



Exploitation: The Predominant theme in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* deals with the subhuman living condition of an underprivileged class worker boy called Bakha. The boy and his clan are scavengers chiefly by profession but they remain outcastes for the upper caste and aristocratic people. Given an opportunity, every one wishes to exploit these scavengers. The novel portrays the different layers of exploitation one can observe in the lives of untouchables. Even though, the whole narration is restricted to only one day events in the life of Bakha, it stands a representation of his routine life.

Keywords: Scavenger, untouchable, exploitation, humiliation, outcastes, embarrassment, punishment, priest, polluted, defile, anger.

Introduction

The theme of Exploitation pervades Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable.' Set in the pre-independent India, *Untouchable* narrates the one-day events that happen in the life of Bakha, the novel's young adolescent protagonist who belongs to the lower strata of the caste-ridden Indian society. Bakha stands a representative of the vast segment of Indian society which had always been marginalized by the hypocritical upper caste people of that period. He is a victim of cruel contempt and heartless exploitation. The vivid description of many kinds of ill-treatment and exploitation seems to be a scathing attack on the long-believed *varna* system. Anand deserves kudos for writing such a novel at such a period. It was indeed brave act! In an essay titled, "Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: The Dialectics of Self-Assertion," the writer G. S. Balarama Gupta points out that Bakha-like untouchables were exploited, chiefly, in the pre-independent era just like negroes in America. The predicament and the humiliation of untouchables were very much similar to that of Blacks. Their plight was worse than that of animals. They were subjected to inhuman or subhuman treatment by the upper caste Hindus and they were forced to accept their condition without any grumbling. Most importantly, they were never allowed to enter the main stream of the society.

The very dwelling of Bakha and his family is a fine example of exploitation. There is no suggestion in the novel to show that the family was made to live in that place. But, there isn't also a description to show that they hated to live in that place. They were compelled to accept their condition. Untouchables, as they were called and treated, were kept outside the main streets of the small town Bulandshahr in the interiors of Punjab. The novel opens with a pictorial description of an unhygienic colony of untouchables in the town.

"The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters 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 banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. The absence of drainage had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive smells. 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. ^[1]"

Each sentence of this long opening paragraph clearly puts forth the ugly and unfit abode of untouchables. Words like 'outside' and 'separate' stress the fact that these outcastes were never accepted in an inhuman society. There are things like stink, ugliness, degradation, waste and therefore, could also be death. Even the most essential water is polluted. Anand, clearly declares that the place is 'uncongenial' to live in. However, the outcastes were made to live, accepting the life, as it comes to them, in such an unhygienic place. The 'civil' society has succeeded in breeding a sense of slavery among the outcastes.

The word 'exploitation' connotes utilization of people for one's selfish ends giving them very little. In *Untouchable*, a serious reader can come across different varieties of exploitation. Predominantly, there is social exploitation besides many others such as sexual, gender, psychological,

religious and colonial exploitation. The very people who utilize the meek services of untouchables never hesitate to exploit them when given little opportunities. Their innocent and in-deliberate mistakes appear to their exploiters incorrigible sins. Punishments given to such mistakes are always inhuman. The novel describes these accounts of ill treatment meted out to the protagonist Bakha.

Bakha is a scavenger. His job is to clean public latrines which he does honestly and sincerely. He is described bit 'superior' to his job. Even the caste Hindus would appreciate Bakha for his dexterous duty. Havildar Charat Singh gifts him a hockey stick being happy with the hardworking and clean Bakha. But, it is to be noted that he does not express his appreciation before Bakha. As the writer puts it aptly, "Charat Singh was feeling kind (towards Bakha), but he did not relax the grin which symbolized two thousand years of racial and caste superiority."^[2] But the same Charat Singh does not hesitate to shower words of abuse on Bakha for being a little late to the work, when he finds the latrines not clean. He shouts, "Ohe, Bakhya! Ohe Bakhya! Ohe, scoundrel of a sweeper's son! Come and clean a latrine for me."^[3] Hypocrisy of Charat Singh is evident in this instance.

People of the village who very much depend on scavengers' service in turn look down upon them constantly. They are never allowed to mingle with them or touch them. Even the things touched by outcastes are considered "impure" or "defiled" by caste Hindus. In one instance, the money given by Bakha for the 'jelebis' he purchased, is 'washed' by the confectioner's assistance. He splashes some water on the four *anna* piece thrown by Bakha. He is made to feel embarrassed time and again by these cruel acts.

Bakha gets exploited for being a scavenger not only in his colony but even outside. He is supposed to announce his presence when he walks in the streets, "posh posh, sweeper coming." Bakha, being a little sensitive and pragmatic, detests doing so, but he finds no alternative. If any of the outcastes fails to shout his presence, he is sure to be in trouble. It is not important whether an outcaste touches a Hindu or a Hindu touches an outcaste, punishment will be sure for the ostracized.

In another instance, Bakha gets a nice slap on his face for touching a Hindu in the midst of a busy market road. More than the slap, the piercing criticism of the Hindus is humiliating for Bakha. Not one, but a large group assembles to prove Bakha inferior to them and remind him his place. He is jibed, criticized and taunted for his English-style dress and for his gait. Even though Bakha is honest and hardworking, he along with his community is branded lazy. The crowd takes every opportunity to mock and humiliate him. Repeatedly it forces him to feel ostracized and marginalized. Bakha, out of shame and remorse, feels that he would collapse. His first impulse is to run, far away from this torment and all the abuses. Most of the accusations of the crowd are false and cooked up, still they are thrust on Bakha to compel him to accept all. He is called a careless swine, lazy, rape-sister, son of a bitch, dirty dog, insolent, liar but none in the group succeeds to understand Bakha's predicament. Such is the ill-treatment meted out to Bakha!

Bakha's peril does not end there. His innocent wish to climb the steps of the temple to watch *pooja* lands him in trouble again. Even the places of worship are forbidden for outcastes like Bakha. The caste Hindu worshippers believe that "a temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it." In such a scenario, for Bakha who happens to keep the temple

surroundings neat and tidy, to enter into the sanctum sanctorum is never practically possible. But, this very day, the worshippers' chanting and singing attracts Bakha and he dares to mount the steps which lead to the sanctum. Unfortunately, he is identified by one of the priests of the temple Pundit Kali Nath, who shouts "polluted, polluted." All the worshippers besides the exploitative Pundit curse Bakha for his insolent act. Kalinath even calls Bakha a 'dog.' He is again made to agitate and feel humiliated. The poor outcaste feels sorry for himself. In fact, he is made to!

Bakha understands that his plight is such because he belongs to the sweeper class. He criticizes the upper caste Hindus and his own people who are not sweepers. When he recalls his humiliation at the hands of the caste Hindus, he calls them cowards and hypocrites. He knows that Muhammadans and British don't mind touching him, but Hindus, they won't because he touches dung. "If the Hindus hate dung, I too hate it," Bakha justifies his anger.

Not only men, even women of caste Hindus, do not fall behind in denouncing and exploiting the outcastes. The household lady, to whose house Bakha goes to beg food, treats Bakha inhumanly for lying down on the house's wooden platform. The lady herself does not know whether the house is defiled or not, but she curses Bakha for his act. "Vay, 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. 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?"^[4] Such abuses are common for Bakha!

Bakha is even exploited by the English men for his being an Indian and also for being an outcaste. British who were in India during Raj system, did have religious men, and many of them had involved themselves in conversions in the name of Salvation Armies. One such person in the novel is a pastor by name Hutchinson who, ironically, is tormented and ill-treated by his wife. If the pastor tries to convert Bakha taking advantage of his sad state of loneliness in the caste-ridden society, lady Hutchinson calls Bakha and his class 'dirty *Bhangis* and *Chamars*.' The Salvationist Hutchinson tries his best to take Bakha into his fold by explaining about Christianity and Jesus Christ. However, Bakha does not get impressed by the colonel's words and runs hard from him.

Bakha is not only exploited by outsiders but he is even exploited within family by his father Lakha and his brother Rakha. The father expects Bakha to work very hard without ever resisting high caste Hindus and to bring him nice food from them. Even though he too can work, the father feigns illness most of the times and sits idle. On the other hand, his brother Rakha too spends much of his time in the fields playing with his friends rather than assisting his hardworking brother. On a rare occasion when Rakha is made to work in the absence of Bakha, Rakha shows his displeasure. At home, Bakha hardly finds supporters except for his sister Sohini who is helpless most of the times.

Mulk Raj Anand depicts a two-fold plight of untouchable women in the novel. They have to bear the brunt of social as well as sexual exploitation. Many a times, these untouchables are exploited by their own counterparts, the 'upper caste' untouchables. Sohini, the sister of Bakha is a glaring example of such exploitations.

Sohini is beautiful in spite of dire poverty. This rare beauty and an attractive body is the reason for praise and jealousy among many. If men appreciate her, women like the washer woman Gulabo have jealousy. Belonging to the lower strata

of the society, the untouchable Sohini and her class are made to live on the mercy of caste Hindus even to get water for their day to day use. Most of the times, it is the duty of the women in untouchables' colony to draw water for their routine household use. They do not have their own well as it is an expensive affair to get it dug in places like the hilly Bulandshahr.

At the beginning of the novel, when Sohini reaches the well to get water, we can see how she is victimized by Gulabo, the washer woman and Pundit Kali Nath. If Gulabo cannot resist Sohini's sight because of her modest beauty (She even considers Sohini her rival), Kali Nath enjoys the same, and tries to show undue sympathy for the girl. Gulabo picks up an unnecessary quarrel with the girl for no reason. She considers herself belonging to the upper strata of the low castes. With that pride and a natural jealousy towards Sohini, she begins to shower abuses on the innocent Sohini. Even the silence of Sohini irritates Gulabo, and she even rushes to hit her. Exploitation of an untouchable by another untouchable is evident in Gulabo's harsh words.

"You annoy me with your silence. Eater of dung and drinker of urine! Bitch of a sweeper woman! I will show you how to insult one enough to be your mother!"^[5]

On the other hand, Sohini's exploitation at the hands of Kali Nath and her helplessness is depicted vividly by the Author. At the well, Pundit Kali Nath who has an eye on Sohini for her charming beauty, helps her filling pot with water negating the requests of other outcastes. He even asks her to clean the lavatory at his house in the temple yard so that he can 'use' her for exploitation in privacy. He does the same in the later part of the day.

However, the hypocrisy of Kali Nath can be seen when Sohini does not respond to his evil designs. When she does not reciprocate and resists him, he shouts "defiled" by her touch. But, the outcastes are molded in such a way by the caste Hindus, that they are even scared to narrate their harrowing experiences with others. Sohini, at first, does not completely narrate her story of exploitation at the hands of Kalinath to Bakha. But, only after repeated persuasions she tells, "He-e-e just teased me," she at last yielded. "And then when I was bending to work, he came and held me by my breasts."^[6] Bakha wants to teach the priest a lesson, but Sohini prevents him, "No, no. Come back. Let's go away,"^[7] she urges. Pundit Kali Nath or any other exploiter is not as strong as Bakha, but, Bakha is prevented from taking revenge and to accept their fate as "it is" fearing further more exploitation. Acceptance of exploitation is thrust on the very psyche of untouchables.

On one instance, when Bakha expresses his wish of 'giving the exploiters their due,' Lakha, his father consoles him. "No, no, my son, no, we can't do that. They are our superiors. One word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kind."^[8] This sense of fear stops them from any kind of resistance against exploitation.

Conclusion

The novel 'Untouchable' condemns a system, which for ages has succeeded in murdering human dignity. It also talks of the mammoth monster called 'caste' that has seized Indian life in its strangling grasp and where people are made to accept the hypocrisy, insularity and stratification of society based on ideas of high and low, thus making a mockery of the great teachings of our holy scriptures. Through different instances

of social, religious and sexual exploitations, Mulk Raj Anand presents before us the true pre-independent era of India. The all-pervading theme of exploitation disturbs a sensitive reader and that could be the reason why 'Untouchable' is hailed as a true masterpiece even today!

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