

## The “Muted” in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*

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### **Abstract**

The paper seeks to examine the communication between the upper caste groups in the Indian Hindu society and the untouchables as represented in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1968). It argues that the language of the Hindu caste groups is dominant over that of the outcastes, rendering the latter in most interactive occasions mute, even in the face of oppression, exploitation and abuse. However, the paper moves on to demonstrate that when one is pushed beyond limit they can, regardless of societal boundaries, momentarily gain voice to vent the yoke of continuous repression and oppression, even if it is temporary. However, the paper notes that their voice is reduced to a monologue since it is uttered in the absence of the perpetrator from the dominant group. The question the paper attempts to answer is “Who within the Hindu caste system determines the conversation mode? What kind of language is used by the dominant group to address the untouchables? How do untouchable respond or react to utterances made by members of the caste groups. How are the untouchables silenced or muted in their interaction with the dominant group?”

**Key words:** Hindu caste system; outcastes; untouchables/ untouchability; muted; language; communication

### **Introduction**

Mulk raj Anand’s *Untouchable* sheds light on the hierarchical structures of power at different levels of the Hindu caste system, and how it functions through social and religious institutions, and how it affects human language, interaction and relationships. It depicts both the dominant and marginalized groups within the Hindu society: the caste groups on one hand and the outcastes on the other. The relationship between the two groups is that of the privileged versus the under- privileged; the accepted versus the abject; the powerful versus the powerless; and the voiced versus the muted. Such a relationship carries with it inequality, repression, exploitation and abuse. Narnaware (2002: 155) observes that within the Hindu religious system [the bedrock of the caste system], “all human beings are not equal....[it] creates caste- based discrimination against Dalits [outcastes- untouchables], which is then open to various forms of violence against them, which includes public humiliation, torture, rape, beating.” This interaction involves the use of language and the degree of expression by both the dominant and subjugated groups. The

paper argues that untouchables in Anand's *Untouchable*, have suppressed speech and are deprived of the right to free expression of their condition and experiences.

Although fictional, Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Untouchable*, presents the real life experiences of the untouchables through the protagonist Bakha, his father and Sonini (his sister), and their relationship with the caste group members. An understanding of the caste system will help shed light on this form of relationship. The caste system grew out of two main strands of thought; first that 'hierarchy is natural- the belief that a hierarchical social structure is part of the divine intention for natural order...the caste systems are traditional, hereditary systems of social restriction and social stratification enforced by law or common practice based on endogamy, occupation, economic status, race and ethnicity. The basic principle of exclusion of the untouchables from the mainstream Hindu society is largely based on the notion of pollution, defilement and self- purification. In her discussion of rituals of defilement in relation to the Indian caste system, Kristeva ... [draws a distinction] between the self-clean and proper body which is characterized by exercise of authority without guilt and the [unclean and improper body]. This sentiment is shared by (Nartjan, 2012) who outlines the features of the caste system as "hereditary occupational specialization, ritualized/ sacralized hierarchy, and mutual repulsion and separation." (Dispande, 2011). In the novel, Bakha and his family members suffer oppression, ridicule and insults at the hand of the upper castes silently.

( Antinora, 2012) sheds light on the mythology informing the Hindu caste system and possibly justifying the differentiation of upper castes and the untouchables. According to her the four main categories of class derive from Brahma, the Supreme Being and these are as the diagram below shows: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras,, who as indicated above, derive from the body of Brahma. Below the caste groups are the Dalits/ outcastes [in this novel; untouchables], Harijans (God's people), who according to Antinora, are believed to have been created from outside the body of the creator, almost a different species from Brahma's children. This in a way is possibly explains why untouchables are treated as the other, and hence their dehumanization, oppression and muting.

### **Theoretical framework**

The paper employs The Muted Group Theory to analyze Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* in line with the idea of the muted. The theory is appropriate because it shows how and why the untouchables remain silent in the face of perpetual abuse from the upper castes.

The theory [a communication theory] was created by Edwin and Shirley Ardener in 1975 as a communication theory which basically focuses on how language is used to mute and exclude marginalized groups within the society. The main idea of MGT is that language serves its creators better than those in other groups who have to learn to use the language as best as they can. Ardener also used the theory to explore the power and societal structure in relation to the dynamism between dominant and subordinated groups. His concept of muted groups does not only apply to women but can also be applied to other non- dominant groups within the social structures. Ardener's (1975) theory proposes that women have different modes of reality from the male- dominated societal model; their models often take a non- verbal, inarticulate, veiled form in contrast to the male discourse.

The paper argues that the same theory can be applied to untouchables, who like women, fall under the marginalized groups within the Indian Hindu society. The theory further recognizes that societies are structured hierarchically, and thereby designating some groups as dominant, or centred, and other groups as subordinate, or marginal. Thus the theory acknowledges the operation of power relations in cultural life; that those who get to name the world do so from their perspectives and, by implication, that the other perspectives are suppressed. (Wood,2005,p.61).

Untouchables in Anand's *Untouchable* are muted. While the upper caste group members are verbal and explicit in their mode of expression and behavior, the untouchables' mode of expression is mostly non- verbal, inarticulate, and is mostly veiled, especially in the presence of the upper caste members.

(Cowan, 2007) points out that 'mutedness' does not refer to the absence of voice but a kind of distortion where subordinates "[...] are allowed to speak but only in the confines of the dominant communication system". According to Gerdin, muting or silencing is a social phenomenon based on the tacit understanding that within a society, there are dominant and non-dominant groups [...]. Thus, the muting process is a socially shared phenomenon that presupposes a collective understanding of who is in power and who is not. (Gendrin, 2000). These differences in power lead to the "oppressor" and the "oppressed". Kramarae adds that gender, race, and class hierarchies where muted groups [exist] are supported by our "political, educational, religious, legal, and media systems." (Kramarae,1981).

(West and Turner, 2010) go a step further and provide a model for the muting or silencing process, which in my view would help us understand how untouchables are silenced by the upper caste groups. This process as outlined in the figure below involves the ridiculing, harassment, and control of the marginalized group by the dominant one. All these attributes of the muting process are occur in Anand's *Untouchable*



## Analysis of the text

*Untouchable* opens up with a clear physical separation of the untouchables from the mainstream Hindu society:

The outcaste 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 scavengers, the leader workers, the washmen, 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 public latrines situated about it, (Anand, 1968, p.9).

The physical barrier denotes exclusion from the Hindu society and hence social stratification which privileges the upper caste groups (dominant) over the outcastes. If they are separated from the rest of the society, can they possibly use the same language? It is obvious that those with acceptable language would be the upper caste groups, which can never be adequately used by the outcastes: firstly, the language of touching, pollution, purification and untouchability; which forms the basis for physical, spiritual, and social segregation of the untouchables from the upper castes, and secondly; insolent, demeaning, patronizing, degrading and dehumanizing language used against the untouchables by the upper castes.

When Havildar ji, [an upper caste], finds the pit latrines not washed, he explicitly pours out his anger in the language his group has designed for the marginalized:

“Why aren’t the latrines clean, you roque of a Bhake! There is not one fit to go near! I have walked all round! Do you know you are responsible for my piles? I caught the contagion sitting on one of those latrines!” (15)

One notes that Havildar ji uses the language that has been created as a communication system by the dominant caste within the Hindu caste system. The upper castes have crafted and sealed a language they deem appropriate for addressing the untouchables; the language which they can use freely without expecting the untouchables to retaliate in- a language that dehumanizes, patronizes, and insults the oppressed; a language system that does not serve all of a culture’s voices equally (Griffin, Foss & S. Foss,2004).

Bakha’s response shows a different type of language: a polite, restraint, and subdued language in the face of insolence and verbal abuse. He cannot answer back in a language that is not his own and hence behaves like the oppressed subordinate and marginalized that he is in the society:

“All right, Havildar ji, I will get one ready for you at once,” Bakha said cautiously as he proceeded to pick up his brush and basket from the place where these tools decorated the front wall of the house. (15)

Bakha’s reaction Havildar ji speaks volume about subordinate position- he is extra careful not to step out of line and possibly agitate the man from a dominant group. For (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 276-77, cited by Skinner and (Holland, 2001),

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio- ideological consciousness and around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it – it does not approach the object from the sidelines.

Even though Bakha responds verbally, he is still muted because as (Ardener, 1975b:2) asserts, “muted” does not necessarily mean silent, the important issue is whether they are able to say all they wish for, where and when they wish to say it.” Bakha is cautious in what and how he responds to Havildar ji, which shows that he is not free to express himself freely and hence the paper concurs with Ardener that he is “muted”.

Bakha like all other untouchables in the novel is used to clean up that which is unclean since he is regarded as polluted by the upper- caste group members. One would concur with (Ruchi Tomar , 2014) untouchables “are used as tools of the Hindu caste system to perform duties for those in power, yet have their speech suppressed and their rights trampled upon”. So Bakha here is an out caste shunned from the world of the upper castes, yet exploited by the same.

When Ramanand, the money lender shouts at him for the dirty latrines, he does not even answer back, but like the subordinate, the marginalized that he is, “bowed with joined hands to Ramanand who was staring at him, a pair of gold rings studded with rubies in his ears, a transparent muslin loin- cloth and shirt on his portentous belly, a funny string cap of a turban on his head. ‘Maharaj.’ He said and ran towards the latrines and busied himself with his job again. (19). Bhaka’s silence here is not merely “inability to create utterance in a conversational exchange, but also denotes as (Gal, 1994, p.408) asserts, failure to produce a separate, socially significant discourse. It seems to be the kind of interaction which according to (Orbe, 1998), the marginalized is “non-assertive, constrained and non-confrontational, putting the needs of others first to avoid conflicts”.

When Bhaka’s sister, Sohini goes to the well to fetch water, she waits for someone from the upper caste to draw water for her since as an untouchable, she could not draw water from the well lest she pollutes it.

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the upper castes would consider the water polluted, Nor were they allowed access to the nearby

brook, as their use of it would contaminate the stream.[...] Perforce they had to collect at the foot of the caste Hindu's well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. More often than not there was no caste Hindu present. (22)

On this, (Harris, 1971, pp.405-6) notes that:

Inequalities in the form of differential access to basic resources, asymmetrical distribution of the [nation's] surplus lopsided workloads, [...] and institution that physically suppress the [down trodden], stifle any form of expression from the latter.

The paper argues that the incident at the well depicts the untouchables' lack of agency and self-determination. Their silence at the well, shows the upper-castes' ignorance of the voice and needs of the marginalized. The latter cannot speak and are muted by the Hindu caste system. As (West and Turner, 2010) rightly assert, the dominant group may also ignore the voice of the marginalized group. All these may eventually lead to the mutedness of the subordinate group... group that is muted by the inadequacies of their languages.

Bakha, the sweeper, is only allowed to sweep the compound of the temple but is not allowed, like other untouchables, to enter the temple. When he wants to see the interior of the temple:

He realized that an untouchable going into the temple polluted it past purification.[...]But the edge of curiosity became more and more acute as he stood there. He suddenly dismissed his thoughts and with a determined, hurried step went towards the stairs, looking to this and that, with a tense, heavy head, but unafraid.[...]But soon he lost his grace in the low stoop which the dead weight of years of habitual bending cast on him. He became the humble, oppressed, oppressed under-dog that he was by birth, afraid of everything, creeping slowly up, in a curiously hesitant, cringing movement. (58)

Before he could even enter the temple, someone from the caste Hindu sees him and pours scorn and insult upon him, in the language of the dominant towards the underdog-insolence:

A cry disturbed him: "polluted, polluted, polluted." A shout rang through the air, [...] "Polluted, polluted, polluted!" shouted the Brahmin below. The crowd above him took the cue and shouted after him, waving their hands, some in fear, others in anger, but all in a terrible orgy of excitement. One of the crowd struck out an individual note.

"Get off the steps you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service. Now we will have to pay for the purification ceremony. Get down, get away you dog!" (61)

On the perception of untouchables as polluting agents, the paper concurs with (Dommergues 1985,14) that:

Anand exposes the evils of untouchability...The archaic stereotype of the abominable sweeper, the coarse, vulgar brute whose soul was as foul and as loathsome as the mud hut he lived in or the excrement he handled. He also demonstrates the absurdity of the Hindu doctrine which assimilates high castes with moral excellence, and out castes particularly with turpitude and depravity.

Any contact of upper- caste with an untouchable renders the former defiled, and he/she must immerse or wash himself with water to be purified. In *Untouchable*, when Bakha accidentally touches one of the Brahmins, the latter shouts, in a language reserved for the marginalized untouchables:

“Keep to the side of the road, you low caste vermin!” He suddenly heard someone shouting at him “why don’t you call you swine and announce your approach! Do you know that you have touched me and defiled me, you cock-eyed son of a bow legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new Dhoti and shirt I put on this morning.” (46)

The language used is aimed at muting the untouchable boy through humiliation, ridicule and dehumanization. It is the language coined by the dominant group, used to continually remind the out- caste s that they are pollutants and hence not part of the clean and proper bodied upper-castes. The protagonist’s reaction to this verbal attack depicts the helplessness of the outcastes in the face of powerful and dominant upper-castes:

Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb [muted]. His senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility. He was used to being spoken to roughly.[...] Bakha’s mouth was open. But he couldn’t utter a single word. [muted] He had already joined his hands instinctively. [like the voiceless and submissive under-dog he is]. (46)

Bakha’s reaction is a clear sign of mutedness. How can he in turn insult the upper castes? This incident, the paper further argues, firmly establishes the subaltern’s inability to speak and the fact that even historically, during the 1930’s, as (Antinora, 2012) argues, had no voice, let alone the power to speak or write and that the contemporary word for the untouchable meaning was, “crushed under foot” and hence no voice/ muted.

Bhaka then questions the system at some point:

“Why are we always abused? The sentry inspector and the sahib that they abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That’s why I came here. I was tired of working on latrines every day. That’s why they don’t touch us, the high castes, [...] for them I am a sweeper, sweeper- Untouchable! Untouchable!

That's the word! [used by upper castes] Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (52).

In the passage above, Bhaka mutates from the voiceless victim to a voiced critic of the Hindu caste system, thereby breaking the norm that characterizes his place within the society. However, in his speech, there is no cut voice of revolt. His is a protest without action, limited only to a monologue; he has no audience. Again, the agency of the protagonist is temporary since he immediately falls back to his usual way of life within the Hindu society and fulfills the expectations of the dominant group by announcing his approach. Anand writes:

Like a ray of light through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that had happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer. The contempt of those who came to the latrines daily and complained that there weren't any latrines clean, the sneers of the people in the outcastes' colony, the abuse of the crowd which had gathered round him this morning. It was all explicable now. (52)

His moment of both disillusionment and acceptance of who he is and his fate is temporary and is without resistance since he continues to announce his approach, as dictated by the upper- castes: "posh, posh, sweeper coming." (52). He picks up his broom and continues to sweep as usual.

Untouchables in the novel fail to create any language outside the language of the upper-caste groups. When Bakha's father, calls him to wake up in the morning, the he interestingly expresses himself in the same insolent language used by the upper- castes:

"Get up ohe you Bakhya, you son of a pig" came his father's voice, sure as a bullet to its target, from the midst of a broken jarring, interrupted snore. "Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoys will be angry." [...] Bhaka opened his eyes and tried to lift his head from the earth as he heard his father's shout. He was angered at the abuse as he was already feeling rather depressed that morning. (13)

Bakha's father fails to create new words or add anything new to the language system of the dominant group and hence, ironically perpetuates the language that is not inclusive of the marginalized groups – the untouchables. This language, one may argue, is derogative and carries the perspectives of the dominant group and their attitudes towards the marginalized.

On this (Wall, J and Gannon–Leary,1999, 22), assert that "to be heard and heeded an individual must use this dominant mode of expression. The use of an alternative "individual" mode of expression will not be heard. To be understood, the would-be communicator must suppress her own mode of expression, in favour of the dominant mode and thus she is "muted".



## Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that the untouchables are muted because they do not form part of the dominant upper caste groups and their communication system. They are not dumb but are reduced to the level of savages. They cannot in the face of abuse, use the language of the upper castes: that of pollution, purification and cannot even insult the upper castes. The language of the upper castes is out of their scope of communication and hence renders them muted. It has also demonstrated that “the dominant group alone determines the appropriate communication systems of a culture.” (Burnett et al., 2009). This culture determines what is said to the marginalized group, how, when, the main aim of which is to humiliate, ridicule and dehumanize them.

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