

**VOICE OF PROTEST: A STUDY OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S
UNTOUCHABLE**

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Though many researchers have been undertaken on Mulk Raj Anand, this article ventures to point out the rebelliousness of Bakha, the central character in *Untouchable*, against the social system of his time. Generally, critics portray him as a poor character victimized by the high caste Hindus on the ground of untouchability. He is treated as an object of sympathy and empathy which has dehumanized him further. He is depicted as a passive character born to bear all the social injustices, inequalities and discriminations. Though he does not come forward to protest in public yet the spirit in him rebels against the system. He has raised his voice of protest within himself. He has also shared it with his father. His father understands the reality but does not add fuel to his anger.

The novel provides a realistic picture of the outcastes' colony where we find a true picture of the exploited class of the society which is a concrete symbol of the traditional practice of the untouchability. The aspect in which Bakha is presented offers an elucidating comment on the relations between the self and society considered in terms of untouchability. The colony is dark, damp and uncongenial place. The absence of drainage system and the addition of rains of various seasons give out the most offensive stink. The thatched mud houses clustered together in two rows are utterly ill-fitted for human habitation. This colony maintains distance both from the town and the cantonment. It looks as though the scavengers, leather-workers, washer men, barbers, water-carriers and grass-cutters – all these inhabitants of the colony are sub human non-entities muddled up together. The colony which is known as “outcaste colony” reveals that the privileged folk are totally indifferent to the welfare of these inhabitants. The sweepers who do responsible jobs of maintaining cleanliness are destined to live in a locality that has never known hygiene or sanitation. They should be content to live in the gutters like worms to be crushed by the superior caste people. Here Anand has painted the realistic colony where untouchables and other outcaste people stay and wait to be humiliated by other caste Hindus.

Bakha, the central character, lives with his family in the outcaste colony. The father of this eighteen year old boy is Lakha, the Jamedar of the sweepers of the town and cantonment. Rakha is the younger brother of Bakha. Sohini, Bakha's little sister is young and attractive in this dirty colony. Bakha is young and able-bodied boy. His mother died a long ago when he was a child. The old father does nothing except coughing and abusing his children and wants to place all his responsibilities on his eldest son. So Bakha, even at eighteen, is burdened with the strenuous routine of a sweeper. He has to work in all weathers throughout the day. He is a very

sensitive boy and uncommon in many ways while other sweepers including Lakha accept the caste realities in a docile manner. Bakha, the representative of the progressive section of the untouchables, simmers with discontent. He is full of the spirit of revolt and dreams of social justice.

The novel begins with an autumnal morning in Bakha's life. He feels much uneasy in his bed though he puts on the regulation overcoat, breaches, puttees and ammunition boots; the biting cold wind reaches right to his skin. He had been working in the barracks of a British regiment for some years on sort of probation with a remote uncle. That's the reason he had been caught by the glamour of the White Man's life. Bakha's adulation for the White Man is not only that of an innocent youth's admiration for sola toupees and immaculate white dresses, but has deeper roots. It stems from the fact that they treat him as a human being. He has been much influenced by the Tommies (English Soldiers) who have always treated him as a human being. He wants to dress like them. In imitating the Tommies' way of life, he follows Red Lamp brand cigarette. His craze for Angrezi fashion has earned him the nickname Pilpali Sahib. Bakha is a child of twentieth century and his encounter with Tommies causes stirrings within him. From a Tommy, he has secured a pair of old breeches and from a sepoy a pair of old boots and he has begged one Tommy for the gift of a pair of trousers. Bakha clearly has trouble of accepting the identity allotted to him at birth. He has the desire to be like the Tommies. He learns to think of himself as superior to his fellow-outcastes. He attempts to adopt the "fashun" or European style of the Tommies and has an overwhelming desire to live their life though he knows very well that except for the English clothing there is nothing English in his life. This escape from the sordid realities to the world of fantasies by aping the west is again momentary. In the words of Paul Premila, poverty does not allow him to live up to that standard of imitation. Reality overtakes him. Poverty is a medium of his self exploitation. He prefers to work under Tommies even if its really painstaking and he gets bakshis from them. He does not realize the implications of the white man's presence; the larger political issues affect him little. What is real to him is the discrimination meted out to him by the castes Hindus. At the same time, he is not aware of the class divisions. He imagines himself cleaning the commodes of the Sahibs in the British Barracks dressed in a superior military uniform.

The novel moves forward describing Bakha's morning round of duties with a painstaking particularity, bringing out both the efficiency with which the boy does this essential service and the sheer callousness with which the beneficiaries receive it as if it is a matter of no account what so ever. His routine life begins with the horrendous abuses which he receives from his father and the diurnal cleansing of a row of latrines. He sets out to work even before dawn at the rude command of his father else Sahibs will be angry. They have only created a growing dislike in his heart for his old father. He recalls the fine mornings he used to have with his mother when she was alive. But then those reminiscences of Bakha cease to an end by the call of Charat Singh, the famous hockey player, living in the barracks where Bakha goes daily and he shouts at him for not cleaning the latrines. As a worshipper of duty, Bakha proceeds to pick up his brush and basket from the front wall of his house and sets out to clean the three rows of latrines. But he shows amazing efficiency and quickness in doing his job. He does the work of a dexterous workman. Charat Singh tempts Bakha to give him a hockey stick if he cleans his latrine. Here Bakha falls victim to exploitation by a havildar who wants Bakha to clean his latrine. Anand writes:

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Charat Singh's generous promise had called forth that trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his fore-fathers, the weaknesses of the down-trodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indigent, suddenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog suddenly illuminated by the prospect of fulfillment of a secret and long cherished desire.

Bakha's survival does not rely so much on his inner strength as an individual, but rather it is dependent on the action that surround him, mainly those individuals of higher caste. It is a character like Charat Singh who determines his survival depending on the degree of pity. He is willing to dispense at any particular moment. Bakha sets himself to do anything for Charat Singh. He salutes his benefactor and bends down to his work again.

The peevish old black money-lender Ramachand shouts at Bakha in his sharp southern diction. He forcibly realizes Bakha of his duty as a scavenger and his low position in the society. This shows the exploitation of a money-lender. Anand describes almost with a painstaking particularity, the malaise of Bakha's unending drudgery. Bakha after toilsome work gets tired and feels thirsty, after finishing his work, he returns to his hut where he finds Sohini trying to light a fire between two bricks. The wet wooden sticks don't give out any flame. Smoke irritated her eyes which are full of water. Bakha is eager to have a cup of tea. He sits down on his knees and begins to light the fire. When the sticks flare up into a big flame, he puts the earthen pan over it. To his utter surprise he finds water neither in their pitcher nor in the house. Sohini goes to fetch water. She waits long for chance to fill her pitcher with water as untouchables have no well of their own. She is treated badly by the high caste Hindus. According to orthodox belief, if the outcastes go up the platform, the water in the well shall be polluted. They depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. This is a curse of untouchability which has bestowed upon them. Anand through his novel satirizes the religious hypocrisy of caste Hindus which are prevalent in the society. It's their general tendency to keep physical distance with untouchables and treat them socially backward. (9)

Sohini keeps waiting with other women, one of them being Gulabo who picks up a fierce quarrel with Sohini just to satisfy her sense of jealousy. Gulabo, the washer woman who claims a high place among the low caste, looks down upon Sohini who belongs to the lowest among the sub caste as a sweeper girl. Here again, we find the exploitation among the exploited. After long wait comes a belated caste Hindu visitor to the latrines who is a sepoy from the neighboring regiment. The crowd begs to the sepoy. But the sepoy is a callous brute or in too much of hurry and he passes ignoring the request of the group collected at the foot well. The sepoy shows his indifference without realizing the important works which are done by the outcaste in their locality. This is a perfect example of exploitation by the sepoy who is in a better position than the untouchables and hesitates to pour water into their pitchers.

As time passes, there comes Pandit Kalinath, a priest of the temple in the town. All the outcastes begin to request him to fill their pitcher. The Brahmin's eyes fall on Sohini, charmed by her sylph-like beauty, he calls her pouring water into her pitcher, dismissing others. Sohini is grateful to the priest who asks her to come in the afternoon and clean his house in the temple courtyard. Sohini agrees to do so but the so called sympathetic attitude of the priest towards Sohini proves wrong in the later part of the novel.

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The scene moves forward when Bakha for the first time as a responsible son, goes out to sweep the roads of the bazaar. Usually this work was done by Lakha, but on that particular day Lakha is too ill to go out and work. Bakha suffers a lot on the very first day by the Hindu caste. Anand describes the misery and humiliation of Bakha which is very much prevalent in our social hierarchy. Bakha while walking along the dusty broken road, halts before a pan-cigarette shop and feels tempted to purchase a packet of Red Lamp cigarettes. Before picking up the one anna coin that Bakha puts at a place near the shop, the shopkeeper sprinkles water over it to purify it. Then he throws a cigarette at Bakha as a butcher may throw a bone to an insistent dog. He feels humiliated, goes to a Mohammedan, puffing at a big hubble-bubble to light his cigarette from the chillum. The Muslim allows him to do so. It gratifies Bakha who is not used to taking such liberties with anybody. Anand here tries to contrast the behavior of the caste Hindus with that of the Muslims who treat Bakha as a human being, and not as a dog. Next Bakha passes by Ganesh Nath's shop and avoids looking at him. The slight of his shop brings an unpleasant memory for Bakha. Recently there was a quarrel between the man and Bakha's father on account of the compound interest Ganesh had demanded for the money Lakha had borrowed on the mortgage of his wife's trinkets to pay for her funeral. Ganesh is a perfect specimen of the exploiting Bania community.

The role of the confectioner is shown by Anand to present the theme of exploitation. At a confectioner's shop, Bakha is tempted to buy some jalebis. The confectioner cheats him while weighing. This shows his economic exploitation. Bakha knows that he has been cheated but he dares not complain. The confectioner throws the jalebis wrapped in a paper that Bakha tries to catch. The taste of the warm and sweet syrup satisfies him. He feels exhilarated but his carefree mood and joy don't last long. As an untouchable, he has to keep physical distance from Hindu and has to shout while entering among the crowd of Hindus. He hears someone shouting at him, a torrent of abuses is hurled at him for he had accidentally touched a high class Hindu forgetting to announce his approach on the road and thus pollutes him. A crowd gathers around him, he was dazed and dumb founded. The touched man was hysteric with anger. None was there to speak for the poor caste. This wounds him psychologically and makes him ponder over the humiliating segregation of man from man by the restrictive imperatives of a social order which has seemingly become anachronistic and irrelevant. Luckily a sharp-tongued tonga-wallah comes to his rescue and disperses the crowd. The touched man gives a sharp slap to Bakha, undoing his turban and scattering his jalebis in the dust. This is the worst moment in Bakha's life. Bakha did not mind scavenging for others; but what makes him in vigil against the whole social system is the desire to see that it accommodates everyone in its system. He has the potential to hit back but his anger gets subsumed into an indifference and passivity as he becomes conscious of the fact that a vast majority of outcastes too are subjected to the same kind of dehumanization as he is. But two thousand years of continual suppression and intimation of his race have not sapped out his humility and he tries to suffer from these social indignities with an exemplary forbearance that is not untypical of a tragic hero. He is much stronger than the tyrant, yet his muscles and limbs can't reach promptly in retaliation. Anand states:

His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, far away, from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not by physical barrier, because one push from his hefty

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shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the Hindus merchants, but a moral one. (39)

The tonga-wallah understands his innocence and consoles him. Bakha the protagonist of the novel is the figure of suffering because of his caste. Casteism plays a prominent role for his exploitation in the hands of society. Bakha is a universal figure to show the oppression, injustice, and humiliation to the whole community of the outcastes in India. His anguish and humiliation are not of his alone, but the sufferings of the whole outcastes and underdogs.

Bakha recalls his experiences of the morning. To the caste Hindus, he has become dirt. The abuses of people ring in his ears. Moving a little further on, Bakha sees a big temple. He has to clean the heap of leaves and dust in the temple courtyard. He knows that an untouchable going into a temple pollutes its past purification. He goes on with his job of cleaning and piles the litter in heaps. The desire to see the inside of the temple keeps him restless and finally he decides to go up to the stairs and gets a chance to see the deity and hear the mantras. A sudden cry 'polluted, polluted, polluted' rendered the air. This shows the hypocrisy of the Pandit. Sohini who comes to sweep the temple falls as a prey to the hands of Kalinath who attempts to violate her chastity making improper suggestions to her but at her denial he starts shouting 'polluted, polluted'. Anand throws light on the hypocrisy and lustfulness of pretentious and so called lanky priest Kalinath who believes to be polluted by the untouchable. Anand shows, says M.K.Naik:

A sure grasp of the psychology is seen in both the caste Hindu and the Untouchable. In his dealings with the later, the caste Hindu is armed with the feeling of six thousand years of social and class superiority- a feeling which refuses to accept the fact that untouchable is a human being, but insists on treating him like a sub-human creature, to be ignored or bullied or exploited as the occasion demands. (29)

God saves Sohini from the evil hands of the priest who escapes into the crowd and takes to his heels when Bakha comes up. He listens to everything from Sohini and moves towards the priest in a threatening manner but then he is also helpless to express his open resentment of the insult inflicted to his own sister, to his own self and to his caste too. The insults and abuses of the Brahmin rankle long in his mind. He tries to gauge the pitiful predicament of his sister, but remains a mute witness because of caste barriers, though he very much wanted to pull the priest out and beat him up. He wants to rise in protest against the hypocrisy of this priest. He has the physical strength to resist the oppression and voice to protest. The protest becomes inward. This is so because servility of centuries has weakened and enervated him. This pokes a good example of sexual exploitation and injustice done to untouchable in India.

Bakha suffers the curse of untouchability within himself. He is unrecognized and unsympathized several times simply because he is poor, lived in a one-roomed house, has no property and belonged to lower dregs. His hard work pays nothing to him more than some pieces of bread and clothes. This portrays his economic and social exploitation.

Bakha asked an "ashamed and crest-fallen" Sohini to go home and he decides to go to a few houses himself in the Silversmith's lane to collect food which was done by Sohini usually. He cries intermittently at the doors for bread. A woman rebukes him for sitting at the doorsteps and polluting her house. Anand satirically portrays the typical Hindu wives who are heartless. They favor the lazy Sadhus with hot vegetable curry and rice where as they fling thin stale slices of bread to the laboring class.

The exploitation of lower caste is described by Anand in the novel when he throws light on the pathetic condition of their life. He expresses that there was no provision for lights in the sweepers' street, so most of the inhabitants compensated for the nights spent in utter darkness amid the smoke of smoldering hearth fire in the small congested houses, by spending most of their time in the open air. He foresees his future when he sees himself being shouted at by a crowd, he sees a lady throwing bread down at him and reprimanding him for not cleaning the gutter. After receiving the torrent of abuses Bakha tells his father that the Hindus think that they are mere dirt because they clean their dirt. His father does not react as he had accepted the social law of Hindus.

The attitude of the high caste Hindu shatters Bakha and he feels a wild desire to retaliate but he can't overstep the barriers which lie in between him and caste Hindus. The servility of centuries which is ingrained in him paralyses him even when he boldly thinks of retaliation.

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