

## Unsettling Modernism in *Untouchable*: Narrative, Space, and the Politics of Representation

Aakriti Singh\*

### Abstract

As a canonical work in the realm of modernist-social-realist writing, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* reveals traces of unexplored postmodernity in its narration and character construction. This paper aims to retain the novel's modernist essence while foregrounding its latent tendencies that signal postmodern inclinations. Though rooted in a linear narrative and psychological realism, *Untouchable* subtly fractures this framework through stylistic deflections, narrative decentralization, and ideological ambiguity. Its protagonist, Bakha—a Dalit sweeper—emerges not as a traditional hero but as a postmodern anti-hero, shaped by social ostracization and internalized inferiority. His consciousness reflects a postmodern *weltanschauung*, characterized by scepticism, fragmentation, and a rejection of grand narratives. Additionally, the paper incorporates spatial theories by Edward Soja and Doreen Massey to offer a spatialized reading of *Untouchable*—an ostensibly modernist text interpreted through a postmodernist lens. The spatial configurations in the novel are read not merely as physical geographies but as social constructs that reveal the deep-rooted mechanisms of exclusion and control. Through ironic detachment, narrative disruption, and symbolic inversions, Anand ultimately challenges the coherence of modernist representation and anticipates a postmodern sensibility that decenters meaning and questions the fixity of identity and liberation.

**Keywords:** modernism, postmodernism, realism, space, threshold

### Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* hybridizes modernism and realism to present the troubled experiences of its Dalit protagonist, Bakha. Set in the final decades of British colonial rule in India, the novel explores the unresolved social evil of untouchability through Bakha's humiliation and internal struggles. Bakha yearns for dignity and freedom, but the society he inhabits offers little space for either. The novel, long hailed as a foundational work of Indian English fiction, embodies a modernist-social-realist form that critiques social inequities with acute moral urgency.

*Untouchable* is often described as the first true social-realist novel in the Indian English canon—an artistic revolution of its time. However, while its modernist commitments are foregrounded, postmodern and millennial perspectives remain largely unexamined in critical discourse. Like many other literary works, *Untouchable* is open to pluralistic interpretation, and this essay aims to uncover a new dimension of its reception by examining the text's spatial and aesthetic constructions through a postmodernist lens.

My analysis of the text brings to light Anand's unique form of writing, i.e. modernism which continuously blends elements of postmodernism in his mode of writing. My aim is to delve into pivotal aspects and instances of the text that demonstrate a postmodernist understanding of the writing, despite the text's modernist essentialism. While the novel remains grounded in realist representation, it often destabilizes fixed binaries and reveals spatial and symbolic ruptures that align with postmodern concerns. Through key moments in

the narrative—especially threshold spaces and affective ruptures—Anand articulates a mode of expression that anticipates postmodern spatial and epistemological frameworks.

Before tracing these postmodernist impulses, it is important to recognize the formal complexity of the novel. Jessica Berman notes that the novel introduces “a complex narrative dynamic... that unsettles its own temporal structure as the text swings from the static moment of the represented speech back to the progress of Bakha’s day, even while gesturing toward the possible future of Indian modernity” (16). Similarly, Ben Conisbee Baer observes that “[a]ny simplistic opposition between “modernism” and “realism” is called into question here, as a consequence of the attempt to capture colonial subalternity in a literary representation” (582).

Yet if *Untouchable* is so strongly positioned as a modernist-realist novel, should we not ask whether it is also being inscribed into the very grand narrative that modernism constructs for itself (Lyotard 37)? Helmut Lethen, in *Modernism Cut in Half*, challenges the notion of a radical break between modernism and postmodernism. For Lethen, postmodernism can emerge from within modernism, especially when modernism turns self-critical, even to the point of undoing its own aesthetic identity (233).

Indeed, while many critics argue for a clean break between the two periods, others—like Susan Rubin Suleiman in *Naming and Difference*—warn against simplistic genealogies. She critiques the view of postmodernism as merely “a logical extension of the modern” (258). Postmodernism, she argues, does not follow a linear progression from modernism. It is instead a reorientation—sometimes ironic, sometimes destabilizing—that emerges from modernism’s own contradictions.

In this light, *Untouchable* can be read as a site of convergence: where modernist-realist form hosts moments of postmodern spatial critique and affective suspension. The aesthetic and political values of modernism are not undermined but complicated by these postmodern tendencies. These moments do not fully reject realism or modernist clarity, but rather introduce ambiguity, disruption, and multiplicity into the narrative. Therefore, the postmodernist tendencies in *Untouchable* must be seen as epistemological ruptures—brief yet significant fissures in the text’s realist surface.

### **The Postmodern *Weltanschauung***

*Untouchable* has its narrative immersed in caste-based oppression and a psychological portrayal of its Dalit protagonist. The narrative is often described as modernist in its psychological focus and interior monologues, particularly in its portrayal of Bakha’s fragmented yet sincere consciousness. It is situated within a linear, mimetic structure, capturing the gritty realities of caste-based oppression and Anand draws upon the techniques of social realism—grounded in the material conditions of the protagonist’s life—to depict a society that is rigidly hierarchical and morally compromised. This blend of realism with psychological introspection roots the novel within the modernist-social-realist tradition, portraying a coherent world in which oppression is visible, traceable, and systemic. However, despite this structural and thematic alignment with modernism, Anand’s novel also subtly fractures that framework through stylistic and narrative disjunctions that evoke a postmodernist lens.

Bakha is an ostracized citizen of a nation who expresses an “epistemological doubt” over the unreliability of the options presented to him over his liberation and human dignity (Bertens 20). He feels a distaste for the two major dominant discourses of the freedom struggle, and does not find solace in either of the revelations he shortly experiences. Though initially he feels liberated through the ideology presented in the Mahatma’s speech but is suddenly dissatisfied with the turn that the speech takes. He finds himself back at the starting

point, grappling with numerous unanswered questions about his existence and the societal enforcement of hierarchies.

This tumultuous experience not only raises a single kind of doubt in mind of the protagonist Bakha, but numerous ones, such as on the notions of nationhood, the ongoing freedom struggle, and the true meaning of liberation. Bakha tries to restore the wholeness in the fragmented world that surrounds him but perpetually fails at achieving it. He is dissatisfied with the weight of his ostracization that the other members of his community may feel, but are unable to bring them to their conscious understanding. Anand instils in him a zeal that, though faltering, highlights that it is not Bakha who must change, but the world around him. Such realizations lead to a postmodern *weltanschauung* through the inner workings and troubled psyche of our protagonist Bakha, who emerges as the opposite of a traditional hero—a postmodern anti-hero.

The German word *weltanschauung*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to “a particular philosophy or view of life; the worldview of an individual or group.” The *Cambridge Dictionary* similarly defines it as “a particular way of thinking about the world, especially one that is shared by a particular group or culture,” and, *Encyclopedia Britannica* adds that the term implies an “intellectual and cultural orientation encompassing beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape an individual's or community's understanding of reality.” In the context of postmodernism, *weltanschauung* denotes a fragmented and skeptical outlook—one that rejects absolute truths, embraces multiplicity, and views identity and meaning as socially and discursively constructed.

This worldview aligns with Bakha's experience as a marginalized subject whose identity is shaped not by heroic virtue but by social ostracization and structural injustice. As a postmodern anti-hero, Bakha emerges from a distinctly non-heroic background: he is an outcaste, unloved and scorned not only by upper-caste Hindus but also by Muslims and Christians. He possesses none of the traditional heroic traits—neither valour, charm, nor agency. Instead, he is burdened with a collective, internalized sense of inferiority, etched into both his subconscious and unconscious by caste-based social conditioning. Yet, it is precisely the vivid and fluid portrayal of his thoughts that makes him a powerful protagonist. As Neetu Khanna notes, Bakha possesses the capacity “to move” the reader into political consciousness, not through grand action, but through his raw, lived experience (37).

This ability to move the reader is embedded in the multitude of painful and humiliating moments that Bakha endures over the course of just a single day. His very existence is contextualized within a paradoxical and deeply unjust world. One such striking paradox is revealed when a child defecates openly in front of Bakha as he sits begging for food. The act of defecation, though uncivil and unhygienic, does not “pollute” the space in the eyes of the household; rather, it is Bakha's mere presence on the platform that provokes outrage. The upper-caste woman who owns the home scorns him—not for the child's act—but for his bodily proximity to her threshold (Bhattacharya 201). This moment crystallizes the hypocrisy of caste society, in which public defecation is tolerated, but the outcaste cleaner is stigmatized. Bhattacharya incisively observes: “Undoubtedly it is the society whose resources are denuded as a result of imperial control, but it is also a society that suffers from complete civic apathy, along with religious bigotry, so much so that it is content to transfer the entire responsibility of civic sanitation to a community of hapless, ill-paid, and marginalised people” (194). In this contradiction, Anand lays bare the failures of both colonial governance and indigenous social hierarchies, exposing the hollow moral core of a society that privileges ritual purity over human dignity.

Such moments are not rare in Bakha's life. A close reading reveals that episodes of ruthless stripping away of Bakha's dignity constitute more than one-third of the novel. Anand

presents a seemingly natural unfurling of events—one flowing into another—yet the structure is meticulously constructed to expose the systemic nature of oppression. This seemingly natural but dextrous arrangement of events hints at a narrative strategy that disrupts centrality—a form of postmodern decentering.

For instance, the dexterity in assertively fixing Bakha at the center of a discriminatory structure is done by Anand through the mention of Bakha's tender age when "he had begun to work at the latrines at the age of six and resigned himself to the hereditary life of the craft" (Anand 31). "You have got to work for them all your life, my son, after I die" (Anand 68). Anand shows us the system in which Bakha is a peripheral member, yet ironically, he lies transfixed at the center of all its discriminations. Once that structure is built, Anand begins to expose narrative deflections—moments when expected events take unexpected turns.

One key deflection arises in a story that Bakha hears from his father, Lakha. Lakha recounts a time when Bakha had lain deathly ill as a child, and Lakha summoned a Brahmin priest to perform rites. The priest, however, refused to enter the home, instead cursing Lakha for calling him to the house of an untouchable. The moment is significant: it exposes the rot within caste-bound religious structures. Bakha listens quietly but is disturbed. Anand writes,

Bakha had felt stirred in the deepest cells of his body as his father narrated the story. Every time his father mentioned his name, every time he referred to his dangerous illness, Bakha felt a strain of self-pity run through him which made him hot and cold at the same time, raised his hair on end and brought tears gushing to his eyes. It was by sheer exertion of his will power that he kept his weakness from actually letting the tears drop from his eyes (Anand 74).

From this moment, Bakha is an internally altered man. The expected narrative trajectory—where Bakha submits to his social role—is now deflected. He firstly goes to his friend Ram Charan sister's wedding, and then goes to play hockey at the barracks with Ram Charan and Chota; *instead of* peacefully enjoying the game, he gets yelled at by the injured boy's mother, which leads to his startling encounter with Colone Hutchinson, the missionary; and, finally the culmination of all these '*insteads*' is in his unforeseen visit to the *golbagh* for the Mahatma's speech which is serendipitously followed by a debate between Iqbal and Bashir, two figures in the crowd.

Another deflection is visible in the construction of Bakha's body. While he occupies the lowest rung in society, his body is described in terms that elevate and valorise him:

Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass ... 'A bit superior to his job,' they always said, 'not the kind of man who ought to be doing this.' For he looked intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean (Anand 7–8).

Chatterjee notes that the body of the untouchable is "valorized consistently as noble and masculine... which is *at odds* with the position of disempowerment in which it finds itself" (207, emphasis mine). This disjunction between image and role is a classic postmodern move—a fragmentation of coherence between signifier and signified.

Thus, Anand's narration which is often realistic and omniscient, is also marked by moments of ironic detachment and narrative disruption. While the narrator appears to sympathize with Bakha, he also occasionally retreats into objectivity, letting Bakha's internal dilemmas remain unresolved. The novel does not impose a definitive moral stance or ideological closure. Instead, it offers a chorus of competing ideological voices—Gandhian reformism, Christian salvation, and scientific rationalism—without endorsing any. This polyphonic uncertainty, combined with Bakha's refusal to be resolved into a singular



narrative trajectory, brings into view a subtle but discernible postmodern quality to Anand's work.

### Spaceism

The appearance of postmodernism as an aesthetic and as a condition came decades after *Untouchable* was composed. Yet, as the millennium approached, the 1990s “experienced an unprecedented spatial turn” (Soja 261). Space emerged as a central analytical tool across disciplines, gaining theoretical independence from the historical and social categories it had long been subordinated to. Edward Soja, among others, injected what he called “an assertive third term into the ontology of human existence,” emphasizing a trialectic relationship between spatiality, sociality, and historicity—a conceptual move he called “thirling” (262). This “thirling” breaks down the closed binary logic of “either/or” and replaces it with the postmodern “both-and-also,” encouraging scholars to rethink fixed spatial meanings (268).

Another conquest of the spaceist *fin de siècle* was Doreen Massey's *Spaces of Politics* (1999), when for the first-time space ‘became’ political and dynamic instead of being revered as natural, static, and symbolic. Space became a *process* instead of being still, became a “sphere of the possibility of existence of more than one voice,” and due to the plurality of voices also became a chaotic power that was a source of “disruption” (Massey 279–80). As Massey delineates the politics of space and the power it holds over functioning of society, the dynamics of space in Anand's *Untouchable* demand highlighting (3). This multiplicity renders space a site of both domination and potential resistance. In applying this framework, *Untouchable*—despite its rootedness in modernist-social-realist tradition—reveals spatial-postmodernist inclinations, especially in how it stages interactions at physical and symbolic thresholds.

When space becomes political, it also becomes a source of resistance. The novel's treatment of shared urban spaces—markets, temples, colonial streets, and the outcastes' colony—embodies this politicized spatiality. These settings exert an invisible yet pervasive power over characters, echoing Massey's argument that space is never neutral but always imbued with power dynamics (4). Anand's representation of Bulashah, the fictional town, reveals how segregated layouts and symbolic spatial markers naturalize caste hierarchies. Yet in their cracks and crossings, these spaces also enable momentary ruptures and glimpses of agency. Thus, in *Untouchable*, space is not just a backdrop for oppression but is also an active agent for social change and sometimes its resistor (Massey 23).

Most notably, the novel is populated by thresholds—sites that are both literal and symbolic markers of social exclusion and possibility. The well, for example, becomes a charged space where various caste-based and gendered experiences collide. As Massey notes, such spaces are “the meeting of multiple trajectories... where they co-exist, affect each other, maybe come into conflict” (283). Sohini, Gulabo, Pundit Kali Nath, Waziro, and Lachman bring their diverse identities and anxieties into this compact zone, transforming it from a utilitarian fixture into a lived space, charged with emotional and political meaning. This kind of “dynamic simultaneity” exemplifies Massey's call to reimagine space as affectively and socially constructed, she states “[think] of space, not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'. The fact is, however, that social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic” (Massey 2–3). In this regard, Saumya Lal's *Thresholds of Caste and Nation* (2018) is instrumental in reading *Untouchable* spatially. Lal argues that thresholds suspend plot narration, drawing attention to unresolved

affective tensions and formal disruptions in the text (35). These spatial interruptions create what Mary Wilson calls “formal thresholds”—moments where space, affect, and narrative pause intersect (qtd. in Lal 6). The platform around the well, the patio Bakha sleeps on, and the temple gate each enact this aesthetics of blockage and momentary transgression. Such thresholds not only reveal structural violence but also register subtle, often fleeting forms of affective resistance.

Bakha’s encounter at the temple threshold marks a pivotal spatial moment. When he enters the temple, moved by the shock of his sister’s assault, the text stages an explicit crossing—physical, affective, and symbolic. Here, Lal notes the “conflicted affective intensity of threshold space,” where social fear and personal outrage collide (44). This moment cannot be read simply as a modernist depiction of transgression. Rather, it marks what Soja calls a “thirdspace moment”—a temporary collapse of the rigid binaries between sacred/profane, pure/polluted, self/other (Soja 283). The act is both constrained and radical; though it doesn’t bring about transformation, it opens the possibility of resistance, disrupting the illusion of spatial closure maintained by the caste order. It is a liminal rupture, made possible precisely because of the symbolic and emotional density Anand gives to space.

To deepen the spatial critique, Bakha’s interiority as a spatial condition can also be taken under study. Space is not only physical but also shaped by emotion and imagination (Massey 51). Bakha’s dreams of wearing trousers like the British, his internalization of disgust from others, his romanticized visions of modern cleanliness—all construct an inner map of confinement and longing. His psychological cartography is dense with contradictions: he desires modernity but is denied its spaces. In this way, Bakha’s subjectivity is spatialized—not just in the world he occupies but in how he feels himself within it. These affective geographies—his shame, confusion, defiance—become an unspoken thirdspace within him, destabilizing the realist terrain of the novel with postmodern ambivalence. Thus, a focus “on rupture, dislocation, fragmentation and the co-constitution of identity/difference” becomes a part of the spatial critique (Massey 51).

This sense of affective liberation culminates at *golbagh*, the rally field, where Gandhi’s speech momentarily suspends caste distinctions. For Bakha, the field becomes a radically open space—free from the fixed spatial markers that dictate everyday interactions where “[h]e had been lifted from the gutter, through the barriers of space, to partake of a life which was his, and yet not his” (Anand 128). The absence of caste policing here acts as a rupture in the spatial logic of the town, giving Bakha his first glimpse of collective spatial agency. Soja’s concept of the “thirdspace-Other” is relevant here—a space where characters’ independence and interrelation can coexist, where conflicting identities might temporarily align in shared affect (283).

The openness of the rally field breaks with the “confining dualism” of the structured town and imagines a different mode of belonging, one that is not limited by the built environment or its social coding (Soja 267). The novel’s townscape Bulashah, on the other hand is not merely a reflection of 1930s India but also a constructed space that exists simultaneously in representation and abstraction (Soja 268). Anand’s spatial crafting therefore becomes double-coded: it speaks to modernist ideals of social critique (through the town), while also exposing the fluid, permeable, and contested nature of space (through *golbagh*, the rally field), that postmodern theory would later articulate.

## Conclusion

To encapsulate, while *Untouchable* is firmly situated within the modernist-social-realist tradition, a deeper reading reveals that Mulk Raj Anand’s narrative strategies and spatial constructions prefigure postmodern sensibilities. Through its use of narrative

fragmentation, affective instability, and a rejection of fixed moral binaries, the novel resists the unifying teleologies that define conventional realism. Bakha's fragmented consciousness, Anand's multi-voiced narration, and the narrative's resistance to closure all demonstrate tendencies akin to what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as polyphony and what Jean-François Lyotard identifies as scepticism toward grand narratives. These elements, though subtle, introduce postmodern dissonance into an otherwise realist framework, indicating Anand's nuanced experimentation with form. Therefore, the novel's engagement with space opens it up to postmodern spatial theory.

The urban landscapes of Bulashah, the charged social thresholds, and even Bakha's interiority are all rendered through a spatial logic that aligns with the theories of Edward Soja and Doreen Massey. The town functions not just as a realist setting but also as a symbolic architecture of caste-based power—contested and at times disrupted. Thresholds such as the temple gate and the well serve as both literal barriers and affective pressure points, revealing how space in the novel is never neutral. Through these sites, the text stages fleeting moments of resistance, opening up the possibility for spatial agency.

Together, these analyses affirm that *Untouchable*, though rooted in the socio-political commitments of realism and modernism, anticipates postmodern interrogations of identity, space, and narrative. Anand's work thus occupies a hybrid position—bridging the temporal and aesthetic divide between literary epochs. This hybridity invites a pluralistic reading of the novel, encouraging a reception that honours its modernist core while acknowledging the postmodern currents that quietly run through it. So, Anand's *Untouchable* stands as a testament to the ongoing relevance and ambiguity of postmodernism, inviting readers to grapple with the evolving dynamics of identity, power, and societal transformation. The novel's adept navigation through spatial intricacies and the postmodern turn accentuates its relevance, transcending its initial composition period. Anand's probing of caste hierarchies, coupled with spatial resistance, manifests as a powerful commentary on marginalized communities and while we contemplate the lingering questions of dignity and societal evolution, *Untouchable* remains a poignant testament to the enduring struggles faced by the Dalit community, inviting readers to reflect on the ongoing journey toward societal equality and justice.

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**\*Aakriti Singh** holds a Master’s degree in English from Panjab University, Chandigarh, and a Bachelor’s degree in Science. She is an independent research scholar with over three years of experience and has also taught English as an IELTS trainer. Her research interests include Indian English Literature, Postcolonial Theory, and Cultural Studies. She is particularly committed to exploring questions of identity, space, and representation within Indian literary and cultural discourse.