# THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALIZED: ANALYZING CASTE AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

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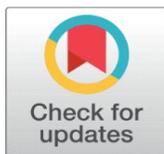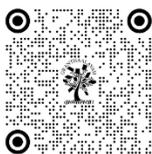
ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable is a seminal work that foregrounds the lived experiences of marginalized communities subjected to the oppressive caste system in colonial India. This study explores how Anand's narrative gives voice to the voiceless, centering on Bakha, a young sweeper boy, whose daily encounters reveal the systemic and dehumanizing effects of caste-based discrimination. By condensing the novel's events into a single day, Anand intensifies the emotional and psychological impact of untouchability, exposing how social stratification permeates even the most mundane aspects of life.

The analysis highlights Anand's use of narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse to immerse readers in Bakha's inner world, thus challenging prevailing stereotypes and fostering empathy. The study also examines the symbolic significance of cleanliness and impurity, showing how these notions underpin caste hierarchies and social exclusion. Furthermore, it situates the novel within its historical and political context, reflecting Anand's critique of both indigenous traditions and colonial modernity. By contrasting Bakha's aspirations with his harsh reality, Anand critiques the legitimization of inequality through religious and social dogma. The study also discusses Anand's engagement with reformist ideas, including Gandhian philosophy and technological innovation, presenting multiple, though unresolved, paths toward emancipation. Ultimately, Untouchable is positioned as a radical literary intervention that dismantles entrenched social orders and advocates for human dignity. This study argues that Anand's work remains profoundly relevant today, as caste and social stratification continue to shape access to resources and opportunities in India and beyond. Through its empathetic portrayal of marginalization and incisive social critique, Untouchable challenges readers to confront injustice and envision a more equitable society.

Keywords: Voice, Marginalized, Caste, Social Stratification, Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchable

1. INTRODUCTION

Caste and social stratification refer to the ways societies organize people into hierarchical groups based on various factors like birth, occupation, wealth, or social status. Caste is a specific form of social stratification found predominantly in South Asia, especially India, where individuals are born into rigid hereditary groups that determine their social roles, professions, and interactions. These groups often have strict rules governing marriage, occupation, and social behavior, leading to entrenched inequality and discrimination. The caste system divides people into distinct categories such as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and Dalits (formerly "Untouchables"), with significant social and economic disparities among them.

Social stratification is a broader term that describes the structured ranking of individuals or groups in any society, creating layers of privilege and disadvantage. It affects access to resources, power, and opportunities, shaping life

chances and social mobility. Both caste and social stratification influence social relations and identity, often reinforcing systemic inequality.

1.1. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores how Anand's narrative gives voice to the voiceless.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study purely based on secondary data sources such as articles, journals, research papers, books and others.

2.1. THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALIZED: ANALYZING CASTE AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, first published in 1935, is a powerful and evocative narrative that delves deep into the brutal realities of caste and social stratification in colonial India. Anand, one of the pioneering figures in Indian English literature, uses the novel as a vehicle to illuminate the dehumanizing experiences of the Dalit community through the story of a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper boy. Written during a time when nationalist fervor was intertwined with social reform movements, Untouchable serves not merely as a fictional account but as a socio-political document that gives voice to the voiceless and exposes the structural violence embedded in traditional hierarchies. Anand's portrayal of caste does not merely operate on a personal or emotional level—it functions as a critique of an entire system that legitimizes inequality under the guise of religion, purity, and social order.

The power of Untouchable lies in its simplicity and focus. Rather than presenting a sprawling epic, Anand condenses the complexities of caste discrimination into a single day, allowing the reader to experience the minute-by-minute indignities faced by Bakha. The narrative begins with the ordinary act of waking up, but even in this simple moment, Anand introduces the weight of inherited labor and systemic subjugation. Bakha, despite his youth, is burdened by a lineage of humiliation. His aspirations—to wear the clothes of the British soldiers, to speak English, to be clean—are not merely aesthetic or superficial; they represent his yearning for dignity, recognition, and an escape from the filth that society both physically and metaphorically forces upon him. Through this, Anand underscores how caste is not just a ritualistic category but a lived reality that permeates every aspect of a person's identity and bodily existence.

The novel meticulously documents how caste-based discrimination is both institutional and interpersonal. Bakha's journey through the town, as he performs his work of cleaning latrines and sweeping streets, is marked by a series of humiliating encounters that highlight the deeply ingrained prejudices of society. From being denied access to water to being physically assaulted for accidentally brushing against a high-caste Hindu, Bakha's experiences exemplify the brutal enforcement of untouchability. These incidents are not portrayed as isolated or extraordinary; rather, they are normalized within the social fabric, making the violence more insidious. Anand exposes how ritual purity is used as a pretext for exclusion and domination, and how religion, far from being a source of solace or morality, becomes a mechanism of control. The temple, ostensibly a place of divine grace, becomes a site of violation when Bakha is accused of polluting the sacred space merely by his presence. In these moments, Anand sharply critiques the hypocrisy of religious dogma that preaches compassion while practicing cruelty.

Another striking feature of Untouchable is its deep psychological insight into the consciousness of the oppressed. Bakha is not portrayed as a passive victim; he is acutely aware of his condition, even if he lacks the vocabulary or education to articulate it in abstract terms. His internal monologue is filled with confusion, anger, and longing. He questions the fairness of the world, he marvels at the cleanliness and order of the British soldiers, he dreams of upward mobility. In one poignant scene, he is mesmerized by a hockey match in which he participates momentarily as an equal, only to be reminded again of his 'place' when his younger brother is injured and the caste dynamics reassert themselves. Anand's narrative technique—frequently employing stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse—allows the reader to inhabit Bakha's inner world, thus fostering empathy and breaking the alienation that caste enforces not just socially, but emotionally and intellectually. This psychological depth is crucial, for it rehumanizes those whom society deems less than human.

At the same time, Untouchable is not a novel of despair. Embedded within its narrative are possibilities for change and moments of solidarity. The character of Havildar Charat Singh, who offers Bakha a hockey stick and speaks to him

without contempt, provides a brief but significant respite from the oppressive social norm. Likewise, Bakha's fascination with the British and their orderly lives, while reflecting colonial influence, also opens a window to the idea that alternative systems of dignity and justice are conceivable. Yet Anand does not romanticize colonialism; instead, he uses the contrast to highlight the failures of indigenous structures to reform themselves. The introduction of Mahatma Gandhi towards the end of the novel further complicates this dynamic. Gandhi, whom Anand portrays delivering a speech on the eradication of untouchability, offers a vision of social upliftment through moral persuasion and reform. Bakha listens, awed and somewhat confused, but also inspired. He is then introduced to the ideas of the machine—the flushing toilet—as another potential liberator, one that would remove the need for his degrading labor altogether. Anand thus presents multiple avenues of liberation: moral, technological, political. But he leaves the resolution open-ended, emphasizing that the path to emancipation is not singular or straightforward.

Mulk Raj Anand's engagement with the theme of untouchability was not a mere literary venture—it was a deeply personal and political act. A vocal humanist and social reformer, Anand wrote Untouchable after being inspired by an actual incident and after interacting closely with Gandhi, whose ideas on caste and reform permeate the final part of the novel. However, Anand's vision diverges significantly from Gandhian ideology. While Gandhi sought to preserve the varnashrama dharma system through reform and compassion toward the so-called 'Harijans,' Anand critiques the very foundation of that structure. His indignation is not aimed solely at the symptoms but at the root of the hierarchical system itself. Through Bakha, he challenges the legitimacy of a civilization that rationalizes oppression with metaphysical reasoning and treats sanitation workers—those whose labor sustains public health—as untouchable. The paradox is bitter and intentional: the most essential services are rendered by the most reviled people.

Language and narrative form become critical tools in Anand's deconstruction of caste. The novel, written in English, was a deliberate choice, not just for wider dissemination but as a statement against linguistic purity and elitism. Anand crafts a hybridized idiom that blends Indian thought patterns, cultural idioms, and English syntax. He creates a linguistic environment that reflects the hybrid identity of colonial India while also resisting the notion that English is inherently the language of the elite. Bakha, though illiterate, uses English phrases awkwardly but proudly, suggesting his desire to claim dignity and modernity through the very medium used to exclude him. This performative use of English becomes an act of agency, a refusal to be linguistically and socially muted. Anand's prose flows with an intense rhythm, alternating between realism and lyrical introspection, reflecting the fluctuations of Bakha's emotional and mental states throughout the day. The literary strategy works not only to build empathy but also to dismantle the notion that the marginalized lack interiority or complexity.

Furthermore, Anand constructs Bakha's world not as an isolated caste enclave but as a microcosm of Indian society, where hierarchies intersect and reinforce each other. Beyond the primary conflict of caste, the novel reveals the tensions between colonizer and colonized, modernity and tradition, individual will and collective norms. The sweepers' colony is segregated, but it exists within a larger town structure, mirroring India's broader social architecture. The market, the temple, the barracks, the school—each space that Bakha traverses is marked by barriers, both visible and invisible. And in each space, he is reminded of his supposed inferiority. Yet Anand also subtly reveals how these divisions are socially constructed rather than divinely ordained. There is no natural order to Bakha's suffering; it is maintained through centuries of conditioning and fear. In exposing this artificiality, Anand offers a powerful argument for radical change.

A key motif that runs through the novel is cleanliness—both literal and symbolic. Bakha is obsessed with physical hygiene, meticulously washing himself and admiring the sanitary habits of the British. This obsession is more than mimicry; it is a mode of resistance. In a world where his touch is considered polluting, Bakha reclaims his body through scrubbing, rinsing, and polishing. His desire to appear 'clean' is a form of self-assertion against the constructed impurity imposed upon him. This notion of cleanliness takes on added significance when juxtaposed with the upper castes, who claim ritual purity while living in moral filth—hurling abuses, hoarding privilege, and inflicting violence. Anand uses this inversion to question the legitimacy of social constructs. If purity is measured by action rather than caste, then Bakha emerges morally superior to his oppressors. The metaphor of dirt is thus turned on its head: the physical dirt that Bakha removes daily contrasts with the moral dirt the upper castes refuse to acknowledge.

The character of Bakha's father, Lakha, adds another dimension to the narrative by showing how caste oppression is internalized. Lakha, unlike Bakha, has accepted the hierarchy, believing that resistance is futile and even blasphemous. His submissiveness and cowardice are not simply flaws but products of generational trauma and survival strategy. Anand does not mock Lakha; rather, he presents him as a tragic figure whose spirit has been broken by decades of systemic abuse. In contrast, Bakha's youth offers a glimmer of rebellion. He may not yet have the means or vocabulary to mount a

revolution, but his very discontent signals a rupture in the continuity of oppression. Anand seems to suggest that change begins with the refusal to accept injustice as natural. The generational contrast between father and son reflects the broader struggle within colonized and caste-stratified societies—between those resigned to fate and those yearning for transformation.

The climax of the novel is deliberately anticlimactic. After enduring a full day of humiliation, Bakha encounters three possible answers to his suffering. First, he listens to Gandhi, who preaches the brotherhood of all Hindus and the need to abolish untouchability from within. Second, he meets a Christian missionary who offers salvation through conversion. Third, he learns about the flushing toilet—a machine that could eliminate the need for manual scavenging altogether. Each solution is presented as a possibility, but none is portrayed as definitive. Gandhi's speech is moving but abstract; the missionary's offer seems insincere or culturally alien; the toilet, while practical, is a technological fix to a moral problem. Bakha does not choose any of these paths conclusively. Instead, he continues walking, reflecting. The novel ends not with resolution but with contemplation, reinforcing the idea that the journey toward justice is ongoing, complex, and unfinished.

Anand's refusal to offer a neat conclusion is itself a radical act. It rejects the narrative conventions of closure, redemption, or salvation that often sanitize social critique. Instead, he leaves the reader in a state of unease, much like Bakha himself, caught between awareness and action. This narrative strategy compels readers to grapple with the realities of caste not as a resolved issue but as a persistent crisis. In doing so, Anand demands engagement rather than passive consumption. The reader is not allowed the comfort of distance; through Bakha, we are made to witness, to feel, and perhaps, to act.

What distinguishes Untouchable from other social realist novels is its emotional immediacy combined with intellectual rigor. It does not merely present suffering—it interrogates the structures that perpetuate it. Anand weaves philosophy, politics, and pathos into a single thread, making the novel a site of both emotional engagement and ethical inquiry. The novel becomes a mirror in which Indian society must see its own contradictions: a nation struggling for independence while imprisoning millions within inherited hierarchies; a culture that venerates gods while dehumanizing fellow humans. Anand's critique is not aimed at individuals but at systems, ideologies, and institutions. By centering the narrative on someone from the margins, he redefines the very idea of the 'center' and challenges readers to reconsider whose stories are told, whose voices are heard, and whose lives are valued.

Over the decades, Untouchable has remained a seminal text in postcolonial literature, Dalit discourse, and social criticism. Its relevance persists in contemporary India, where caste continues to shape access to education, employment, healthcare, and dignity. While legal reforms and affirmative action have altered some aspects of social mobility, the deep-seated prejudices that Anand exposed are far from eradicated. In recent years, the resurgence of Dalit literature, activism, and political assertion has drawn from the legacy of Untouchable, reaffirming its status as a foundational work. Moreover, Anand's novel transcends its immediate context to speak to global systems of marginalization—be it race in America, apartheid in South Africa, or class stratification in other parts of the world. The mechanisms may differ, but the logic of exclusion remains strikingly similar.

Reading Untouchable today is not merely an exercise in historical reflection but a call to conscience. It reminds us that literature can be a form of resistance, that storytelling can disrupt silence, and that empathy is not a luxury but a necessity. Anand's contribution is not just to Indian letters but to the global conversation on justice, equality, and human dignity. He gives voice not only to Bakha but to millions like him who continue to live on the margins, whose worth is measured not by their humanity but by their utility or caste. In amplifying these voices, Anand reaffirms the radical potential of literature: to unsettle, to illuminate, and to transform.

3. CONCLUSION

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable remains a powerful and enduring critique of caste and social stratification, offering an unflinching portrayal of the systemic oppression faced by marginalized communities in India. Through the life of Bakha, Anand humanizes the untouchables, transforming abstract social injustices into vivid, lived experiences that evoke empathy and demand attention. The novel exposes the cruelty of caste-based discrimination, showing how it invades every aspect of daily life—physical, psychological, and social. Anand's nuanced narrative challenges the religious and cultural justifications that sustain such inequalities, while also highlighting the internalized trauma of those oppressed. Importantly, Untouchable does not present a simplistic solution but acknowledges the complexities involved

in dismantling deep-rooted social hierarchies. By presenting multiple avenues of possible change—Gandhian reform, religious conversion, and technological progress—Anand illustrates the multifaceted nature of emancipation. The novel's open-ended conclusion serves as a call to continued reflection and action, urging readers to recognize and confront systemic injustice.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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