



Research Paper

## Humanism and Marxist Class Consciousness in *Untouchable*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper will look at the work of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, which describes a day in the life of a sweeper Bakha, in the light of humanist ideology and Marxist class consciousness. Marxism and Humanism are associated with the idea of progression. Anand being one of the progressives considered literature a medium for societal and political change, hence, worked actively for the cause of progression in literature. The Progressive Writers' conference of 1948 declared that a non-marxist writer cannot be considered progressive. This paper will draw references from various works on Marxism and Humanism, one of the important work being Lukacs's *History and Class-consciousness*. Progressives are religiously humanists and the paper shall draw forth Anand's critique of materialism and upper-class domination in the novel. The paper will discuss the proletariat class struggle and its exploitation. Also, it will explore caste bias in India which shall bring out the humanist aspect of the novel as well.

**KEYWORDS:** Class and Caste struggle, Humanism, Marxist class consciousness, Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchability*.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Humanism is a philosophy which focusses upon deciphering reality through human means. Lamont describes Humanism as a philosophy which upholds service to mankind as the highest moral ideal. He writes:

It (humanism) holds that as individuals we can find our own highest good in working for the good of all, which of course includes ourselves and our families... It refuses to accept the reduction of human motivation to economic terms, to sexual terms, to pleasure-seeking terms, or to *any* one limited set of human desires. It insists on the reality of genuine altruism as one of the moving forces in the affairs of human beings. [1]

Anand had from a very young age developed a sense of kinship and commiseration for the outcastes of his surroundings. He was sensitive towards the suffering of people, lower classes particularly who were constantly dehumanized by the upper classes of Indian society from the time immemorial. Later, he went away to England to pursue Philosophy which broadened his mind and introduced him to ideas such as Gandhism, Humanism and Marxism. Anand's Dickensian humanism led him to introduce anti-heroes in his works. His novels unlike earlier novels gave voice and life to the representatives of the lowest strata of the Indian society. The novel deals with the sad plight of a sweeper Bakha, who is an untouchable. It holds a mirror to the injustice that Indians do to Indians rather than British colonizers. The novel begins with the description of outcastes' colony which Anand writes is outside the boundary of the town and the cantonment. The novel begins with the description of dehumanized state in which the outcastes are forced to live their life. He writes:

There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers... and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its bank... The absence of drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. [2]

### II. HUMANISM

The opening paragraph itself strikes a humanist note and depicts a horrid reality where the outcastes are forced to lead a subhuman existence because of the orthodox Hindu point of view that contact with an untouchable pollutes and defiles the upper caste. Hence, the only place they can call home is the periphery which lies neglected in the most horrible, unhygienic conditions possible. The day progresses and Bakha goes about doing his everyday chores like cleaning latrines for Hindus and upper-class men who constantly abuse him and call him the most offensive names, sweeping the alleys, waiting for hours to get left over food from

Hindu household and leavings from a Hindu's plate. Anand shows a realistic picture of upper-class hypocrisy and callous attitude towards the outcastes. Bakha is more human than the upper-classes portrayed in the novel. He is a keen observer and with a critical insight he questions the practices around him. One of the incidents is when he sees a cow and remarks, "How queer, the Hindus don't feed their cows although they call the cow "mother"! Bakha thought, 'Cattle which go to graze at the brookside are so skinny and feeble.'" [3]. Through the character of Bakha, Anand has successfully brought to light the double standards of Hindu Brahmins who would shout "Polluted, Polluted" at the slight unmindful touch of a sweeper but would have no qualms about sexually harassing an untouchable woman. Pundit Kalinath tries to seduce Bakha's sister Sohini but when she raises an alarm, he shouts "polluted" and the blame falls on Sohini instead. It is one of the many instances where the high-castes, the privileged go scot-free and the socially oppressed suffer the most insufferable doom. Bakha observes that the high-castes' colony was filthy, laden with stray dog excrement and decayed food. In a sudden outburst of rage, he states that "they (high-castes) think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt." [4] Anand brings out the callous attitude of Brahmins towards untouchables who wait all day for a priest or a Brahmin to pass-by and fill their pitchers with water because their touch would pollute the well. Some would pay heed to the request but many would ignore them altogether. Anand realistically depicts Brahmin arrogance. The priest who is supposed to preach virtue, humility, kindness and love is the one who practices arrogance, selfishness and lasciviousness. There are many incidents which expose the hypocrisy and double standards of high caste men and women. After a tiring day and many calls to the woman of the house for food, Bakha falls asleep at the doorstep. The woman abuses him-

You eater of your masters... may the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you perish and die! You have defiled my house! Go! Get up, get up! You eater of your masters! Why didn't you shout if you wanted food? Is this your father's house that you come and rest here? [5]

The woman's bias is highlighted when she serves special food to the sadhu and throws down bread for Bakha which falls on the ground and Bakha has no other option but to pick it up quietly and wrap it in his duster because he has to feed hungry stomachs back at home. Lalla ji, who Bakha touches inadvertently in the market place, is so engulfed by the feeling of rage and revenge as he feels polluted and since he has to take a bath anyway he slaps him hard causing Bakha's turban and jalebis to fall on the ground. However, Bakha's insides rage and fume on account of such inhuman and horrible treatment but he is never able to raise a voice against such injustices. Such treatment undoubtedly has sensitized him towards the horrible plight of his fellow beings but he remains a mute victim. The idea of revenge stays inside his bosom and he finds himself unable to act as he is weighed down by the burden of the past, the brutality of the high castes and their outdated religious practices which give them an upper hand. Jotirao Phule, in his essay brings to light the Brahmin supremacy through their sacred book which gave them the highest rights and promoted ideas like untouchability. He writes-

The institution of caste, which has been the main object of their (Brahmin) deep cunning is evident from their own writings. The highest rights... that would make the life of a Brahmin easy, smooth going... everything that would conserve and flatter their self-pride, -were specially inculcated... whereas the Sudras and Atisudras were regarded with supreme hatred and contempt, and the commonest rights of humanity were denied to them. Their touch... is deemed a pollution. [6]

The high castes portrayed in the novel are corrupt to the core and leave no stone unturned in exploiting the lower castes. The jalebi seller cheats Bakha and gives him a lesser quantity than worth four annas of jalebi. It is their belief that untouchables should be kept away from pleasures of eating rich food. This oppression has been so deeply rooted within the psyche of the oppressed that he feels ashamed to buy such pleasures for himself. Later Bakha learns that Jesus Christ sees a Brahmin and a sweeper as equals. Such doctrine of equality tempts Bakha but later when he comes to know about the Christian ideology that men are born sinners, he questions this belief and exclaims that he has never sinned. Bakha's portrayal is realistically human and by exposing the corrupt, hypocritical nature of the higher castes, Anand has struck a humanist note in his work. He has given life and soul to an oppressed underdog. Anand states his position as a humanist in *Apology for Heroism* -

I believe, first and foremost, in human beings, in Man, in the whole man... The humanism which I prefer does not rest on a Divine Sanction... but puts its faith in the creative imagination of man in his capacity to transform himself, in the tireless mental and physical energy with which he can, often in the face of great odds, raise himself to tremendous heights of dignity and redeem the world from its misery and pain... [7]

Towards the end Bakha has been shaken up from a deep slumber of ignorance and he comes to the realization that he is an untouchable and he must strive to break free from the shackles of oppression.

### **III. MARXIST CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS**

Anand, as a Marxist saw class oppression as a factor that hindered the progress of Indian society. In the novel a double oppression is at play. Bakha is both an untouchable and a proletariat. He is exploited both socially and economically. Anand is clearly sympathetic towards the oppressed and attacks both religion and

capitalist society which cannot see the lower caste and class as humans. The novel can be analysed through the Marxist lens. Within the novel the class system is inseparable from the caste system which are oppressive and exploitative. Through endless frustrations and dejections with the Hindu community, Bakha realizes himself as an exploited class entity. Bakha achieves what Lukacs in his work would describe as class-consciousness. Class-consciousness is an awareness of the structure of economic and social class and the class interests that a member of a certain class, a proletariat to be specific, achieves by being exploited by the ruling class. This awareness according to Marx could initiate a revolt against the ruling class. Lukacs explains that in order to achieve class-consciousness the proletariat must engage in what he calls materialistic dialectic which is an interaction with the material. Bakha from the very beginning portrays himself as a materialist. This engagement with the material is an unconscious process which is a necessary part of achieving class-consciousness. Bakha would wear “trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots, etc., as worn by the British and Indian soldiers in India” [8]. Though these clothes have no practical usage, he wears them anyway for the sake of “fashun”. His possession of hockey stick with an English stamp is matter of pride for him. This shows his initial taste for vulgar materialism which could only give him a sense of superiority. The plot progresses and Bakha experiences caste and class oppression from the upper-castes. Anand points out that Bakha toils hard all day and cleans the latrines for Hindus and sepoys yet they consistently abuse him. Upper-classes exploit the proletariat and deny them their basic pay for the work they do. When Bakha bumps into an upper-caste, an old man remarks- Don’t know what the world is coming to! These swines are getting more and more uppish!... one of his brethren who cleans the lavatory of my house, announced the other day that he wanted two rupees a month instead of one rupee, and the food that he gets from us daily. [9]

In this case, the ruling class doesn’t wish to acknowledge the fact that it is hard for the working class to sustain themselves on one rupee a month. The subhuman conditions that they live in, the amount of work they do and the number of hungry mouths that they have to feed, one rupee a month is, without a doubt, insufficient. Sustaining oneself on such meagre wages would automatically explain the subhuman conditions in which the proletariat lives. Also, the quality and quantity of food that the proletariat gets is abominable. Bakha cannot complain and has to pick up the bread that the lady of the upper-class house throws down on the dirty road. Dulai states –

Sweepers and latrine cleaners depend on the people for whom they work for food. It is part of their wages but is given to them virtually as alms... The outcastes often get only the leavings of their employers, the caste Hindus. Perhaps on festive occasions they may receive some decent food. Thus, they are constantly starved for good nourishment... Because of deprivation, food is an obsession with Lakha and other outcastes. [10]

Bakha, through the day is constantly bullied and abused. Apart from the meagre wages that they get, working class women also have to endure sexual harassment at work place. They cannot raise a voice against the same as the power lies with the employer and they need to work to sustain themselves. The Pundit harasses Sohini and manages to get off scot-free. It is through these experiences, the naïve Bakha at the beginning of the novel, comes to realize himself as an exploited class. Lukacs states “Defeat is the necessary prelude to victory” [11]. Bakha is subjected to unconscious exploitation of the proletariat through which he develops a sense of identity of his own class. Unlike his father, Bakha shows restraint and chooses not to eat the leavings from the plates of Hindus. Also, he realizes the futility of his obsession with the clothes of sahibs. This is the result of his realization of himself as an oppressed. Not accepting such food is a sure sign of revolt. Towards the end Bakha is presented with three alternatives to break free from oppression. First is presented by Colonel Hutchinson who tries to persuade Bakha to convert to Christianity. But he fails to explain to Bakha who Jesus Christ is and what does he mean when he says that Christ was the son of god. Bakha is puzzled “The sahib, however, was singing, singing to himself and saying *YessuhMessih* was the son of god. How could God have a son? Who is God?” [12]. Though the missionary’s religion doesn’t discriminate between a Brahmin and an untouchable, Bakha detests the Christian idea of him being a sinner. He concludes that the religion of his forefathers is no way inferior to sahib’s religion and conversion is not a solution to his miserable state. The second alternative is presented by Gandhi who considers the practice of untouchability as “satanic” but nevertheless he criticizes Untouchables for their dirty surroundings and bad habits. Bakha observes that Gandhi is blaming them for their dirty lifestyle. The question that arises is how the untouchables should break-free from such oppressive state and improve their lifestyle or clean their surroundings when the upper-class exploiters keep exploiting and oppressing and deny them their basic humanity and fair wages and rewards for their labour? Gandhi undoubtedly sides with the untouchables but Bakha realizes that Gandhi’s solution involves passively waiting for the upper castes to have a change of heart and he has no part to play for his release from oppressive state. The third and the last alternative is offered by the poet Iqbal Nath. Bakha learns that there is a machine called a flush which could clear away excrement without anyone having to handle it. It is through the poet that Marxist solution is offered to Bakha. The poet says-

When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine... - the flush system. Then the sweepers can

be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society. [13]

Along with this solution, a social revolution too would be required to break away from the bondage of untouchability and exploitation of the working class. Towards the end, as Bakha turns towards home to tell his father about Gandhi and the flush system, Anand clearly implies that a change is at hand.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Anand puts forth the renaissance humanist belief that man is the master of his destiny. Man can bring about a change and rid the society of innumerable kinds of social evils. Also, religion and God play no part in shaping a man's destiny. He suggests cultivation of Humanistic values and pleads for social, political, economic equality between men.

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