignity. He like the Indian Government does not know the ways and means to abolish caste system and untouchability as it is a national and religious plague. But he is not idle. He is in search of some effective solutions. In the end of the novel when Iqbal Nath Sarshar advocates about the use of modern machine, flush system in latrine, Bakha thinks about this as a solution to untouchability, which is not so. Bakha returns to his home in the outcasts' quarter thinking about it. "This is wonderful machine that can remove dung without anyone having to handle it" (156).

As E.M. Forster remarks, "*Untouchable* could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not

have known enough about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity” (vi). During 1930s when no one has the courage to write against the tyrant and oppressive caste-Hindus, Anand has done it. Anand deserves compliment for exposing the hypocrisy of priests, businessman, money lenders, shop owners, merchants and orthodox women of caste Hindu community.

### **Work Cited**

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