

Subaltern and Trauma: Examining Bakha's Identity Crisis in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

Aditi Bandyopadhyay
Assistant Professor
Birbhum Mahavidyalaya
Suri

Abstract

The chaturvarna (the four varnas or classes) caste system practiced in India under the hegemony of the Brahminical codes of conduct in the Hindu society engaged certain sections of the population in dirty and unclean occupations and categorised them as outcastes or untouchables. These sections of the people were marginalised in every field of life and they were denied the basic rights of living a dignified life. The superior castes considered their touch as a source of pollution. Thus, they were segregated from the mainstream society. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Rabindranath Tagore, Munshi Premchand and other such writers captured the trauma of the dalits through the literary lens and raised their voice in protest of such unjust principles of the Hindu society much before the rise of the Dalit studies. They focused on the fact that such issues were not only to be condemned through literature and theory but also in practice. Activism must be the driving force to bring about social reforms. This paper seeks to address the issue of untouchability in the light of Mulk Raj Anand's path breaking reformist novel *Untouchable*. The litterateur examines this issue through the portrayal of the dalit hero, Bakha who suffers from dilemma as he realises the meaninglessness and the hypocrisy of the caste system which plagues the society and yet he is forced to accept it voicelessly. Anand's choice of a subaltern hero revolutionised the genre of the Indian English novel. This paper examines the identity crisis faced by Bakha in the context of untouchability vis-à-vis the tenets of dalit studies.

Keywords: Dalit, Untouchable, Subaltern, Trauma, Identity crisis, Reform

In the Indian context, the factors of caste, class and gender play a major role in maintaining the power dynamics of various social and cultural institutions. An enquiry into these facets of the social structures raise multiple questions regarding the inequalities resulted from interplay of these paradigms. Interestingly, interrogating the factors of caste and gender within the institution of patriarchy and the dictates of the Brahminical codes of existence, projects the manipulation done to contain knowledge within the hegemonic control. Frantz Fanon, while examining the challenges faced by a postcolonial nation in *The Wretched of the Earth*, states, "The national government if it wants to be national, ought to govern by the people and for the people, for the outcastes and by the outcastes" (165). It is indeed intriguing that postcolonial nations suffer from the oppressive social structures of class, caste, gender and other such factors according to the socio-political-cultural variations. Ranajit Guha further assesses the subaltern state and observes that subalternity is, "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way" (Guha 7).

The paper strives to understand trauma within the context of caste as a lived experience of otherization in case of the identity crisis faced by the subaltern Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's pathbreaking reformist novel, *Untouchable*. The paper further engages in

interrogating the illogical process of subaltern existence forced by birth within a specific community by pushing these group of people into traumatic life choices in terms of hereditary profession. Bakha suffers in spite of realizing the irrationality of the hypocritical and diabolical Brahminical practices. Moreover, he lives a subjugated life in spite of knowing that he has the physical strength and intelligence to overpower his caste superiors because of his caste-based nurturing in the hands of his traditional father Lakha, the jemadar of the sweepers.

The word “dalit” is a Marathi word and it has a Sanskrit root. The term connotes to the idea of the untouchables. They were the outcastes who were not included in the four-fold varna system of the Hindu caste hierarchy. It was used for the first time by Jotiba Phule, the founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj, in the context of the oppressed in the nineteenth century in one of his writings which was published in a journal titled *Deenabandhu*. Phule received anglophile education and in this process, he was inspired by reading *The Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine. He was further inspired by the egalitarian principles laid down by Buddha and Kabir. He realized that dalit welfare would be possible only by educating the members of this oppressed class. However, it became popular in the writings of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, who remains the greatest of Dalit leaders to work for the empowerment of this class. He first defined “Dalit” in his journal *Bahishkrut Bharat* as the “life conditions which characterize the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes’ Brahminical ideology. In the context of dalithood, Ambedkar used the term “scheduled caste” (in the Constitution of India), “depressed class” (while conversing with the Britishers), “bahishkrut” or “outcaste” (while writing essays and addressing the upper caste Hindus) and “pad dalit” or the “crushed one” (while addressing the fellow Dalits). This class was addressed compassionately as “harijans” by Mahatma Gandhi. By using the word “harijans”, Gandhiji was trying to spread the message that they must be treated equally as they, too, were created by the Hindu god Lord Hari or Vishnu. However, one must note that the term was popularized by the manifesto of the Maharashtra Dalit Panther Movement published in 1973. The Dalit literary movement was born in Maharashtra in the 1960’s, it disseminated its ideas through the 1970’s and gradually it spread across India.

Early Indian English novel rests on the seminal works of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. The trinity wrote in the 1930’s and interestingly their works experimented with the content of the novel. Anand used this genre to spread awareness about some of the conspicuous social injustice in his contemporary period in order to reform the Indian society. He revolutionised the genre by choosing protagonists from the lowest strata of the society which included a sweeper (Bakha in *Untouchable*), a coolie (in the novel of the same title) and a peasant named Lal Singh (in the Anand trilogy titled *The Village*, *Across Black Waters* and *The Sword and the Sickle*). He remains an iconoclast who voiced the silent protest of the oppressed and raised concern for the upliftment of the marginalized even before the rise of the dalit movement in the Indian society. Swami Vivekananda, who was a scientific monk, preached Hinduism across the world in a rational way but he disliked the orthodox dogmas associated with this religion. Addressing the issue of the diversity of India, he talks about the caste system as a barrier in the Hindu religion. He elaborates, “Make way for the life current of the nation. Take away the blocks that bar the way to the progress of this mighty river, cleanse its path, clear the channel and out it will rush by its own natural impulse, and the nation will go on careering and progressing” (382). Apart from Mulk Raj Anand, Munshi Premchand, R.N.Tagore and Mahashweta Devi also wrote vividly against the rampant social inequalities in the post independent India. These writers were much ahead of

their times in raising such concerns. Dalit literature abounds in such themes and importantly the genre found a new life with the rise of Dalits who documented the caste-based inequalities from first-hand experience.

The paper under consideration addresses the identity crisis faced by Bakha in Anand's novel *Untouchable* and it seeks to study the novel as a precursor to Dalit literature and as inspiration for the Dalit writers. Anand single handedly revolutionized the Indian English novel by portraying the details of a single day's experience in Bakha's life, who was a jamadar, that is, one who cleaned the latrines. The decision of choosing such a hero was beyond imagination for the people in his contemporary period. The rebellious act of choosing a protagonist from the lowest strata of the atishudra reveals the reformist spirit of Anand. The iconoclast Anand faced tremendous challenges to get this novel published as the publishers marked his novel as 'dirty' and 'unclean' because they feared that it would not meet the expectations of the then caste-based Indian society. Moreover, they felt that a dalit hero and the issue of cleaning latrines would be an obnoxious matter in the sphere of writing novels. Unfortunately, it was rejected by nineteen publishers and as a result, at one stage, Anand too feared that his effort would remain fruitless. The masterpiece was ultimately published by Wishart Books in 1935 on the ground that E.M.Forster wrote in the book's preface that it "would be a great pleasure" to him if he would be "of any help in introducing such an interesting and original piece of work to the readers" of India. The successful appeal of the novel is clearly highlighted in one of Anand's letters to Saros Cowasjee where he wrote, "I do not in the least mind criticism, even adverse suffering from which my novels have been written has already been rewarded by the fact that they have gone into so many languages of the world in spite of their truthfulness and exposure of many shams, hypocrisies and orthodoxies of India" (Cowasjee 15-16). Anand was trying to give voice to the voiceless, an act that has been expressed beautifully by Tagore in "Ebar Phirao More", where he says, "Ei sab murh mlan mukhe dite hobe bhasha" (220), that is, the oppressed must be taught the language of protest so that they can voice their opinion. The novel abounds in social realism and remains a major landmark in voicing the atrocities faced by the suppressed class of the sweepers in India.

Anand was a member of the Progressive Writers Association in the 1930's England. This association was formed in 1935 by a group of students studying in England (including Anand) to rebel against the various forms of social injustice. Interestingly, this movement was inspired by the Paris conference of 1935 whose stalwarts were Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland, Thomas Mann and E.M.Forster. Anand's stay in England for around two decades and his membership with this association made an immense influence on him to take up kaleidoscopic social issues under his fictive lens. The General Strike of Great Britain in 1926 made the people cognizant about the social hierarchies and the disparities in the living standards of the haves and the have-nots. This event too was an eye opener for Anand. As a litterateur, he realized his power to influence the masses and to raise voice against the appalling miseries of the downtrodden people. He championed this humanist vision in almost all his works. In his essay "Why I Write?", he observes that "truth alone should matter to a writer" and that "this truth should become imaginative truth without losing sincerity. The novel should interpret the truth of life, from felt experience, and not from books" (251). He thereby used the platform of literature to disseminate the voice of protest and enlighten the oppressed masses. In the same vein Dr. B. R. Ambedkar elaborated his reformist call in "The Annihilation of Caste" (1936), The path of social reform, like the path to heaven (at any rate, in India), is strewn with many difficulties. Social reform in India has few friends and many

critics” (19). He further explained that therefore he was “giving expression” to his “views” from his “own platform” (18).

Anand wrote *Untouchable* after being inspired by the story of a young boy Uka written by Mahatma Gandhi in *Young India*. Anand elaborates the compositional background of this path breaking literary success in his article “On the Genesis of the Untouchable: A Note”. He states that in April 1929 he visited Gandhiji in the Sabarmati ashram and narrated the story of Bakha to him. Thereby he included the changes suggested by Gandhiji in the novel. Interestingly Anand cleaned the toilets in the ashram during his three months stay there. This was a part of Mahatma’s teaching that everyone should do his/ her work on his/her own. Anand was highly touched by the simplicity of living in Gandhiji’s ashram and he wished for a casteless society.

Untouchable encapsulates the events of a single day in the life of the subaltern protagonist, Bakha. Anand uses this strategy of employing the time span of a single day to highlight the intensity of the struggles faced by the untouchables. Bama writes in *Karukku*, “If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle” (27). The novel focuses on the irrationality of the rigid Hindus, whose orthodox vision of maintaining the varna system in the society perpetuate discriminatory hierarchies of class and caste. The onset of the novel under consideration, captures the “ugliness, the squalor and the misery” (1) of the claustrophobic living condition in the “little colony” of the outcastes-

The outcastes’ colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate, for them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washerman, 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 the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh and offensive stink. (1)

Such a realistic description makes *Untouchable* the first novel to highlight the abominable condition of the Dalits. This description brings to our mind the description of unhygienic congested London slums in the novels of Dickens. Anand describes the details with stark precision. The subaltern hero, Bakha, “a young man of eighteen, strong and able-bodied” (1) with an intrinsic ability of interrogating the social norms finds it extremely difficult to fit into existing caste system. As Anand’s mouthpiece, Bakha fails to understand the reason behind his infernal existence. His morning begins on a depressed note with the abusive call of his father, “Get up, oye you Bakhya, ohe son of a pig!” (5). As he is immersed in the reverie of his mother’s love, he is shuddered by Havildar Charan Singh’s (of thirty eighth Dogra regiment) call as he accuses Bakha for his negligence in cleaning latrines which has worsened the condition of the Havildar’s piles. However, the Havildar understands his uniqueness among the scavengers and praises Bakha’s “gentleman” (8) like demeanor. Bakha feels repelled by his obnoxious job of being a scavenger. Even though he doesn’t like his job, his efficiency in the job is reflected as he is praised by all that “though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean. He didn’t even soil his sleeves, handling the commodes, sweeping and scrubbing them” (8). The author describes that this sweeper was a “bit superior to his job” as the caste superiors observed that Bakha was “not the kind of man who ought to

be doing this (sweeping latrines)” (8). Dr. B.R.Ambedkar appropriately remarks in his seminal work “Annihilation of Caste” that “The division of labour brought about by the caste system is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference, has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination” (36).

Anand captures the heart wrenching injustice done towards the untouchables by focusing on their struggle to earn the basic needs for living. They begged for food in return of the service done for the superiors. The author captures the irony of the caste system by highlighting the fact that the ‘unclean’ scavengers struggled incessantly to keep the superior’s households ‘clean’ and on the contrary after getting the cleaning works done, these service providers were tagged “untouchables”, whose presence or touch could defile the purity of the superiors. In one touching episode, Bakha asks for food after rendering his service to one of the ladies of the superior class. Anand captures the diabolical practices of the Hindus in this episode. The lady readily gives chapatis and dal to a sadhu shouting “alakh, alakh”. She then notices Bakha and screams at him for sitting near her door. Bakha apologizes in spite of making no mistake, “Forgive me, mother. I shouted for bread, but you were perhaps busy and didn’t hear me. I was tired and sat down” (63). She then accuses the poor hungry boy of defiling her religion as she flings a chapati towards Bakha with the words “May you perish and die!” (63).

Anand was a close observer of the society and he used the tool of words to capture the unjust ways of his contemporary Brahminical society. In the novel under consideration, he focuses on the struggle of the untouchables to collect water as he projects,

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 near-by brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. They had no well of their own because it cost at least a thousand rupees to dig a well....They crowded round the well, congested the space below its high brick platform, morning, noon and night, joining their hands with servile humility to every passer-by, cursing their fate, and bemoaning their lot, if they were refused the help they wanted, praying, beseeching and blessing, if some generous soul condescended to listen to them, or to help them. (14-15)

Such episodes are quite common in most of the literary works concerning the Dalits. Munshi Premchand raises a similar context in “Thakur ka Kuan” where the untouchable Gangi is unable to fetch clean water for her ailing husband as the clean water can be fetched only from “thakur ka kuan”, which belonged to the upper caste Thakurs and they were not supposed to touch it as they were the subalterns. The diseased man is forced to drink contaminated water which is full of the stink of dead animals to quench his thirst. Bama in *Karukku*, for instance, writes extensively about the exploitation of the Dalits by the Naicker employers and the Nadar tradesmen. While describing one of her childhood episodes in the autobiography, she writes that once her “paatti” completed all the “filthy chores of the Naicker family and placed her vessel besides the drain for food” and in response, “the Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them in paatti’s vessel and went away. Her vessel it seemed, must not touch paatti’s; it would be polluted... these people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them how will we survive? Have not they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and have not we been lower-caste? Can we change this” (14). The seminal question asked by Bama remains at the crux of Dalit literature and it reverberates in all the works which highlight the dalit

consciousness. It is really striking that Anand was much ahead of his times to raise such interrogations through his portrayal of Bakha in his masterpiece.

The sweet shop episode is another striking instance that captures the dehumanized state of the subaltern sweeper. Being aware of his untouchable status, he announces “Posh! Posh! The sweeper coming” (42) while moving on the streets of the market. He chooses to eat jalebis as he could not afford to eat the other costly sweets. The sweet seller cheats him and treats him like cattle as, “he lifted the string attached to the middle of the rod, balanced the scales for the shortest possible space of time and threw the sweets into a piece torn off an old Daily Mail” (37). Further we are informed that “He (Bakha) caught the jalebis which the confectioner threw at him like a cricket ball, placed four nickel coins on the shoe-board or the confectioner’s assistant who stood ready to splash some water on them, and he walked away embarrassed, yet, happy” (37). Unfortunately, as he relishes the jalebis, an upper caste person hurls nefarious abuses as he feels touched and polluted by Bakha. To draw fun, a street urchin falsely accuses him of beating children very often. Bakha apologizes for touching Lalla ji but he refuses to accept the false accusation. He is beaten up and the jalebis fall on the ground. As he is saved by a Muslim, he introspects, “Why all this fuss? Why was I so humble? I could have struck him! ... For them I am a sweeper, sweeper- untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable!” (43).

Bakha visits the temple after being assaulted by the people of the upper caste, while eating jalebis in the market. The hypocrisy of the upper-class Hindus is revealed in an episode at the temple in Anand’s novel where the priest molests Bakha’s sister and thereby blames Bakha for polluting the temple premises by his presence, to hide his crime. Bakha’s helplessness is revealed as he talks to his sister and urges his spontaneous strong desire to take revenge against the hypocrite priest, “The son of a pig! I will go and kill him!” (55).

The sweet shop episode and the temple episode remain a major documentation where a subaltern’s fear turns into an urge for revenge but he realizes his helplessness in the backdrop of a caste ridden society. He sees the hypocrisy of the Hindu society where the upper caste people thrive on deceit. Moreover, in all these episodes of facing the atrocities inflicted by the superiors in terms of caste and facing the trauma of being an outcaste, Bakha realizes that he could overthrow his tormentors with his physical strength and yet he is silenced by the shackles of a society plagued by caste system. He is forced to remain voiceless as he realizes that single handed protest would invite life threatening repercussions. He wishes to rise from the shackles of his caste to fight against injustice and yet he remains chained by the fear of a caste driven society. This identity crisis faced by Bakha makes the novel a landmark in Dalit literature as it remains a major precursor in this regard.

Strikingly the end of the Anand’s novel provides fruitful clues and suggestions to overcome the sense of indignity, loss and erasure associated with the life of a sweeper. Bakha is inspired by the teachings of Christ’s love, redemption and equality for all taught by the Christian missionaries under the local salvation army led by Colonel Hutchinson. However, he fears conversion. In the state of disillusion, he reaches Golbagh to listen to Gandhi’s speech. He is overwhelmed and mesmerized to hear the lecture where Gandhi states, “As you all know, while we are asking for freedom from the grip of a foreign nation, we have ourselves, for centuries trampled underfoot millions of human beings without feeling the slightest remorse for our inequity” (136). He feels that Gandhi can unite the nation irrespective of the barrier of caste. Anand provides another solution through the advocate R. N. Bashir and his poet friend Iqbal Nath Sarashar, who claim that the change in profession can improve the oppressed state of the sweepers. They observe that the introduction of the

“machine which clears dung without anyone to handle it – the flush system” (146) will eradicate the evil of untouchability from the lives of the sweepers. Anand thus envisions the dream of a “casteless and classless society” (146).

Anand's struggle in getting the *Untouchable* published after writing on the content that was considered to be dirty or unclean spread the message that one must struggle to bring reforms even if one has to face many failures. He uses the platform of literature to enlighten the readers to accept challenges and move beyond the barriers of caste to achieve equality in society. He remains an iconoclast who was ahead of his times in condemning the evil of caste system. More importantly, he remains a realist in portraying the atrocities done against the untouchables. As he captures the “dalit consciousness” through the portrayal of the subaltern hero Bakha, he raises a silent but suggestive voice of protest against a casteist society and interrogates their segregated state in his self-introspection. He remains an inspiration for the dalit writers who penned down their traumatic experiences of being victimized on the ground of caste. This spirit of Anand echoes Augusto Boal who states in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, that individual must “rehearse battle plans – ways of freeing themselves from all oppression... To free ourselves is to exist. To free yourself is to exist” (xx-xxi). Further, perhaps the greatest proponent of Hinduism and the unity of man, Swami Vivekananda catches the crux of existence as he talks about the being and states, “Freedom is the watchword. Be free! A free body, a free mind, and a free soul!” (516).

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