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EXPLORING CASTE & OPPRESSION BEFORE INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF *MULK RAJ ANAND'S 'THE UNTOUCHABLE'*

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Abstract

This article critically examines the representation of caste-based discrimination and social oppression in pre-independent India as depicted in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable*. Through a detailed exploration of the protagonist *Bakha* and other peripheral characters, the author sheds light on the systemic injustices Dalits face and the socio-political forces perpetuating their subjugation. This study examines Anand's narrative techniques, including his stream-of-consciousness and realistic character portrayal, as tools for social critique. Drawing parallels to Gandhian philosophy and influenced by literary figures like James Joyce, Anand's work is a profound commentary on human dignity, equality, and the need for social reform. In addition, the analysis highlights the novel's structural coherence, linguistic authenticity, and its notable role in the evolution of Indian English literature at large.

Keywords: Literary realism, pre-independent India, caste discrimination, Dalit narrative, and social reform.

The nature of society in pre-independent India was highly discriminatory, and the citizens had no equality. On one side, the English people who ruled India segregated the people to serve their race of ruling without hindrance. They followed the theory of divide and rule. On the other hand, there are further divisions of people and a highly discriminatory nature. The literary percentage at this particular time was much less. The rural population engaged in agriculture was uneducated and incapable of thinking for themselves. The people belonging to high castes were land owners, and the landless poor worked as agricultural labourers under rich caste-oriented people. The caste system in the present context does not refer to the supremacy of brahmins but also the caste hierarchy who have exploited the SCs just as Englishmen treated the Indians.

One is reminded of P. B. Shelly, who said, "The writers (poets) are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind." (*The Defence of Poetry*, pp. 2730 -32, 1821). It was unfortunate that even these writers could not open the eyes of the rulers regarding the plight of the oppressed.

Art is often described as an expression of emotion and reality. Art is true to a great extent. The literary art, through its artistic expression by the Indian writers, the realities of the situation underlining and highlighting the condition of the poor people. Even social reformers could not take any initiative for the cause of people experiencing poverty. Mulk Raj Anand occupies a place for excellence among many period writers. He was not merely a writer but an extraordinary man of pure consciousness and cried with those who cried. He puts himself in their portions and realises their problems.

He combined imagination with truth and started writing novels, and through the novels, he mirrored the plight of people experiencing poverty. Who was this man Mulk Raj Anand? One can know him as a novelist, short story writer, or essayist, but he was something more than that. Humorously, he called himself "a bogus professor". He came from a family of copper smiths but did not take up that profession; instead, he worked as a regiment clerk in the British Army. He had opportunities to accompany his father wherever he went and learned many things about India and European society. He was very familiar with the lifestyle of the army personnel and Englishmen, as well as the sorrowful life led by villagers and how they were poverty-stricken and exploited by the wealthier castes. This experience took him to study the hypocrisy of money lenders, caste-Hindu priests, and officers. These sections of the people were after sinful pleasures, exploiting the condition of people with low incomes. All these experiences Mulk Raj Anand had when he was too young. He could not remove these impressions from his mind. His sense of mind was found to be expressed through his novels.



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In a sense, his novels represent the social history of pre-independent India. He peeps into his family and reveals that his mother was an orthodox woman, and his father learned mythology. He spends much time reading works of social revolutionaries like Leo Tolstoy, Karkheh, and James Joyce. It was his period of transition from being an observer to a writer. He spent some time in Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram. The collective consciousness of the oppressed people affected him much. It was a period that he prepared the opening chapters of *Untouchable*. Many publishers rejected the novel *Untouchable* for its themes. One can learn the writer E.M. Forster was instrumental in publishing this novel in 1935.

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the most prolific Indian novelists, developed his writing techniques. The most popular Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Prem Chand, and Satish Chandra influenced Anand much.

Tagore's novels, known for their humanistic approach and sympathy for people with low incomes, inspired Mulk Raj Anand. In this context, one must accept that his novels are completely artistic expressions of his literary talent and imagination.

His characters are real. All the heroes are people. One can find it everywhere, in the cities, towns, and villages. Broadly, one can divide the scavenger into two groups. Firstly, his characters are the victims of social injustice. And the supporters of unjust social orders. The first group belongs to the characters Bakha, Sohini, and Ananda, and the second group is hypocritical priests, landlords, moneylenders, and white rulers. The caste Hindus, inclusive of the Brahmins, victimised the downtrodden. Here, one can learn the relevance of Mulk Raj Anand to the history of Indian fiction. He was fully conscious of the ignorance and weakness of the poor people.

At the same time, through his novels, he aimed to bring out the goodness in the characters written. If a novelist is a non-Dalit, he will be a commentator rather than a participant. There will be distancing, and whatever compassion or concern is found in the novel will be imported and inherent; it will be a literary device rather than an organic experience. Despite all proclaimed principles of the writer's sensibility, the novel suffers from the passion that is an evolution of expertise. The narrative again will suffer from the demands of chronological sequencing. The *Dalit* experience is not layered or sequential but holistic, cumulative, and intensely experiential. The stream of consciousness is traced to James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* is a pioneering novel, who narrates the recollections of the hero's life on a day of his life. An experience of the here and there is a mental summation in an instant of all the experiences that happened in the total, which is a narrative compressing the infinite variety into an instantaneous unity. The novels of Anand are written in this technique. Afro-American literature is a striking parallel to it.

The Afro-American novels of writers, early and late, are written in a stream-of-consciousness mode. The plot will not be linear, but the past and the present in political democracy and spiritual democracy are to flow into a confluence where the heterogeneity is levelled into the homogeneous flood of social change. Neither scholarly discourses nor logical fortresses could achieve anything like this without the people participating. The ivory tower must break down and demolish its artificial compartmentalisation, like ballads and folktales, which could easily percolate into society. A more authentic and analysable medium must emerge. Like the epics of yore that had a huge canvas, the novels, often called prose epics, fulfilled the social purpose. If theology and heroism in the epics inspired society, then the novel and novella inspired the people to act and orchestrate their endeavour to achieve equality and respect.

In most novels with an ideological background, the authors adopt a stream-of-consciousness novel that is neither logical nor chronological but psychological. It lays down the epistemology of the story. Whether it is feminism, third genderism, or *Dalit* fiction, the question of its ontology arises. *Dalit* literature, for example, is not just writing about Dalit. *Dalit* literature is the literature of the *Dalits*, by the *Dalits*, and for the *Dalits*, when a novel on the *Dalit* theme is.

The kind of society in pre-India was highly discriminating, and there was no equality among the citizens. On one side, the English people who ruled India segregated the people to serve their caste of ruling without hindrance. They followed the theory of divide and rule. On the other hand, further decisions are made by people who are highly



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discriminating in nature. The literacy percentage is at the particular of twice was much less. The rural population engaged in agriculture was uneducated and incapable of thinking for themselves. The people belonging to high castes were land owners, and the landless poor worked as agricultural labourers under the rich caste-oriented people. The caste system in the present context does not refer to the supremacy of brahmins also but the caste- Hindus who have exploited the SCs just as English men treated the Indians. There was no representative or spokesperson for these poor people. Only the writers and thinkers should have done something to highlight the people's grievances, sorrow, and humiliation under the rule of rich landlords.

During the period in almost all parts of India, only the writers, such as Bharathiar and Bharathidasan, took up the cause of the oppression. We are reminded of Shelley, who said, "The written are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind." It was unfortunate that even these writers could not open the eyes of the rulers regarding the plight of the oppressed.

Art is often described as an expression of emotion and reality. Art is true to a great extent. Literary art, through its artistic expression by Indian writers, reveals the situation's underlying realities and highlights the poor people's conditions. Even social reformers could not take any initiative for the cause of people with low incomes. Among the marginalised writers of the period, Mulk Raj Anand occupies a place of excellence. He was a writer and an extraordinary man of pure consciousness who cried with those who cried. The novelist put himself in their positions and realised their problems. He combined imagination with truth and started writing novels, and through the novels, he mirrored the plight of people experiencing poverty. Who was this man Mulk Raj Anand? One can know him as a novelist, short story writer, or essayist, but he was something more than that. Humorously, he called himself a bogus professor. He came from a family of copper-smiths but didn't take up that profession; he worked as a regiment clerk in the British Army.

He had opportunities to accompany his father wherever he went and learned many things about Indian and European society. He was very familiar with the lifestyle of the army personnel and Englishmen, as well as the sorrowful life led by villagers and how they were poverty-stricken and exploited by the wealthier castes. This experience taught him the hypocrisy of moneylenders, castes, priests, and officers. These sections of the people were affected by sinful pleasures exploiting the condition of people experiencing poverty.

All these experiences Mulk Raj Anand had when he was too young. He could not remove these impressions from his mind. His sense of the mind was found to be expressed through his novels. In a sense, his novels are not merely literary pieces. His novels represent the social history of pre-independent India. His peep into his family reveals that his mother was an orthodox woman from her learned mythology. He spent much time reading works by social revolutionaries like Tolstoy, Karkheh, and James Joyce. This period was his transition from being an observer to a writer. He sometimes spent time in Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram. The collective consciousness of the oppressed people affected him much.

It was during this period that he prepared the opening chapters of *Untouchable*. Because of his themes, many publishers rejected the novel *Untouchable*. One learns that the writer E.M. Forster was instrumental in publishing this novel in 1935.

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the most prolific Indian novelists, developed his writing techniques. The most popular Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Prem Chand, and Satish Chandra infer Anand much. Tagore's novels are known for their humanistic approach and sympathy for the poor-inspired Mulk Raj Anand. In this context, we only have to accept that his novels are completely artistic expressions of his literary talent and imagination. His characters are real. All the heroes are people we can find everywhere in the cities, towns, and villages. Broadly, we can divide the scavengers into two groups. Firstly, his characters are the victims of social injustice, and secondly, the characters are the supporters of unjust social order. The first group belongs to the characters Bakha, Sohini, and Ananda, and the second group consists of hypocritical priests, lords, money-tenders, and white rulers.



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Caste Hindus, more than the Brahmins, victimized the downtrodden. Here, we can see the relevance of Mulk Raj Anand in the history of Indian fiction. He was fully conscious of the ignorance and weakness of the poor people. At the same time, his aim was, through his novels, to bring on the goodness in the characters. Through his characters, he sympathizes with the downtrodden and effectively brings out the need for reformation to save and protect the marginalised section of society. It is not that Anand alone was the saviour. There were people like Gandhi and others. But other people could not create that much impact as the writings of novels like Mulk Raj Anand.

Since the thesis is titled artistic expression, we need to understand the art of characterisation in the novels of Anand. His art of characterisation is remarkable for the ultimate touches of realism. His characters represent the society's suffering members, bringing out the tragedy of the oppressed and poor, whom he had seen and known. His characters are common men who are ignorant of superstitions and each thing in courage. But they try to fight against social forces that are against their destiny. Despite their strength against these forces, they never succeeded. It is saddening to note that even after 68 years of independence, the same thing continued in modern India.

The author's first novel discusses serious and critical conditions of the Caste System's prevalent Indian scenario. The place of action is an outcaste colony situated in an unhealthy atmosphere. The area consisted of a cluster of mud-ware houses far from the town. This colony was uninhabited by leather workers, washermen, barbers, and scavengers. Most of them are poor, naturally lived poverty persons and nursing.

The atmosphere and environment were unhealthy, insecure, and prone to diseases. There was a head a son, Bakha. Bakha was expected to clean public restrooms. Bakha had been working in the barracks of the British regiment. He had a fathered Chhota; both imitated the English men, and Charan, the son of the washer men, imitated the two boys.

The story starts with a particular day when Bakha sleeps longer with his clothes on. It was winter season and very cold. He was shivering. His father Lakha and sister Sohini slept in the guilt.

All the children were deeply impressed by the style of English men. An English soldier gave Bakha a pair of breeches, and a Hindu sepoy gave him a pair of books, and whatever he earned in the military barracks, he gave to his father with the Rupees he got from his work. He could not buy all the things he wanted. The nights were awful cold and uncomfortable. His father used to scold him and abuse him. Even the sepoys ill-treated and insulted Bakha. He was afraid of everybody, but at the same time, he was proud of his self-respect. His father, Lakha, forced him to get up to clean the sepoys' toilets; otherwise, they would become angry on that particular day. He repeated his father's abusive words. He recalled the morning when his mother passed away. This young boy resisted his father's treatment to be deaf and later began to ignore it. He thought of his mother, who used to make him get up early. When she was alive, she gave him a brass glass full of tea, which he had a headache very much. After drinking tea, he used to go to work. But today, his mother was not there. Her father insulted him. He lost in imagination his mother. Since her death, he didn't get up early in the morning. Nobody gave him a cup of tea. In addition to this ill-treatment, his father called him an illegally begotten child. Bakha was very unhappy and called his father a bully.

This story is a short introduction about Bakha, a young man with much energy and enthusiasm compared to his father. He was sincere in his work and admired the lifestyle of English people. He wanted to wear the dress of the English and behave like him, though he was not like English. His father made fun of him by calling him Vipali Saheb (Imitation Saheb). Though he was a scavenger and did dirty work, he preferred better living conditions, like a clean house, street, and town. In other words, he hated the style of life lived by his forefathers. There is evidence in this novel to show that, at times, he felt against his father for his harsh words and disagreeable method of insulting him. The well-built young man could think originally and expected a better social life.

He was little but confused, though he had the job as a scavenger. He had such a sensation that he felt the brightness of the sin everywhere, "in him, on him, before him, and behind him." This primary sensation was a great turning point in



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his mental attitude. At the same time, Bakha was only an ordinary person with all the passion and feeling one can see in a boy his age. Side by side with social ideologies, he was romantic also. He was fond of Ram Chandan's sister and wanted to marry her. To highlight his character, Mulk Raj Anand describes him in words: Bakha had a high sense of gratitude, haltingly grateful, falteringly grateful and stumblingly grateful" to Charan Singh to fight him a hockey stick. Bakha wanted pity and sympathy to be shown to him more than everything else. He hated the caste Hindus because they looked down upon him and ill-treated him for nothing, whereas he was happy with Christians and Muslims who did not observe caste distinction and bored everybody alike. Mulk Raj Anand says, "The Tommie had treated him as a human being and had the heart to think of himself as superior to his fellow outcasts." His life is nothing but the history of the Indian nation divided by the caste system, economic status, social position, and unwarranted ill-treatment meted out to a particular section of the people. The cruellest act was to label Pancha men fit for nothing and call them worse than animals. The strangest thing that we can think of is that upper caste and rich people used these outcasts for the medico jobs and had no qualms when the women of this caste were sexually exploited. For these relations, the outcast women were outcasts. The primary importance in this novel is to be given to the character of Bakha for the lesson that he was nothing but the victim, but also his rebellion, not the traditions and customs occupational diversion created artificially by the people of the upper caste. The term untouchable in these novels focuses on the life of Bakha's theory; other characters were equally ill-treated and insulted by the same society. According to E.M. Forster, "Bakha is a real individual, lovable they wanted, sometimes gland sometimes weak, but wrongly Indian, even physique is distinctive; can recognise his bright face, with the graceful torso and heavy buttocks as he does his nasty job. Bakha returns to his father and wretched bed, thinking of Mahatma. His Indian day is over. The next day will be like that. But on the surface of the earth, the change at hand". In these words, Anand anticipated that there would be a refreshing rebirth for the outcaste at a later time.

Apart from the character Bakha, other characters in the novel that Mulk Raj Anand created to recreate the image of the society of that period are the character of Sohini, the only female character in the story. She is Bakha's sister, and critics have described her character as minor, but she plays an important role in the development of the plot. The novelist has taken sufficient pains to paint a character realistically. She is an innocent, bashful, modest, and dutiful character. Sohini has all the virtues that the Indian maid should have, but despite this, she suffers and faces insults. She is beautiful and has physical charms. Anand says, "She had a sylph-like form not thin lent full-loaded within the limits of the graceful father came well-rounded on the hips with an arched narrow waist fathom which descended the folds of trousers and above which were her full round globular breast jerking slightly under a transparent muslin shirt." Bakha was proud of her beauty. His matchless beauty tempted Pandit Kalinath, the priest in the temple, and attempted to molest her. But he failed in his attempt. Though she belongs to the lower class of society and is beautiful, she never succumbed to the pressures of the priest. She had her principles of virtues and charity. Bakha, but in the same society and belonging to the same lower class, there was another lady, Gulabo, the washerwoman. She was a keep of a gentleman and must be taken care of him. This washed woman was very submissive to the gentleman at the same time; she was jealous of Sohini and abused her on many occasions. Sohini is affectionate and tender towards his brother. Through the interesting description, the novelist, "a son overhead shot down, bright arrows of heart and inspired a feeling of the passing of time, a feeling that made her forget the unsolicited quarrel with Gulabo." Though they belong to the same class, both female characters have different attitudes towards life values.

Another important character in the novel's plot is Rakha, Bakha's younger brother. This flat character does not contribute significantly to the development of the strong. However, the authors intentionally introduced the character to highlight the miserable condition of the marginalised members or untouchables like Bakha, who worked hard. Rakha was lazy and did not have any sense of hygiene, manners, or culture. It does not help the newborn of the family. He was a product of "suffering and misery." Mulk Raj Anand writes, "his tattered flannel shirt griming with the blowing of his ever-running nose obstructed his walk." There was little about this character except that he contrasted with his brother.

Another important character apart from Bakha is Lakha, who is untouchable in the novel. He belonged to the old type of sweepers who were almost like the Inhumans with their employers. Anand has described Lakha, Bakha's father. as "the Jameshar of all sweepers in the town and officially in charge of three Rose public restrooms by the side of the brook. He was lord and weak. The side by and job, which was also dirty, made him behave rudely with his children. But at the



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same time, pitied him. He found his father had no responsibilities towards family and children. His old age forced him to give up his job when withdrawing from his father's job. When withdrawing from his father's job, he was confident that his son Bakha would care for him and his family.

Lakha was fond of delicious eatables like pickles and sweets. He used to take these Hems left by the high caste Hindus in their plates. Lakha had been experiencing poverty and misery since his very early days and resized himself into fate. He never entertained the thoughts of retaliation against high caste men, so when his son Bakha wanted to revolt against the high caste, his father pacified, characterised by Anand saying, "They think mere dirt because we cleaned their dirt. Even an enslaved person is better than a sweeper or a scavenger.

Untouchability is a difficult Indian phenomenon. E.M. Forster says "that only an Indian endowed with detachment and sympathy could write this novel. The best part of Anand's family life was that he was born a Kshatriya, and the caste was a part of the upper class. Though he belonged to a Kshatriya community, he was not a Kshatriya. His life history shows when he was a child, he played with the sweeper and not with Kshatriya children. He was fond of untouchables. The isolation of the untouchables is a central theme of the novel. Anand drew inspiration from writers like Karkheh and James Joyce.

The novel begins with a description of the slums, the outcast colony situated on the city's outskirts. Its location is symbolic of isolation and the indifference of the caste Hindus towards untouchables. They are not even allowed to draw water, which is a basic human need of human existence. For this, they have to depend on the mercy of the caste Hindus towards untouchables; the oppressed are not allowed even to draw water, the basic human need of human existence for this, they have to depend on the mercy of the caste Hindus. The most painful and disgusting is the desire that his son also must be a scavenger for his livelihood. He also told his son that all so-called high caste people were not bad and gave the example of Baking Bhavan Das and his kindness. The whole novel centres around the form of characters, and the novelist has over a plot that takes us to the theme of one of the curses of society, namely Untouchability.

Every piece of art, as mentioned earlier, must have a common theme, and the novel's theme is to bring out the condition of the so-called low-caste people and the prevalence of casteism, which was artificial. Through this novel and his characters, Mulk Raj Anand brings out the inhuman, cruel attitude of a section of the and their vile attempts to control workers like scavengers, sweepers, servants, and other people involved in menial jobs. In choosing this theme, Mulk Raj Anand has charged his duties as an artist to hold the mirror of humanity to reformat and purify the human mind.

This novel, published in 1935, reveals the condition of the society in pre-independent India, and the rulers were the British. It was courageous because the novelist considered bringing out the sample attitudes of the upper castes, Indians, and the British. According to a study, this novel was written under the influence of Gandhian philosophy. The novelist said that in the article "Mirror," published in 1935. The article's title is "How I Become a Writer One Day." However, I need a story, like Gandhi in Young India, about the sweeper boy called Lakha. It was so simple, direct, and sincere that I felt in my heart the false ring of the base coin I had become in my novel through imitating Joyce". This incident shows the human face of the novelist who suffered with those suffering and wanted to share his views on the need to follow the philosophy of equality and recognize the self-respect of every human being. Anand offered this novel for publication with the information available but met only failures. The reason given by the publishers was the story dealt with a poor man, dirty, shabby, worked on due heat". Anand was told by a popular critic that the English people did not want a filthy league to walk into the drawing room.

The Untouchable exposes the evils of the untouchable in Hindu society. The novelist critically and realistically and, at the same time, objectively analyses the conditions of the underdogs—one of the prevalence of the caste hierarchy even among the untouchables. Galileo, the washer man, is proud of his superiority to Sohini. Bakha, a young man 18, finds it difficult to adjust to the other people of his caste. Anand attempts to write these people against caste Hindus, whereas the clear evidence in the novel shows that Anand had an urge for social reformation. The plot of *The Untouchable* is remarkable for observing three classical unities of time, place, and action.



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Its plot is well-kit. All characters are vividly delineated. The novelist uses Indians, the Indian words fatherly, to create an Indian atmosphere. His diction is polished, and the words used in the novel describe the nature of the temperament of his characters.

The novel *The Untouchable* can be called a mini-classic in Indian English after its publication; several stories of the same genre have been published. To swim up, we can quote M.K Nayak, who said, "The novel ends with Bakha thinking of everything he had heard though he could not understand it."

Anand's treatment of them is objective, and restraint is viewed differently. The novel is not merely a literary piece. It is a social history of pre-independence India, expecting to be reformed socially through the art of the most popular literary device of the novel; the novelist has created a milestone in Indian English literature.

Concluding Statements

Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable* transcends mere storytelling to become a potent vehicle for social criticism by vividly portraying the caste-based inequities of pre-independent India. Anand's authentic depiction of Bakha's inner conflict and external struggles graphically exemplifies the dehumanizing impact of Untouchability while providing a narrative of silent resistance and dignity. The novel's influence lies in its blend of literary artistry and ideological commitment, as Anand uses realistic characterizations and immersive narrative techniques to challenge societal norms. His work remains a critical text in understanding the socio-political dynamics of caste oppression. It continues to inspire discourse on equality, human rights, and social justice within Indian society and beyond. Eventually, the novel's lasting impact lies in its ability to evoke empathy and awareness, making it a timeless piece of social commentary and a significant milestone in Indian English literature.

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