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Department of English in collaboration with

Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University Nanded

On

"Reflection of Society and Culture in Indian Literature in English"

Editor : **Asst. Prof. Atish Akade**

Address for Correspondence

Mrs. Pallavi Laxman Shete

Editor in Chief - Worldwide International Inter Disciplinary Research Journal (A Peer Reviewed Referred)

Principal - Sanskrit Public School, Nanded (MH, India) Email - shirishprakashan2009@gmail.com

House No. 62/1, Belanagar, Near Maruti Temple, Taroda (MH, Nanded), 431805 (India - Maharashtra)

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:: Editor ::

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Assit. Prof. & Head, Department of English
Mahatma Phule Mahavidyalaya, Ahmedpur.

Address for Correspondence

Mrs. Pallavi Laxman Shete

Principal, Sanskriti Public School, Nanded.(MH. India)

Website: www.wiidrj.com

House No.624 – Belanagar, Near Maruti Temple, Taroda (KH), Nanded – 431605 (India –
Maharashtra) Email: Shrishprakashan2009@gmail.com umbarkar.rajesh@yahoo.com

Dr. Rajesh G. Umbarkar Mob. No: +91-9623979067

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SOCIAL REALISM: RELIGION AND CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S 'UNTOUCHABLE'

Dr. Premal Ramesh Deore

Assistant Professor, Dept. Of English, M. P. H. Arts, Sci. and Com. Mahila Mahavidyalaya ,Malegaon Camp,
Tal. Malegaon, Dist. Nashik.

Dr. Deepanjali Karbhari Borse

Assistant Professor, Dept. Of English, M. P. H. Arts, Sci. and Com. Mahila Mahavidyalaya ,Malegaon Camp,
Tal. Malegaon, Dist. Nashik.

ABSTRACT :

Mulk Raj Anand has been truly regarded as a social-realist for the themes and issues that he brings forward in his works. Untouchability is one of the most evil practices of caste system in India which prevails in socially and economically backward places. Great personalities like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R.Ambedkar have spoken on this issue and its eradication from the society for the upliftment of the people. They have opined that no society can ever progress if its people are prejudiced against this kind of practices of casteist mentality. In the novel we see that Gandhi appears on the scene where he delivers a lecture on untouchability which comforts and encourages Bakha and other people of his community. The social aspect of the novel that is the treatment of religion and caste discrimination has been delineated in a realistic manner.

Religion plays an important role in the novel for we see its influence upon the people of the society to a great extent. Untouchable depicts the lives of the marginalized and the destitute people of an orthodox Indian society. The aim of this paper is to bring about a change in the perception that people had in their minds regarding the untouchables. The untouchables live an isolated life far away from the village. In the novel we are told that they even cannot draw water from the wells as it might be contaminated by their touch. One can refer to Arundhati Roy's 'The God Of Small Things' where Velutha faces the similar kind of discrimination. Bakha is the protagonist of the novel and introduced to the readers as a young man who has a strongly built body. He works as a sweeper and cleans public toilets. Bakha maintains cleanliness throughout his work and remains cautious so as not to spoil his sleeves while doing his job. The hard labour that he puts in his work is responsible for the making of his strong physique. Bakha is a representative of all the underdogs who suffer at the hands of the society for their lower caste. Throughout the novel we see that Bakha struggles for the search of his own identity and tries to find the significance of his life.

KEY WORDS : Untouchability, Panchamas, Harijans, Religion, Caste discrimination.

INTRODUCTION :

Untouchable is one of the most celebrated novels in English literature for its realistic rendering of the life of a sweeper boy named Bakha who is an untouchable. It is the story of a single day in the life of Bakha and gives an account of the humiliation and struggle that he had. Other lower caste people had to go through. Bakha was dissatisfied with his profession as a toilet cleaner and wanted to pursue a better life by educating himself. He and other characters in the novel suffer due to the fact that they belong to the lower caste. E. M. Forster describes him in the Preface to the novel, "Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak and thoroughly Indian. Even physique is distinctive; we can recognize his broad intelligent face, graceful torso, and

heavy buttocks as he does his nasty job or steps out in artillery boots in hope of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper packet of cheap sweets in his hands. Bakha and other characters in the novel suffer due to the fact that they belong to the lower caste. We get a bleak vision of their place of living as described in the beginning of the novel, "The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow of the town and the cantonment but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the leather-workers, the scavengers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society." These sections of people suffer because they are by birth regarded as outcastes by others.

THE PRACTICE OF UNTOUCHABILITY –

The practice of Untouchability is rampant as the author tells the story of Bakha, an untouchable sweeper boy. The novel is an indictment of the snobbery and hypocrisy seen in the upper caste section of a Hindu society. The untouchables referred to as the panchamas are forced to live the life of an outcast in a deplorable condition. E.M. Forster opines, "The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he can't escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself he pollutes other when he touches them." In *Untouchable*, the Panchamas wait for long hours in the hope that some people of an upper caste might come and be kind enough to draw water for them. Bakha's sister, Sohini also goes through the same situation and waits near a well for someone to come and pour water into her pot. After a long time, Kalinath who is attracted by her beauty arrives and helps her but this intention was to take advantage of her by calling her to his house and molesting her. Bakha is outraged by the incident and complains to his father about this. His father Lakha remains indifferent and does not react at all as he has compromised with his state of living. He readily accepts the Hindu system of untouchability and thus this practice is passed down to their next generations as there is no fight against it. The panchamas were quite responsible for their own miseries. We get the description of the uncongenial place where these untouchables live, "The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the untouchable caste were washer-men, grass cutters, water men, sweepers, barbers and others who lived in mud-walled cottages huddled with each other and are socially isolated from the rest of the village. One day Bakha had accidentally touched an upper caste Hindu in a market place. That person was so infuriated that he abused Bakha by addressing him as a 'swine dog', 'dirty dog' and so on. Everyone present in the situation saw him getting insulted but no one spoke a word against it. Bakha ashamed as he was fell down on his knees and silently listened to all the insults that were targeted to him. At last a Muslim tangawallah rescued him from the situation. Bakha was so shattered by the incident that he burst out into anger.

SOCIAL REALISM: RELIGION AND CASTE DISCRIMINATION –

The social aspect of the novel that is the treatment of religion and caste discrimination has been delineated in a realistic manner. The central character of the novel is Bakha is ill-treated by the high-caste people throughout the novel. The novel comprises of events of a single day and from the morning itself we are given a glimpse of how Bakha is subjected to abuses and treated like an animal. A high caste Hindu throws away a packet of cigarette at him and when he is hungry he is given chapattis in a way as food is thrown to a dog. His experience with a Hindu at a market place is suggestive of how much the place was steeped in caste-discrimination. By bringing in the Mahatma Gandhi's episode, Anand has not only provided a solution for the plight of the untouchables in the novel but also enlightened his readers about such evil practices that need to be removed from the

society. Gandhi comments that the predicament of the untouchables is both a moral and a religious issue. He says that untouchability is the “greatest blot on the Hinduism” and regards it ‘satanic’ to think that anyone in Hinduism is born as an untouchable. Gandhi holds the view that untouchables have to “cultivate habits of cleanliness” and be free from unhealthy habits such as drinking liquor or gambling. Gandhi regards all Indians as equal and expresses his desire to be reborn as an untouchable. He addresses them with a new name ‘ Harijan’ and considers them as to be the cleaners of Hindu religion. Although Gandhi’s words instil a ray of hope in Bakha and other people. The closing of the novel appropriates Bakha’s inner conflicts between enthusiasm and naivete. This is a consequence of what Bakha has experienced during the whole day and its indelible impact upon him due to which he situates himself within his own culture. Bakha’s interaction with the poet IqbalNathSarshar and his ideas about the flush toilet system also provided him some hope for the future. The novel ends with a hint that the situation of this exploited class will undergo a positive change.

COCLUSION :

Mulk Raj Anand captures the predicament of the untouchables and presents a harsh reality. We see that they are denied even the basic need of life that is water. We see how these people were prohibited to touch wells that would otherwise pollute them. The novelist is indeed quite powerful in his rendering of the plight of the untouchables with his acute observation and the regional language that he adopts and the use of abuses clearly shows the social realism with which he has presented the curse of untouchability. This novel shows a realistic picture of all the oppressed section of the society during the pre-independence period of India. Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, is representative of all the downtrodden people of the country who faced discrimination and suppression due to their caste. People in the name of religion have suppressed lives of many innocents who are not given an equal status and opportunity to live in the society.

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