

Intersections of Caste and Class in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable, The Road, and Coolie*

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Abstract

*This article examines the societal prejudice in *Untouchable* and *The Road* by Mulk Raj Anand critically. It centres on the lower castes' social and psychological oppression in traditional culture. Hindu scriptures explain the traditional caste system, which separates people into four main varnas: Kshatriyas, Brahmins, Shudras, and Vaishyas. Shudras were among these varnas or groups, working as labourers and providing services; they are untouchables and are subjected to severe prejudice and exploitation. Bakha, the protagonist of *Untouchable* (1935), is a lower caste sweeper who faces harsh societal limitations. His livelihood depends on upper castes, and he cannot access public resources like well water. Concomitant with its criticism of the hypocrisy of upper caste members and the exploitation of women, this book explores the ceremonial purifying procedures that serve as the foundation for the marginalization of members of lower castes. Albeit, advancements in knowledge and progress, the poorer castes in an Indian village continue to face economic exploitation and social inequity in *The Road* (1961). Because the lower caste depends on higher caste landlords for their sustenance, Untouchability, oppression, and the lower castes' inability to rebel are emphasized in both texts. Mulk Raj Anand criticizes caste, subjugation of lower castes, and the inaction of social and religious institutions in addressing these injustices through these narratives.*

Keywords: Discrimination, Mulk Raj Anand, Social Exploitation, Untouchable, Casteism.

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Introduction

The Hindu religious tradition is where untouchability first emerged. Four main varnas or types were recognized in Hindu society: Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Brahmins (priests and scholars), Shudras (workers and service providers), and Vaishyas (traders and merchants). Mulk Raj Anand's famous line in *Untouchable* displays humans as humans' enemy, "Man's fate, today, is no longer in the hands of the gods, but is often in conflict with the evil in other men. . ." (Anand 4). Brahmins are said to be descendants of Lord Brahma, the Creator. Only for this reason do they top the social ladder. Shudras, born from Lord Brahma's feet, were supposed to serve the higher castes. The formation of a well-ordered society where various tasks can be performed by the various classes of people may be the true goal of this caste system. Howbeit, as time goes on and one class consistently asserts its dominance over another, society and individuals deteriorate, and various forms of discrimination and exploitation become entrenched. According to G. S. Ghurye:

untouchability in Hindu civilization is a result of 'ideas of ceremonial purity. First applied to the aboriginal Sutras in connection with the sacrificial ritual and expanded and extended to other groups because of the theoretical impurity of certain occupations. (Ghurye 124)

Untouchables, who are rooted in Sutras, are thus the lowest caste in India and have progressively been exploited and oppressed in society. Mulk Raj Anand portrays Bakha in *Untouchable*; E. M. Forster was so taken by Anand's portrayal that he felt compelled to commend Anand's brilliance. In *Untouchable* preface, Forster wrote, "Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian and by an Indian 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" (*Untouchable* 7-8).

Literature Review:

Renowned novelist Mulk Raj Anand, who speaks for lower and middle-class society. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar calls Mulk Raj Anand the novelist of the underdog, as his fiction consistently represents the oppressed classes. M. K. Naik also observes that Anand's novels are marked by social purpose and humanitarian zeal. While *The Road* masterfully depicts the marginally better circumstances of the lower castes in mid-20th century, *Untouchable* is product of his response to the untouchability ethos in traditional Hindu society during the Gandhian era. Practice of untouchability is now a legal offence, and it has been legally banned in India; the government is doing many praiseworthy things to fill this social gap and to elevate the socially marginalized population. The government has also initiated job opportunities and many other governments support schemes. Howbeit, armed with six thousand years of social and class domination, Hindus continue to treat the untouchable as if they were a subhuman animal that should be ignored, harassed, or taken advantage of whenever necessary.

Discussion

In the novel *Untouchables*, 'low-caste people' have no access to nearby river water, because it is believed that their touch will impure the river water. Since their contact contaminates public wells, they cannot draw water; so they patiently have to wait for any upper caste person, and they request him to draw water for them, and they keep their pitchers away from periphery of the well, where the high caste man would pour water. Mulk Raj Anand describes a scene where people wait for water patiently till a sepoy passes from there, they cry for water, "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" (*Untouchable* 30). People kept on crying till he came near, well, some people were standing, some were bending, and some were joining their hands for mercy. They felt grateful for help, admittedly they were also human beings fit for everything; they also needed water like others, but they had been sidelined for ages, hence they did not dare to challenge or alter those things. This scene reveals the psychological slavery created by caste oppression. E. M. Forster praised *Untouchable* as a book of unforgettable power, precisely because of such moving depictions of humiliation.

The sweepers and cleaners are dependent on the wages paid by the upper caste Hindu people; their access to water and food also depended on upper caste's intention. In the morning, Bakha and his family do cleaning of public latrines, and in the afternoon, they have to visit the houses of upper castes to collect bread and other daily needs. Bakha has to cry like needy, "The sweeper has come for bread, mother! The sweeper has come for bread" (*Untouchable* 76). To get something to eat, he must wait patiently for the woman of that house to come out. On an instances Bakha visits a house and cries for bread, and after some time, a woman comes out and throws few chapattis at him from her balcony. He gets stale chapattis, but that woman curses him for defiling her doorsteps as he sits there waiting for bread. Ere long, a sadhu comes to her door begging for food. She comes out to offer him hot and fresh chapattis and vegetables with great reverence. Veena Singh observes this caste-based discrimination in Hindu society and states, "The necessities of life, like food and water, are used as powerful symbols to delineate the relationship between caste Hindus and the Untouchables. Caste Hindus use them as weapons to humiliate Untouchables and erode their sense of self-respect" (Singh 125). Critics regard food in Anand's fiction as a symbol of power relations, where basic necessities become instruments of domination.

In accordance with social norms, outcasts are viewed as unclean, and if the caste Hindus get polluted by an accidental touch with untouchables, then they are supposed to undergo a ceremonial purification. The caste Hindus have a faith that purification can be achieved by bathing and by performing certain worship with sacrificial fires or by touching a Muslim; it is an easy process to overcome pollution. Chaudhari Thakur Singh, the village's highest caste and class leader, angrily opposes the road's development in *The Road*, telling Pandit Suraj Mani that Untouchables have demolished Shiva's sacred hill to make way for the road. The priest pacifies his

anger by advising, "Then we can hold the yajna, if you folk can collect enough ghee to burn, so that the incense can rise to heaven and Indar Bhagwan can send down a storm to wash off the road!" (*The Road* 3). Anand satirizes religious superstition and exposes how ritual purity is manipulated to preserve caste hierarchy.

While Bakha is visiting pan-shop in *Untouchable* to buy cigarettes, the caste Hindu owner tells him to put his penny on the ground close to him. After that, he touches the coin after sprinkling it with water to make it cleaner. The shopkeeper throws cigarettes to Bakha "as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop" (*Untouchable* 48). It used to be customary for sweepers to continuously yell as they went along the street: "Posh, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming!" (*Untouchable* 57) for the Hindu castes to avoid and protect each other from getting touched by them and becoming polluted. Once Bakha, unfortunately, forgets to shout while passing by a busy street and collides with a high-caste Hindu. He punishes Bakha with a hard slap because Bakha had polluted him with his touch.

The high caste Hindus brainwash the outcastes through their clever talks and uncommon concepts. Pandit Suraj Mani states, "And people suffer enough for the guilt of the past. To be sure, they ought to suffer before they can rise to a higher caste in the next life or recognize the divine. The temple teaches them Dharm. They cannot enter the house of God" (*The Road* 37). Outcastes are prohibited from entering Hindu temples, and it widens the gap between outcastes and high caste Hindus. The priest encourages the young caste Hindu boys to inflict punishment on outcasts. He says to them, "To be sure, if you are convinced of the rightness of your resolve, you can inflict what punishment you like upon them: The God Krishna advised Arjun to fight if the cause be just. . ." (*The road* 39). Character of a person depends upon the society in which he lives; provocation enables them to burn down the huts of poor untouchables.

Bhikhu in *The Road* is a courageous boy, and he is also an admirer of poet Kabir Das. In his poems, the poet preserves the honor of the impoverished working class. He is extremely disturbed by the Hindus from higher castes who are involved in road construction, but he remains adamant and determined to build the road in anytuation. Anand sharply criticizes the misuse of religion as a political weapon to justify oppression and maintain social control. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that *The Road* is a symbolic narrative of social change. The road represents progress and freedom.

Both Bakha and Bikhu are loyal to their duty. They aim to earn recognition by performing their duty. But their loyalty to their work for society is never admired. So, both of them experience similar hardships. Bakha listens to the inspiring words of Gandhiji and decides to change his mind and create his new human identity. Bikhu flees to Delhi. While enduring oppression in the name of caste, they also suffer from economic subjugation at the hands of the privileged people. They are destined to remain poor forever. Mulk Raj Anand writes, "You, the poor and the humble, you, the

meek and the gentle, wretches that you are, swindled out of your rights, and are broken in body and soul, you are respected by no one, and you do not respect yourselves" (*Coolie* 223).

Anand depicts a scene of Govardhan, a typical Indian village, in *The Road*. Thakur Singh, the village mukhiya, is a zamindar. In exchange for food, the village's outcasts labor in his field. Thakur Singh screams and threatens Bhikhu and his mother as they go to work on the road that will connect the adjacent town and village, "Wait, both of you, thieves of daylight! This village was a trust reposed in my family by the Gods, and you have defiled it by robbing the stone from the quarry" (*The Road* 8). He condemns high-caste Hindu Dhooli Singh for letting outcasts work on the road, as he wanted them to keep on working for him without wages. Dhooli Singh takes the side of the outcasts, so he is threatened by the high caste Hindus that if he helps the outcasts financially, then he won't be allowed to live in the village. These threats provoke Dhooli Singh, and he extends his help to the outcasts.

The high caste Hindus fear that if the outcasts get earnings, then the clutches of slavery may shatter. By working in the road construction, the outcasts were getting paid by the government, and it was uncomfortable for the high caste Hindus. Dhooli Singh says that when the road construction is complete: ". . . the milk of the village will be born to the city, and more cash will come to the folk . . . it is only roads and roads and more roads, and Bijli that will bring prosperity!" (*The Road* 21). High castes feared financial independence and earnings may awaken the outcasts, and they may revolt for their rights. Thakur Singh gallingly shouts out his agony, "Ours was a self-sufficient village before the Afsars of the Sarkar began to interfere here. And these Chamars worked for us! And now these Chamar boys are earning wages and walking at the heart of our whole caste brotherhood. . ." (*The Road* 22).

Coolie (1936) is a compelling portrayal of Munoo, a poor orphan boy. He leaves the hamlet to work and encounters the brutal outside world because his aunt leaves him hungry and mistreated. He does housework for a bank clerk. Clerk's daughter is entertained by his monkey-like dancing. There, he is interrupted by a partial insolent housewife; she makes him realize that he is a servant and that he has no right to be happy. Anand writes, "He had no right to join the laughter of his superiors. He was to be a slave, a servant who should do the work, all the odd jobs, someone to be abused, even beaten" (*Coolie* 34). His ambition was to make his life better, and to fulfill his aim, he explored the outer world of Bombay and finally chose to become a collie.

Munoo represents a class; many unfortunate outcaste orphans experience such atrocities in their lives. He works as a rickshaw puller in the busy streets of Bombay. The class gap in society shatters Munoo's dreams. He changes his profession from time to time to get peace, but for that poor orphan, peace was nowhere to be found. His ambition to change his fortune leads him to do such hardships that finally cost his life at the age of mere sixteen. His death at this early age exposes the cruelty of the heartless society.

Conclusion:

Mulk Raj Anand is known widely for representing outcastes and working class in his writings. In the aforementioned novels, he masterfully portrays the lives and sufferings of the marginalized people. Lives of all the protagonists are full of tragedies, and their tragic life is not driven by destiny but by the cruel society that separates individuals by economy and birth. In words of Saros Cowasjee Mulk Raj Anand, 'introduced a whole new people, who had seldom entered the realm of literature, in his narratives' (Cowasjee 40). Mulk Raj Anand's insightful character depictions express India's harsh societal reality. He employed his novels to speak for the marginalized and the downtrodden. His novels revolutionized people's way of thinking for the socially outcast communities. He was literally a gem who gave voice to the outcasts and the marginalized through his novels.

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