



THE HUMAN STRUGGLE IN THE SHADOWS: EXPLORING MARGINALIZATION IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

Hawaibam Loiyumba

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Tetso College, Nagaland, India

ABSTRACT: Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* stands out as a succinct yet profound exploration of social marginalization, distinguishing itself from the author's other, more expansive works. As an early Indian-English writer, Anand chose to illuminate the plight of the marginalized by centering his narrative on Bakha, an eighteen-year-old sweeper from the untouchable community. This novel, unfolding over the course of a single day, offers a penetrating view into the life of an individual oppressed by the rigid caste system.

This paper examines the theme of marginalization through a critical analysis of Anand's depiction of human struggle within the framework of social and religious taboos. By scrutinizing the caste system and its deleterious impact on lower-caste individuals, the study elucidates how the societal construct of untouchability dehumanizes and disenfranchises the oppressed. The narrative sheds light on the systemic exclusion faced by those deemed 'untouchable,' portraying them as societal outcasts whose very presence is regarded as contaminating.

The aim of this research is to highlight the inhumanity inflicted upon the lower castes by upper-caste Hindus. By analyzing Bakha's emotional and psychological experiences, the paper seeks to provide a critical understanding of the humiliation and struggles faced by the untouchables. Through this examination, the study contributes to a broader comprehension of the enduring marginalization and social injustices that characterize the human condition within the context of Anand's work.

Keywords: Human shadows, untouchable, outcast, caste-system, taboos, marginalization.

Mulk Raj Anand, a prominent Indian-English writer, was born in Peshawar in 1904. His career spans four decades, which includes the pre-independence as well as the post-independence

era. Like Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, he is also one of the most celebrated Indian-English writers, having earned worldwide recognition and popularity. His writing career is immensely influenced by his personal life and experiences. He was born into a Kshatriya family, a higher-caste Hindu. However, he spent his childhood days among people from the outcast community. So he had deep knowledge and empathy for the underprivileged. A noted Indian critic, Pramod Kumar Singh, rightly comments:

Anand has a deep concern for the low-caste people of India, and his novels throw light on the existing sorrows and sufferings of the downtrodden. His novels reflect close pictures of traditional Hindu society, with a special focus on the miserable condition of the have-nots. (Singh 23)

Pramod Kumar Singh's observation highlights Anand's profound engagement with the suffering of India's lower castes, illustrating how and his other works vividly portrays their plight within traditional Hindu society. His acclaimed novels span several decades, reflecting his evolving concerns and literary style. The novels that garnered him the most acclaim include *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *The Village*, *Across the Black Water*, *The Sword and the Sickle*, *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts*, *The Big Heart*, *The Private Life of an Indian Prince*, *The Death of a Hero*, *Morning Face*, *Confession of a Lover*, and *The Bubble*.

Mulk Raj Anand's entry into the literary world in the 1930s coincided with a critical period of socio-political transformation in India. As the movement for political independence gained traction, many contemporary writers, including Anand, recognized that mere political freedom would be insufficient without addressing the entrenched socio-economic inequalities prevalent in Indian society. Writers of this era thus vocally criticized social ills such as poverty, illiteracy, casteism, superstition, and untouchability, viewing these as fundamental barriers to true independence.

In *Untouchable*, Anand's first novel, he critically examines the interplay between caste dynamics and the human condition in pre-independence India. The novel presents a compelling and realistic portrayal of a society stratified by rigid caste hierarchies, focusing on the systemic exploitation of marginalized communities. Rather than limiting the narrative to the personal plight of Bakha, an untouchable sweeper, Anand uses his protagonist's experiences to reflect the broader social oppression faced by the entire untouchable class. Through Bakha's humiliation and suffering, the novel foregrounds the pervasive discrimination experienced by those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

This study critically explores the representation of the untouchables, a group whose existence is shaped by enduring social injustice. Rather than focusing solely on individual suffering, *Untouchable* illuminates the collective plight of an entire caste subjected to centuries of institutionalized oppression. Bakha's experiences are emblematic of the widespread dehumanization of the untouchables, serving as a microcosm of the systemic marginalization and alienation faced by his community. His personal humiliation symbolizes the wider social and psychological consequences of caste-based discrimination.

Anand's *Untouchable* offers a profound critique of the human condition within the framework of caste, exposing how deeply entrenched traditions and orthodox Hindu conventions

reinforced social hierarchies and perpetuated inequality. The novel reflects the historical context of slavery, which had stifled Indian society for over two centuries, and demonstrates how caste-based oppression continued to inhibit the social mobility and independence of the lower classes. Through a critical examination of caste dynamics, Anand brings forth the long-standing marginalization of the untouchables and the enduring impact of caste on the human spirit. J. H. Hutton emphasizes the central role of Hinduism in shaping the purity-pollution dynamics within the Indian caste system: "In the Indian caste system, Hinduism was the backbone of the purity-pollution complex, and it was the religion that influenced the daily lives and beliefs of the Indian people" (Hutton 48). His observations draw attention to the significant influence of religious beliefs in maintaining and perpetuating caste-based divisions in Indian society.

The opening paragraph of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* vividly illustrates the sharp divide between the untouchables and other social groups, emphasizing the marginalization of the lower castes. The untouchables' colony is deliberately set apart from the rest of society, symbolizing their exclusion. While the untouchables live in squalid, dilapidated homes, the upper-caste Hindus and the British soldiers (Tommyes) in the barracks enjoy far superior living conditions. Through his realistic portrayal of the outcast colony, Anand immediately establishes the deep social and spatial segregation that defines the human struggle for dignity amidst marginalization. Anand's opening lines distinctly depict the harsh realities of the outcast colony, offering a realistic portrayal of its conditions:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadows both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived scavengers, the leatherworkers, the washermen, barbers, water carriers, the grass cutters, and other outcasts 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 banks, and the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows, and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made the quarter a marsh, which gave out the most offensive smell. And altogether, the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony and the ugliness, the squalor, and the misery which lay within it made it an 'uncongenial place to live in.

(Anand 4)

The systemic discrimination faced by the untouchables in the novel is fundamentally rooted in the rigid caste structure of Hindu society. This structure, based on the concept of "Karma," divides society into four main castes: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The Shudras, occupying the lowest tier of this hierarchy, are further subdivided into various sub-castes, with sweepers being the most marginalized. Within this framework, sweepers are subjected to extreme social exclusion and exploitation. Anand's portrayal of Bakha, an eighteen-year-old sweeper, illustrates not only the severe discrimination imposed by higher castes but also the additional marginalization from other Shudra sub-castes. This depiction stresses the profound isolation and dehumanization experienced by the untouchables, showcasing the multifaceted nature of their marginalization within the caste system.

In the novel, Mulk Raj Anand critically examines the severe social and economic marginalization experienced by the Shudras, who, despite their vital roles as laborers, craftsmen, and servants, are systematically excluded from the larger social and economic system. The Shudras, including characters like Bakha, are marginalized and impoverished due to centuries of entrenched subjugation, relegating them to inherited, menial professions. Bakha, the son of a sweeper, exhibits remarkable skill and dedication in his work, treating it as a form of worship, and excels in various sports, displaying his physical and mental aptitude. However, his contributions go unrecognized, and he faces consistent humiliation and neglect solely due to his caste status.

Anand's portrayal of Bakha underlines the severe economic and social exploitation inherent in the caste system. Despite his diligence and skill, Bakha's rewards are minimal, such as remnants of food and worn clothing, demonstrating the inequitable distribution of resources. Furthermore, caste-based restrictions prevent sweepers from accessing water directly from the well, compelling them to rely on upper-caste individuals to fulfill this basic need. This practice illustrates the broader issue of social marginalization imposed on the Shudras, revealing the embedded inequality and dehumanization perpetuated by the caste system.

In the well scene, Anand poignantly depicts the systemic and personal injustices faced by the untouchables through the experience of Sohini, Bakha's sister. Sohini is forced to rely on the pity of higher-caste individuals to obtain water from the caste-well—a facility she is socially barred from accessing directly. Anand details this as follows: "She went to the steps of the caste-well, where she counted on the chance of some gentleman taking pity on her and giving her the water she needed" (Anand 24). This act accentuates the severe social exclusion and dependence imposed on the untouchable community.

The situation is further compounded by the hypocrisy and exploitation embodied by the priest, Kalinath. While the priest should represent spiritual purity and moral authority, he blatantly contrasts this role by seeking to exploit Sohini sexually when she is assigned to clean his courtyard. His actions reveal a flagrant abuse of power and a deep moral failing as he attempts to derive physical pleasure from Sohini despite her untouchable status. When Sohini resists his advances, Kalinath's reaction is one of rage and indignation. He accuses her of contaminating his sacred space and, in a display of hypocrisy, expels both Sohini and her brother Bakha from his domain. The priest's refusal to acknowledge his exploitation of Sohini and his subsequent actions reinforces ingrained moral and social corruption, further illustrating the systemic dehumanization and marginalization of the untouchables. Sharma rightly asserts that Mulk Raj Anand exposes the hypocrisy of the upper castes by illustrating how figures like Pt. Kali Nath, despite their professed adherence to purity, seek the physical contact of Harijan women: "Mulk Raj Anand, on the other hand, has portrayed the upper caste's hypocrisy by showing how men like Pt. Kali Nath love the touch of Harijan females" (Sharma 45). Upon realizing the molestation of his sister by a man of religious authority, Bakha is overcome with intense anger, temporarily overshadowing all other concerns. This anger drives him to seize his sister's hand and lead her through the crowd, intent on confronting the priest responsible for the abhorrent act. His thoughts are singularly focused on enacting retribution. However, as he searches for the culprit, he finds himself instead before the temple, the site of the transgression. For a brief moment, he is captivated by the temple's grand sculptures, whose intricate beauty sharply contrasts with the

ugliness of the crime that occurred within its walls. The temple stands as a powerful symbol of the religion that simultaneously fascinates and oppresses him. Yet, this moment of distraction quickly gives way to a profound realization: His anger and resolve dissipate, replaced by an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. The temple's threshold, which he cannot physically cross, becomes a potent symbol of the social boundaries that confine him. This physical barrier represents the inescapable societal limitations imposed by the caste system, emphasizing Bakha's intense sense of helplessness.

In the novel, Anand critically portrays Bakha's inability to express his resentment as a reflection of the entrenched oppression enforced by orthodox Hindu society. This powerlessness is emblematic of the extensive marginalization experienced by the untouchables, who are socially and psychologically conditioned to accept their inferior status. Anand's depiction of Bakha's resignation points out how systemic caste-based discrimination stifles dissent and reinforces the subjugation of lower castes, revealing the profound impact of social and religious structures on individual agency and resistance.

Anand crafts his protagonist, Bakha, as a universal symbol of human struggle against an oppressive social structure. Bakha's experiences transcend the specifics of race, time, and location, embodying a broader critique of systemic marginalization and social injustice. Anand uses Bakha to represent the universal human condition constrained by an antiquated and repressive societal framework.

Bakha's status as an untouchable relegates him to the lowest echelon of the caste system, where he endures relentless discrimination and hardship. This social positioning reflects not only the historical and cultural context of pre-independence India but also serves as a broader allegory for the struggles faced by marginalized individuals across different times and places. Anand's depiction of Bakha's daily battles and suffering features the inherent inequalities and systemic barriers imposed by rigid caste hierarchies.

The novel illustrates how Bakha's plight is emblematic of a larger human struggle against repressive structures that curtail individual rights and opportunities. Despite his resilience and efforts to assert his dignity, Bakha is continually thwarted by societal norms that deny him basic rights and respect. His experiences reflect the broader theme of the marginalized fighting against powerful, repressive forces that perpetuate their disenfranchisement.

Anand's portrayal of Bakha spotlights the harsh realities faced by those at the margins of society, revealing how their suffering is not merely a product of individual failings but a consequence institutionalized structural injustices. By presenting Bakha's struggle as a universal experience, Anand critiques the enduring impact of outdated societal structures on human lives, emphasizing the need for systemic change to address these pervasive inequalities. Thus, *Untouchable* serves as a powerful commentary on the larger human condition, illustrating the resilience of the oppressed in their quest for dignity and justice within an unjust social framework.

In conclusion, while there have been advancements in addressing human struggles, the enduring issue of untouchability and marginalization, as explored in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, continues to reveal the persistent shadows of inequality. Anand's depiction of Bakha illuminates that despite societal progress, many individuals still grapple with severe

exclusion and deprivation. This ongoing marginalization reflects the necessity for a thorough re-evaluation of our societal structures and perspectives. The narrative of Bakha reminds us that human dignity is not realized through discrimination or scorn but through a commitment to empathy and justice. As we delve into Anand's portrayal of the human struggle in the shadows, it is clear that achieving true social equity requires an unwavering dedication to dismantling the barriers that perpetuate suffering and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

REFERENCES:

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Arnold Heinemann Publishers, 1981.

Hutton, J.H. *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origins*. Oxford University Press, 1963.

Sharma, Lalita. "Social Values and Human Struggles in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*." *AJRRLSJM*, vol. 6, no. 11, 2021 p. 45.

Singh, Pramod Kumar. *Major Indo-English Novelists and Novels*. Sublime Publications, 2001.

