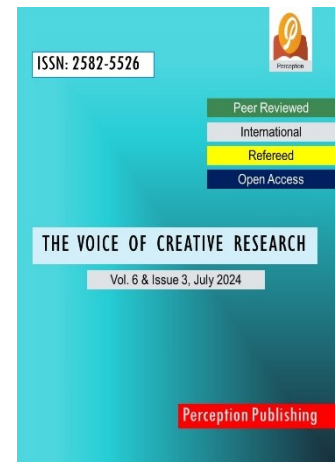


# The Voice of Creative Research

(2582-5526)

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## Socio-Cultural Study of Dalit Society in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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### Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* stands as a poignant socio-cultural critique of Dalit society, focusing sharply on the pervasive evils of casteism, hypocrisy, and exploitation. The narrative serves as a powerful indictment of the caste Hindus who perpetuated a system of oppression, using their privileged status to degrade and exploit the outcaste community. Through vivid portrayal, Anand exposes the hypocrisy and debauchery underlying the caste system, particularly highlighting its impact on women who were treated as mere possessions devoid of agency. In this oppressive environment, the Dalits, symbolized by the protagonist Bakha, endure profound suffering and injustice with stoic resignation, their plight exacerbated by a systemic denial of justice. Central to the novel is Bakha, a symbolic embodiment of the Dalit experience, whose aspirations for a more dignified existence reflect a burgeoning desire for social change. His fascination with Western culture and yearning for equality signify the seeds of a nascent renaissance challenging the entrenched dominion of caste Hindus. *Untouchable* thus emerges not only as a literary work but also as a potent call for societal introspection and reform, compelling its readers to confront the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination and envision a more equitable future.

**Keywords:** Untouchable, Eliminate, Hypocrisy, Modesty, Chastity, Renaissance

## **Introduction**

Mulk Raj Anand has elaborated and applied the term of untouchability and dalithood in his most famous fictional work entitled *Untouchable*. The direct connectivity of the term *Untouchable* is with the caste-system in India. 'Dalit' is originally termed from Marathi but it is, in reality a vernacular form of Sanskrit. Where never we talk about dalit, there comes the name of B.R. Ambedkar before us but the reality is that the term 'Dalit' was applied first by a great social reformed and activist Jyotirao Phule in 1880. We know that the flame of casteism has always been very high in India and it is the root cause of all sorts of social discrimination in society. Traditionally, according to the great scriptures, the Hindu society has been classified into basically four categories – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The Brahmins were considered belonging from the upper caste and they were in title for all sorts of rights and power. The main objective of the Brahmins was to teach about religion to the whole society. After Brahmins, there comes Kshatriya and the main role of the Kshatriya was to fight the battle and to rule the country. The third class of Hindu society was Vaishyas. The people belonging from Vaishya Category were entitled to do all sorts of business-money earning, buying, selling and doing the things related to business. The last clan of the Hindu society or caste- system was that of the shudras. In the caste-system, the shudras were considered inferior in comparison to the other clans. The Brahmins, The Kshatriyas, and the Vaishya considered themselves as superior to the shudras. All sorts of labour work as well as meaner works were assigned to the Shudras. Later on, such people were given a very remote place from the general inhabitation. These people had to lead their lives on the mercy and disgust of the people belonging from upper three castes. Such people were not entitled to touch the pots, drag water from public wells or to play with the children of upper caste. But before going in detail about the term 'Dalit' and its treatment in the novel *Untouchable*, I would like to define the term for a better understanding.

Dalit, term used to refer to any member of a wide range of social groups that were historically marginalized in Hindu caste society. The official designation Scheduled caste is the most common term now used in India for people in these groups, although members of the Scheduled Castes often prefer the term Dalit. Use of the term "untouchable" and the social disabilities associated with it were declared illegal in the constitutions adopted by India in 1949 and by Pakistan in 1953.

From practical point of view, we know that there was a large part of the society that was discriminated. This discrimination was because of caste-system. As I have earlier narrated that Indian society was governed by caste-system though the ancient Indian social organization speaks about the existence of work. In the Hindu social groups, the division was on the basis of the particular works assigned to them. Brahmins were assigned the task of teaching and performing rituals, Kshatriya were assigned the task of protection and to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their nation and ideals. The Vaishyas were assigned the task of business and management as well as the distribution of the essential things among the common people. The last part of the society

was Shudra who was entitled for doing the dirty and meaner sort of works such as cleaning the latrines and sweeping away the dead animals such people were called Bhangi or Chamar or untouchable and with the pass of time, when some people felt that such names were disgusting and humiliating, Mahatma Gandhi, a great Indian leader, named them Harijan. Such people were forced to reside away from the residence of upper caste people.

The present fictional work *Untouchable* is revealing the everyday social life and practical problems faced by the harijans in the society. In the beginning, all the social classifications were made on the basis of the work assigned to them. The theory of work is the main and major feature of our Hindu culture and civilization. All our classical works also favour this fact. But with the pass of time, the theory of work was forgotten. In place of theory of work, the society started to follow the theory of birth. If a man is born of a Brahmin parents, he is given a very high place even though he may involve in several sorts of meaner and disgusting activities. Contrary to it, if a man is born of a Shudra Parents, he is always treated in a very insulting and disgusting manner even though his conduct, character and works might be of great value and importance.

The very beginning of the novel is unveiling the true but bitter social scenario in which the Dalits were forced to live at that time. The first thing that is clear about the residence of the Dalit people, they lived remote from the residence of the upper-class people. One more information that we acquire about them is that there was a large number of races or castes to be counted under Dalit people. For the whole of their life, these people were forced to lead a disgusting life. These people were not allowed to mix up with the upper-caste society.

Anand is presenting the condition of the dalit people in such a realistic manner that it appears as if they are just standing before us in a real manner. Moving his pen on the issues related to Dalit people, Mulk Raj Anand can be compared with Prem chand.

It was not only issue with the untouchables that they were forced to live beyond the residence of upper-class but the condition of their houses and surroundings were also unfavourable. Though these untouchables were employed to clean the residences of the upper class people but the condition of their own residence was very poor. There was neither proper drainage system nor they have proper and sufficient food. They had to live on left-over. There were several occasions when they had to sleep with hungry stomach and there were numerous days when they were half bread. All these situations are indicating toward the suffocated and ill-treated life of the Dalit people.

The absence of a drainage system had through the rains of various seasons made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And all together the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of the little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in. Mulk Raj Anand has presented the issues and challenges of the Dalit people in a very realistic manner. The first basic essential of human survival is food and in the novel *Untouchable* we see that the people belonging from the dalit category were not able to get enough to eat. After food,

the second basic essential is garment. In the novel, Mulk Raj Anand has revealed in a very clear and realistic manner that the untouchables were always in rags or torn clothes.

It is perfectly safe to remark that *Untouchable* is a social fiction that is presenting the real image of Indian society when India was under the clutches of the British people. The whole of the Indian society was facing the problem of various types of conflicts. There was both internal and external conflict in India. The internal conflict was existing in the sense that the Indian people were making discrimination among themselves on the ground of upper caste and lower caste. The upper caste people, mainly Brahmins and Kshatriyas, were suffering from superiority complex and that's why they didn't behave on equal terms with the people of Dalit zone. The same was with the Dalit people as they were suffering from inferiority complex, thinking that they were not able and eligible to be on equal terms with the people belonging from upper-caste society. Though *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand is moving forward with a definite objective to display the real image and condition of the untouchables and Dalit people he is aiming to prove that Dalits were nothing but just a victim of exploitation from every walk of life. The episode of Sohini, the younger sister of Bakha and pundit Kali Nath. A man from the highest rank of society clearly shows that there was no sense of touchability or untouchability in reality but the people from upper class had framed these rules and regulations according to their own. Sohini, a young girl from untouchable family background, is treated as untouchable wherever she goes. There is no sympathy and respect for her among the people from upper class. But one day Kali Nath finds her all alone in the temple as she was brooming the temple stairs. Seeing the youth and beauty of Sohini, there developed erotic and voluptuous feeling in the mind of Pundit Kali Nath and in a secret strategic manner, he invited her to come inside the temple and broom or sweep his room. But as she stepped forward, Pundit Kali Nath touched Sohini in a very wrong way. It was unbearable for Sohini and when she found that there was not any other option for her to save, she started crying and opposing pundit Kali Nath. The people started to assemble there hearing the noise and when Kali Nath felt that his conduct and character was at risk, he took sudden turn and blamed Sohini for everything. He announced that Sohini was going to steal something and she had polluted the holy temple. Now Sohini saw that the mob was looking toward her with a sense of doubt and no one was having sympathy for her. Pundit Kali Nath was able to protect himself only because he was belonging from upper caste. The people believed at his words but the fact was that the real culprit was Pundit Kali Nath and not Sohini.

Pundit Kali Nath belongs from the touchable category of people, belonging, from upper caste. Though Kali Nath had tried his best to seduce Sohini but behind the curtain. Kali Nath was ready to sleep with her but not ready to allow her to enter into the temple publicly. It is clearly showing that the upper caste society was socially and practically authorized to act as a race dominant and superior to the untouchables or the dalit class of society. In all these, there is a very important role of language applied by the characters according to their rank and status.

Hence the upper caste people never digested to be equal with lower caste people and that is why they always treated with insult and disgust to the dalit people. The behavior of Pundit Kali Nath and the frequent verbal attack by Havildar Charat Singh over Bakha shows that these upper-caste people suffering superiority complex were never able to give equal respect and dignity to the dalit community whom they through to be inferior.

Charat Singh, being the member of the upper-caste, assumed to be the master and Bakha belonging to the lower caste accepted the conventional role of a servant. This is the power dynamics in the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer in this context. The social order of the Indian society based on the class structure compelled Bakha to observe silence and perform his task obediently. Bakha did not retaliate because he was bound by the conventions of his lower position in the society.

The use of diminutives like 'Bakhya' and the mention of the caste as 'sweeper' indicated how Havildar Charat Singh assuming the role of a master made use of the tone and expressions, which humiliated Bakha. Bakha, being conscious of his caste, being lowest in the social hierarchy, listened to the humiliations and abuses as an obedient and submissive servant. (*Untouchable*, 53)

Mulk Raj Anand is really very kind and sympathetic toward the dalit community. He didn't want them to suffer under the dictatorial and discriminative behaviour of the upper class/caste people. If we look into the major fictions of Mulk Raj Anand, we find that he has a very soft corner in his heart for dalits and untouchables and all these are visible in his fictional works.

Bakha, who gets up very early in the morning and goes from door to door with an objective and duty to clean the latrines, meets with insult, hatred and the stale bread and leftovers are thrown towards him just in the manner of dogs and such other animals. Nobody gives food to Bakha respectfully in his hand but they throw it down on the ground and the untouchable people like Bakha, are forced to pick up those neglected food because they know that there is not any other option to quench their hunger. But this incident shows the inhuman treatment of the people with the untouchables. On the other hand, the people from the untouchable community are forced to compromise with their health and self-respect.

Thousand years of slavery has left an irrevocable mark upon the life and psyche of the untouchables. Weakness corrupts and absolute weakness corrupts absolutely. Bakha, a scavenger boy, is caught in a vicious circle from which there is no escape. Destined or subjected to clean dung and live in squalor, he has to survive on food left over by the caste Hindus and for water depends on the mercy of so-called patrons of Hindu tradition. Health and hygiene are useless words for them. Neat and clean life is still a distant dream for them. The fact that they are untouchables seems to be the only reason to perpetuate the ostracism and their sufferings merge with eternity.

Generally, the people from the dalit community were uneducated because their parents had not enough and rich resources to provide education to their wards. Since childhood, the one and only

objective of these dalit and untouchable children was to learn their traditional craft so that they might be able to earn their living. Bakha is a clear example of it. Bakha's father had trained him how to clean the latrines properly and now it had become the source of Bakha's income with the pass of time. In the same sequence, the sons and daughters of a washermen were employed to wash the clothes of others and it became the source of their survival and living.

Bakha belonged from a dalit untouchable community and such people were not permitted to enter in the temple. Here, the novelist is making a mockery of social order and system where discrimination is made even in the temple of the god on one hand, the priests and the religious scriptures say that all men are equal in the eye of god. Not only human beings but even the trees, animals and insects have also been narrated as the part of that supreme divinity.

Bakha thought that the British officer was better than native Indians because Britishers had no sense of discrimination on the ground of class, occupation and caste. Mulk Raj Anand is giving an Indirect warning to the Hindus that most of the dalits and unthouchables are converting their religion and embracing Christianity because it was flexible and without-discrimination.

Though Bakha didn't retaliate or misbehaved with anyone yet we see that different characters, from time to time, tried their best show his vulgarity and directly or indirectly humiliated him. All these observations are collectively hinting toward the fact that Mulk Raj Anand has a very soft corner in his heart for Dalits and he wants to improve the condition of dalits and untouchables in society. "The cruelty and tyranny perpetrated on Bakha was peculiar to the untouchables alone although they shared the common hardship and indignity with other outcastes. Because Bakha holds the lowest status in the social hierarchy, even the outcastes loathe them and do not consider them as their equals. Everybody detests him and loathes to accept anything from him or to give anything to him. The confectioner pics the coin after washing it when Bakha exchange it for some sweets".

Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* revolves around the character of Bakha who is powerless due to his low social status. He is introduced to the reader from the first page of the novel as a scavenger and almost remains there till the end of the novel. The pitiable condition of Bakha appeals the readers because he is humble and submissive due to his caste. Mulk Raj Anand's use of language is embedded with a sense of social awareness. Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service. You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog!

Let us look back in the ancient Indian civilization and culture where the people were classified on the basis of the work assigned to them. The top rated and highest clan was that of Brahmins whose chief objective was to teach and instruct. The second category was of Kshatriyas whose duty and responsibility was to protect the country and countrymen from foreign invasion. The third category of Vaishya was dealing with business and profession. The last, fourth and lowest category of Shudras used to do all sorts of meaner type of works.

All these are revealing that the classification of society was on the ground of duty and work assigned to people in India and there was no division like caste-system.

The closing scenes of the novel *untouchable* is also hinting at the some view. Mulk Raj Anand has presented the real pitiable status of untouchables and dalits in a very original manner.

It is observed that the language used by the caste Hindus is offensive and derogatory when it comes to talking to the people from the low castes. Bakha is from the lowest caste and the person insulting him is from the higher caste. It shows the reality in India during the thirties. In those days, the nature and practice of untouchability was rigid. The outcastes were not supposed to touch the high caste Hindus because it would amount to pollution. They were forbidden to draw water from the public wells and were not allowed to enter the Hindu temples. Thus, it is clear that the social class of a person influences the use of language. It is further noticed that an untouchable's shadow would not be tolerated by a caste Hindu while passing by. (Pawar, 91)

Mulk Raj Anand is favouring and defending the untouchables by saying that the untouchables are using a vulgar language because they are being kept away from an ideal and cultured zone. Since early childhood, these untouchable characters hear leers and insults from the upper caste people and they have no courage to oppose them at any cost.

The novel *untouchable*, from the very beginning to the end, is a rich pageant of realistic contemporary society in a satirical tone though the novelists touches several aspects of life but his chief objective is to reveal the original status of untouchable and dalit people. The novelist is revealing all these things in a very original manner. Bakha is the typical character through which Mulk Raj Anand is favouring the untouchables and presents the challenges before the survival of the untouchables. The novelist is trying his best to prove the discriminative temperament of the people toward dalits in pre-independence era in India. *Untouchable* is an eye opening work that is making clear before us the chief cause of the degeneration of Hinduism. In this way, it is an indirect indication for one and all to be cordial for the continuity and survival of our culture and civilization.

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