



## SOCIAL REALISM IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

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### ABSTRACT

*Untouchable* written by Mulk Raj Anand is one of the seminal works in Indian English literature which portrays the harsh realities of caste-based oppression Dalits went through during British rule in India. *Untouchable* captures a single day in the life of Bakha, an untouchable sweeper, and tries to expose the inhumane practices and prejudices entrenched in the caste system. The present article examines the usage of social realism in the novel to critique societal hierarchies, explore the psychological impact of untouchability, and advocate for systemic reform. *Untouchable* provides a lucid picture of marginalized Dalit lives, authentic representation of marginalized voices, and critique of religious orthodoxy.

It analyses the narrative that portrays caste discrimination that Bakha has to go through. It is Anand's attempt to meagre the sufferings of Dalits by providing an interplay of traditional beliefs and modern ideologies like Gandism and technological progress. It also explores Anand's literary devices, including irony, satire, and stream-of-consciousness narration, which enhance the novel's emotional and intellectual appeal. The relevance of *Untouchable* in contemporary India is also discussed, highlighting its enduring significance in the fight against caste-based discrimination and its role in fostering discourse on equality and human dignity. This exploration of *Untouchable* demonstrates how Anand's work transcends its historical context to remain a powerful critique of systemic injustice and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

**KEYWORDS :** Caste, *Untouchable*, Discrimination, Dalits, Realism, Struggle, Modern

### INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand, a pioneer of Indian English literature, is celebrated for his deep commitment to social reform and his ability to weave pressing societal issues into compelling narratives. His novel *Untouchable*, published in 1935, stands as a landmark in Indian fiction, offering a poignant critique of the caste system that has plagued Indian society for centuries. Set in the colonial period, the novel focuses on a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper boy born into the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy. Through Bakha's experiences, Anand unveils the harsh realities of untouchability, a dehumanizing practice that relegates millions to lives of indignity and suffering.

Social realism, a literary approach that seeks to reflect societal truths with unflinching honesty, forms the backbone of *Untouchable*. Anand's portrayal of Bakha's world is neither romanticized nor sensationalized; instead, it provides an authentic representation of the oppressive structures, cultural norms, and human emotions that define life under the caste system. The novel not only sheds light on the plight of the marginalized but also critiques the hypocrisy of societal institutions, including religion and tradition, which perpetuate discrimination.

This article explores the multifaceted dimensions of social realism in *Untouchable*. It examines how Anand's narrative captures the lived experiences of untouchables, critiques the

socio-religious foundations of caste-based oppression, and offers glimpses of hope through the possibility of reform. By analyzing Anand's narrative techniques, character development, and thematic concerns, the article seeks to underscore the enduring relevance of *Untouchable* in understanding and addressing social injustices in both historical and contemporary contexts. Through this exploration, the article argues that *Untouchable* is not just a novel but a powerful tool for social critique, inspiring reflection and change in the ongoing battle against caste-based inequality.

### Overview of *Untouchable*

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* revolves around Bakha, a young boy from an untouchable caste who works as a sweeper in a small Indian town during British colonial rule. The narrative unfolds over the course of a single day, offering a vivid and unflinching portrayal of Bakha's life, aspirations, and struggles. The novel opens with a detailed account of his menial work, highlighting the indignities he faces as he cleans latrines—a task that epitomizes the dehumanizing nature of caste-based labor.

The plot progresses as Bakha encounters various instances of discrimination, including being slapped by a high-caste man for accidentally brushing against him. These moments not only reflect the harsh realities of untouchability but also reveal Bakha's internalization of his social position. Despite his anger and humiliation, Bakha remains silent, embodying the helplessness of those trapped in oppressive societal structures.



Toward the end of the novel, Bakha witnesses a speech by Mahatma Gandhi, who advocates for the abolition of untouchability and emphasizes the need for societal reform. This encounter, coupled with the introduction of the flush system—a symbol of modernization and technological progress—leaves Bakha at a crossroads. He is torn between the promise of change through reform and the persistent weight of societal norms.

Thematically, *Untouchable* addresses caste discrimination, human dignity, the hypocrisy of religious orthodoxy, and the complexities of social reform. Anand's focus on a single day in Bakha's life serves to magnify the systemic injustices faced by untouchables, making their plight both specific and universal. This overview sets the stage for a deeper analysis of the social realism embedded in the novel, as explored in the subsequent sections.

### Social Realism in *Untouchable*

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* exemplifies social realism by offering an unvarnished portrayal of the caste system and its dehumanizing impact on marginalized communities. Through vivid characterization, authentic settings, and a focus on systemic injustice, Anand highlights the stark realities faced by untouchables in colonial India. This section delves into the key aspects of social realism as manifested in the novel.

#### a. Representation of the Caste System

Anand's narrative provides a detailed and realistic depiction of the caste system, exposing its rigid hierarchies and the pervasive discrimination faced by untouchables. Bakha, as a sweeper, is relegated to the most degrading tasks, such as cleaning human excrement, which symbolize his lowly status in society. His encounters with upper-caste individuals—like the man who slaps him for brushing against him—illustrate the entrenched belief in the pollution associated with untouchables.

Anand's portrayal of Bakha's father, Lakha, further underscores the systemic nature of caste oppression. Lakha's resignation to his role as a sweeper contrasts with Bakha's silent rebellion, reflecting the generational persistence of caste-based inequities. The caste system is not just a backdrop but a central force shaping the characters' lives, limiting their opportunities, and crushing their aspirations.

#### b. Realistic Depiction of Social Practices

The novel's strength lies in its ability to authentically depict the daily lives of untouchables. Anand draws upon his personal experiences and observations to create a narrative that feels both intimate and universal. The details of Bakha's work, his living conditions in the sweeper's colony, and his interactions with others are meticulously rendered, providing a vivid picture of the indignities faced by the marginalized.

For example, Bakha's attempt to drink water from a public well becomes a powerful moment of social realism. Denied direct access due to his caste, he must rely on the charity of a caste Hindu to pour water for him—a humiliating act that underscores his dependence and lack of agency. Such incidents

are not isolated but represent the daily struggles of millions of untouchables in Anand's time.

#### c. Critique of Religion and Social Norms

Anand uses *Untouchable* to critique the religious and social norms that perpetuate caste discrimination. Hindu orthodoxy, with its emphasis on ritual purity, is depicted as a key factor in maintaining the caste hierarchy. The novel highlights the hypocrisy of religious leaders who preach compassion while upholding oppressive practices.

For instance, the temple scene, where Bakha is accused of polluting the premises despite his sincere devotion, reveals the exclusionary nature of religion. Anand's critique extends beyond Hinduism to question the broader societal acceptance of such discriminatory practices, emphasizing the need for reform.

#### d. The Role of Social Reformers and Modernization

Anand introduces elements of hope and change through the figures of Mahatma Gandhi and technological advancements. Gandhi's speech, advocating for the abolition of untouchability, resonates with Bakha and offers a vision of a more equitable society. However, the novel also acknowledges the limitations of such reformist ideals, as they often fail to address the deeper structural issues underlying caste discrimination.

The mention of the flush system symbolizes the potential of technology to liberate untouchables from degrading labor. Bakha's fascination with the system reflects his desire for dignity and independence. This interplay between traditional reform and modernization highlights the complex pathways to social change.

#### Literary Devices and Narrative Techniques

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is as much a masterpiece of narrative craftsmanship as it is a vehicle for social critique. Anand employs various literary devices and techniques to amplify the novel's emotional resonance and intellectual impact, bringing Bakha's struggles vividly to life while engaging the reader in a deeper reflection on systemic injustice.

##### 1. Realistic Portrayal of Characters and Settings

Anand's detailed descriptions of Bakha's environment—the sweeper's colony, the bustling streets of the town, and the oppressive social interactions—ground the narrative in reality. The setting is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in shaping Bakha's experiences, reflecting the inescapable grip of caste oppression.

Bakha's character is portrayed with a nuanced blend of resilience and vulnerability, making him a relatable and empathetic figure. His aspirations, such as his admiration for the British soldiers and their uniforms, symbolize his longing for dignity and recognition in a society that denies him both.

##### 2. Stream-of-Consciousness Narrative

Anand uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to delve into Bakha's internal world, revealing his thoughts, fears, and



aspirations. This approach allows readers to experience the psychological toll of untouchability firsthand.

For instance, after being slapped by an upper-caste man, Bakha's inner turmoil is vividly depicted as he grapples with feelings of anger, shame, and helplessness. This narrative technique humanizes Bakha, presenting him not just as a victim of systemic oppression but as an individual with his own dreams and desires.

### 3. Use of Irony and Satire

Anand employs irony and satire to critique the hypocrisies of caste-based society. The temple scene, where Bakha is accused of polluting a sacred space despite his deep reverence, highlights the moral contradictions of religious orthodoxy.

Similarly, the Gandhian ideals of equality are juxtaposed with the realities of caste discrimination, exposing the gap between rhetoric and practice. Anand's subtle use of irony underscores the absurdity and cruelty of societal norms, urging readers to question and challenge them.

### 4. Symbolism

The novel is rich with symbolism, which enhances its thematic depth. Bakha's broom, for instance, symbolizes the degrading labor imposed on untouchables, while the flush system represents the possibility of liberation through technological progress. Gandhi's speech serves as a symbol of hope, albeit tempered by the complexities of implementing social reform.

### 5. Simple yet Powerful Language

Anand's language is direct and accessible, reflecting the lives of the characters he portrays. His use of colloquial expressions and dialect adds authenticity to the narrative, immersing the reader in Bakha's world. At the same time, Anand's prose is infused with poetic beauty, particularly in his descriptions of nature and human emotion, which provide moments of respite and introspection amidst the harsh realities depicted in the novel.

This combination of literary devices and narrative techniques elevates *Untouchable* from a mere social commentary to a profound artistic achievement. Anand's storytelling not only evokes empathy for Bakha but also compels readers to confront the systemic injustices that define his life.

### Relevance of *Untouchable* Today

Although Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* was written nearly nine decades ago, its themes and messages remain profoundly relevant in contemporary society. The novel's critique of systemic discrimination and its exploration of human dignity continue to resonate in the context of ongoing struggles against caste-based oppression, inequality, and social exclusion.

### 1. Persistence of Caste Discrimination

Despite legal measures like the abolition of untouchability under the Indian Constitution and the implementation of affirmative action policies, caste discrimination persists in various forms. Incidents of violence, segregation, and prejudice against Dalits (formerly referred to as untouchables) frequently

make headlines, illustrating the enduring legacy of the caste system.

*Untouchable* serves as a stark reminder of the dehumanization faced by marginalized communities. By highlighting the lived experiences of untouchables through Bakha's story, the novel continues to evoke empathy and provoke critical discussions about caste-based injustices in both rural and urban contexts.

### 2. Global Relevance of Social Exclusion

The novel's themes extend beyond the specific context of the Indian caste system to address broader issues of social exclusion and systemic inequality. Across the world, marginalized groups—be they based on race, ethnicity, religion, or class—face similar challenges of discrimination, exploitation, and denial of basic rights.

Anand's depiction of Bakha's struggles underscores the universality of the human desire for dignity, equality, and recognition, making *Untouchable* a valuable text for understanding and combating social hierarchies globally.

### 3. Intersectionality of Oppressions

In today's discourse on social justice, there is growing recognition of intersectionality—the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression. *Untouchable* provides a nuanced exploration of how caste, poverty, and colonial subjugation intersect to shape Bakha's life. This perspective aligns with contemporary efforts to understand and address complex social injustices in an intersectional framework.

### 4. Literature as a Catalyst for Change

*Untouchable* exemplifies the power of literature to spark awareness and drive social reform. By humanizing Bakha and exposing the harsh realities of untouchability, Anand compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths and question the societal structures they live within.

In modern times, the novel continues to inspire writers, activists, and policymakers to use storytelling as a tool for advocacy and change. It also serves as an educational resource for fostering empathy and understanding among younger generations.

### 5. Inspiration for Contemporary Movements

The struggles of Bakha mirror the ongoing efforts of Dalit movements and other social justice campaigns in India and beyond. Anand's emphasis on dignity, equality, and technological progress aligns with contemporary initiatives aimed at empowering marginalized communities, from grassroots activism to policy reforms.

The novel also resonates with global movements such as Black Lives Matter, which challenge systemic inequalities and advocate for the rights of historically oppressed groups.

### Conclusion of Relevance

In today's world, where issues of caste, race, and class continue to divide societies, *Untouchable* remains a poignant and powerful critique of systemic injustice. Its relevance lies not



only in its ability to reflect historical realities but also in its enduring call for empathy, equality, and reform. Anand's masterpiece reminds us that the struggle for human dignity is universal and ongoing, making it as significant today as it was at the time of its publication.

## CONCLUSION

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* stands as a timeless work of social realism, offering an unflinching critique of caste-based oppression and the systemic injustices faced by marginalized communities. Through the lens of a single day in Bakha's life, Anand masterfully encapsulates the physical and psychological toll of untouchability, exposing the hypocrisies and moral failings of a deeply hierarchical society.

The novel's vivid portrayal of caste discrimination, coupled with its exploration of themes like human dignity, technological progress, and social reform, transcends its historical context to remain profoundly relevant today. Anand's use of literary devices—realistic settings, stream-of-consciousness narrative, and symbolic imagery—further enriches the narrative, transforming it into a compelling call for empathy and change.

As modern societies continue to grapple with issues of caste, class, race, and other forms of systemic inequality, *Untouchable* serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring struggle for justice and equality. It underscores the power of literature not only to reflect societal realities but also to inspire action and reform. Anand's work challenges readers to confront their own biases, question the structures that perpetuate oppression, and envision a world where human dignity is universally upheld.

In conclusion, *Untouchable* is more than a novel; it is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and a clarion call for a more just and equitable society. Its relevance continues to grow, making it a vital text for readers, scholars, and activists committed to understanding and addressing the complexities of social injustice.

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