



Research Paper

Negation Of Humanity: An Analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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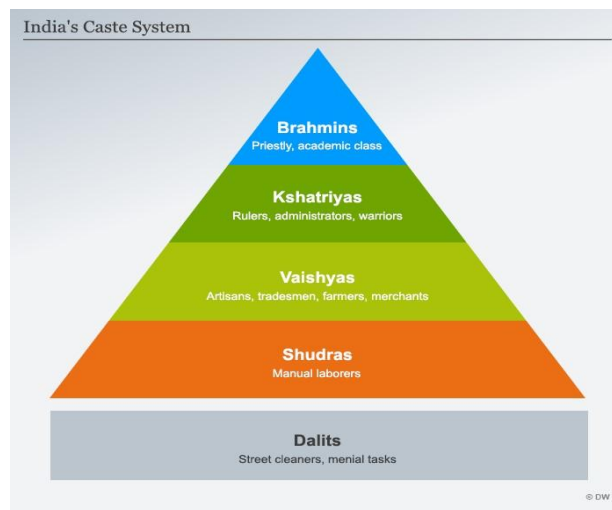
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ABSTRACT: *The current paper is an investigation of the major issues faced by a low-caste boy, Bakha from the novel "Untouchable," written by famous Indian-English writer Mulk Raj Anand. The novelist brings out the central theme of untouchability in an unjust society like India. The Varna system in India has played an important role in this kind of discrimination among the people. Through the characters in the novel, Anand brings out the condition of post-colonial India and the tragic conditions of the low-caste men and women who had to undergo humiliation on a daily basis. The researcher points out the fundamental, social and existential problems in an Indian society such as identity crisis, fear, and low self-esteem the people had to face due to their status in the society. This novel stands as an eye-opener to such social evils prevalent in the society and calls for a liberation from the shackles of discrimination and oppression. KEYWORDS: Oppression, discrimination, humiliation, identity issue*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The caste hierarchy originated after the invasion of the Aryans in precolonial India around 1500 BC. The Aryans were believed to be Indo-European language speakers who established an Aryan race in the Indian continent and subsequently brought changes to its social and cultural status. The term "Aryan" itself meant "white race," hence always considered themselves superior. As a result, they introduced the varna system in India which was inculcated as a part of the Hindu belief system. This "Varnavyavastha" consisted of four hierarchical systems from the superior to the lowest group. The first one is the Brahmins and the most privileged caste; they are believed to have a close connection with God. The second one is the Kshatriyas, who are known as the warriors, and then comes the Vaishyas, a group of farmers and merchants, and then comes Shudras who were traditionally artisans and laborers. A fifth group existed apart from the four caste hierarchies, that of the unclassified or the 'Avarnas' whose works were considered polluting as did jobs such as cremation and handling of dead bodies, manual scavenging etc.



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The term Subaltern can be used as a synonym for minorities, subjugated women, refugees, colonial subjects, the illiterate, and children whose voices have been muted. The post-colonial writers have been trying to bring consciousness to the oppressed, marginalized or the so-called subalterns. It is this consciousness that helped these people to arise from the margins to the centre of society. The term “caste” was first derived from the Spanish or Portuguese word “Casta” which meant race, lineage or breed. In colonial India, the Britishers first used this to identify and separate various groups for the census. Caste is hierarchical, hereditary and endogamous. There existed a group of people who were considered “physically and ritually polluting” due to their occupations. These “out-castes” enjoyed no rights and were considered impure. It is primarily against this community that untouchability was and continues to be practised. This division of society based on caste was later added to the Vedas or Scripture to secure religious sanctions for control and hegemony. Due to the menial works they do, they were removed from the Hindu hierarchical system and were considered as the most defiled beings and also regarded as the out-castes or untouchables (Ghurye). For years, people lived under division based on both caste and class and after a point of time, they decided to revolt against it through their voice and writings. This resulted in subaltern literature which is solely written to bring out the voice of the voiceless. (Nisar Das 2018,84)

Mulk Raj Anand is a post-colonial Indian-English novelist and essayist who depicted the lives of the poor and under-privileged and gave voice to the marginalized. Anand is a committed writer, a novelist with a purpose, his purpose being to focus attention on the suffering, misery and wretchedness of the poor which results either from the exploitation of the under-dogs of society by the capitalists. In the words of Saros Cowasjee: "Anand is deeply concerned with social problems and that he is conceited to the eradication of the evils which infest modern society. Is this a deplorable aim of an artist? Is Untouchable a propaganda because it reveals the exploitation of the poor by the rich? Propaganda is a term given currency by the bourgeois critic/ and loosely used in India to caption any work where the author's intention in plain."

In his first and most famous novel “Untouchable” which was published in 1935, he depicts the life of Bakha, a scavenger boy who belonged to an untouchable sweeper community and the inhumanity he faces in a single day. In an Indian society, a man was recognized by his caste and it determined his status among others. In this novel, the author brings out the sociological aspect that deals with the stream of consciousness of the hero, Bakha and it directly appeals to the inner thoughts and emotions of him and the traumatic experiences he had to face.

II. INHUMANITY OF MAN TOWARDS MAN

The novel “Untouchable” takes up only a single day of Bakha’s life and that itself showcases the thoughts and emotions of an out caste. Even the place he lived complimented his wretched life. The area was filled with the filth of the public latrines and he lived in a dingy single-roomed hut along with three others without proper food or warm clothes to protect from cold. Bakha wakes up early to clean the latrines before someone came to use them. He was treated with nothing but disrespect just because of the job he did, cleaning the filth of others and hence, made him unclean and dirty. He had been abused mentally and even, physically for being born as a subaltern.

There are several episodes in the novel to show the humiliation Bakha has to face in a singleday and one can imagine how it would be every other day. He has to keep physical distance from Hindu and has to shout:

“Posh, Posh, sweeper coming” (untouchable,45) so that they save themselves from being defiled by the touch of an untouchable. The first humiliation he experiences on the street when he forgets to announce his arrival and accidentally touches an upper caste man where Bakha has been abused for defiling him - “why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bowlegged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!” (Untouchable,39) The man even slaps Bakha for his careless mistake and he could not even react as he lived under them and he knew that it would only make the situation worse. The second one is the temple episode where Bakha enters the temple out of curiosity which is prohibited to the untouchables. He is taken aback by the shouts of ‘polluted, polluted,’ and even here, the place which is supposed to be a place for everyone to seek God is defiled by an untouchable like Bakha. But later it infuriates him to know that the same priest who told that he polluted the temple, tried to molest his sister Sohini who also belonged to a lower caste. On one hand, it was believed that an out-caste would defile the upper caste just by their touch but out caste women were constantly abused by the same people and that never counted. The humiliation Bakha faces continue and even after saving an upper caste child from a wound, he is blamed by the child’s mother for defiling him. As a reader, one could not ignore the helpless situation of this scavenger boy, Bakha. These so-called ‘upper caste’ lack basic human compassion towards these people and even treat them as mere cattle. The humiliation he faces is when food is thrown to him as if it is thrown to an animal. This was something he experienced on a daily basis as he could not come in contact with the elite groups. There are still people like

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Charath Singh or Colonel Hutchingson who saw Bakha without any difference but at the same time, there were ones who threw fits at him for being a scavenger like Hutchingson’s wife who racially termed them as “Blackies.” The contempt of the upper classes and the injustices they heap on him make Bakha long for a professional solution. He is convinced that others treat his people as dirt because they remove dirt. So, he seeks a way out in the philosophy of Gandhiji and the mechanical facility offered by the flush-latrines. By the end of the novel, Anand leaves the reader with an unresolved problem whether there will be an end to this and he tries to give a solution to this issue. The novel thus ends on a somewhat positive note with the image of Bakha going home and vocalizing his story in the hopes that some sort of resolution, or at the very least, some emergence of understanding will occur.

III. IDENTITY CRISIS

In many of Mulk Raj’s novels, the characters suffer from identity crisis which have complicated their identity formation and invited miseries into their lives. They are recognized by the identity which is imposed on them by the society according to their social groups. Due to these forms of impositions, the Self of the individual resists the given identity, desiring an identity which would elevate their status and values individually, socially and nationally. According to Erikson (1970); “identity crisis (...) was one of the most important conflicts that people face in development...an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself.” Throughout the novel “Untouchable,” Bakha is searching for a way out of his misery. He finds it difficult to accept his identity as he knows that being born in a sweeper community is the core reason his discrimination. He tries hard to be like the Britishers and imitate them because somewhere he thinks that being like them will gain him some respect but it turns out to be another reason for others to mock him for the English clothes and mannerisms he tries to adopt from the “tommies,” his assertion of identity failed to bring out the desired result. Bakha is desperately trying to escape the connotations the title of the novel asserts over his identity. Bakha’s desire to imitate the Tommies is important because he can preserve his identity only to the extent that he can be conscious of his superiority. However, Anand quickly dispels Bakha’s consciousness of superiority when he comes to the realization that “except for the English clothing there was nothing English in his life.” He accepts his true identity when he is treated like an animal in the street by an upper-caste for accidentally touching and defiling him or when throwing food at him by an upper-caste woman. He feels helpless when he is physically and mentally abused by them and has to stand still without rebelling or raising his voice against this brutal treatment. These course of humiliations he faces strike him and make him realize that he is a mere subaltern who has no voice of his own - “For them I am a sweeper, sweeper untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an untouchable.” ()

IV. CONCLUSION

Bakha is a universal figure who shows the oppression, injustice and humiliation of the whole community of out-castes in India; his anguish and agony are not of his alone, but the suffering of the whole outcastes and underdogs. As Bakha fails to find solution in the world around him, it seems that the only way to alleviate untouchability depends only on the Untouchables themselves. Though much has been done to eradicate this evil institution that has been prevalent for centuries and it has become part of daily life. Though legislation has been enacted to stop this evil, it alone can’t control this problem. This is an issue which can be solved only

by convincing millions of hearts and minds through self-education. Even in this 21st century, we often witness such caste-class discrimination and this can only be eradicated by teaching the coming generation from a very young age and that must begin within the households. *Untouchable* is one such novel which explores the plights and predicaments faced by people who undergo social discrimination and search for their identity in Indian society. Mulk Raj Anand has presented the case against this social evil with a force that comes from true art.

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