
Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable: The Early Echo of the Dalit Voice

NehaB.A. in English (Hons) VI Semester

Article Received: 29/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 31/05/2025**Published Online:** 02/06/2025**DOI:** 10.47311/IJOES.2025.19.05.719

Abstract: This paper explores Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* as a pioneering literary effort to bring the suppressed voice of Dalit community into the mainstream of Indian English literature. Written in 1935, it is a fictional story a single day in the life of Bakha, young Dalit sweeper boy, that depicts the systemic social exclusion, humiliation, and internal conflict of the Dalit people those who labeled as "Untouchable" in the Indian caste hierarchy. By situating the narrative within the context of colonial India, the novel offers a nuanced examination of how traditional caste structure were reinforced and challenged in a period of growing nationalist fervor. Through Bakha's personal struggles and aspirations, Anand critiques the social rigidity of the time and calls attention to the need for reform. Utilizing a modernist narrative style, the author crafts a deeply empathetic of caste-based suffering, marking a significant moment in the emergence of Dalit consciousness in literature. This study highlights the enduring relevance of *Untouchable* as an early yet powerful articulation of resistance against caste oppression and an important forerunner of contemporary Dalit discourse.

Key Words: Caste, trauma, nationalism, colonialism, humanism, and Dalit discourse.

Introduction: Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable* stands as a seminal work in Indian English literature, offering a poignant exploration of the caste-based discrimination in entrenched in Colonial India. Set over the course of a single day, the narrative follows Bakha, an eighteen-year-old Dalit sweeper, as he navigates the systemic oppression and social ostracism imposed by rigid caste hierarchy. Through Bakha's experiences, Anand critiques the dehumanizing effects of Untouchability and advocates for social reform, marking the novel as an early and influential voice in Dalit literature.

The backdrop of colonial India in the early twentieth century provides a complex setting where traditional social structures and emerging nationalist sentiments intersect. While the British colonial administration perpetuated existing caste divisions for administrative convenience, Indian society grappled with internal reform movements aiming to address social injustices.

Anand situates his narrative within this milieu, highlighting the paradoxes and hypocrisies of a society striving for independence while simultaneously upholding oppressive social norms.

Bakha's character embodies the plight of Dalit community, often referred to as "Untouchable", who were relegated to the margins of society and subjected to inhumane treatment. Despite his subjugation, Bakha exhibits yearning for dignity and self-respect, reflecting the inner turmoil and resilience of the oppressed. His admiration for British customs and his desire for cleanliness and modernity underscore his internal conflict and the complexities of colonial influence on marginalized communities.

Anand employs stream-of-consciousness narrative style, influenced by modernist writers like James Joyce, to delve into Bakha's psyche and provide an intimate portrayal of his thoughts and emotions. This technique allows readers to experience Bakha's internal struggles and aspirations firsthand, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of the psychological impact on caste-based discrimination. The novel's realistic depiction of daily life and its unflinching portrayal of social injustices contribute to its enduring relevance and literary significance.

The novel also engages with contemporary social reform movements, particularly those led by Mahatma Gandhi, who advocated for the upliftment of the Dalit community, whom he referred to as "Harijan" or "Children of God." Anand incorporates Gandhi's ideology into the narrative, presenting it as a potential path towards social change. However, the novel also raises questions about the efficacy of such reforms and the challenges inherent in transforming deeply ingrained social attitudes.

Untouchable has been the subject of extensive critical analysis, with scholars examining its portrayal of caste dynamics, colonial influence, and the complexities of social reforms. Some critiques suggest that while Anand brings attention to Dalit issues, his portrayal may inadvertently perpetuate certain stereotypes or fail to fully capture the lived experiences of Dalits. Others argue that the novel's humanistic approach emphasizes the shared humanity of all individuals, challenging the moral justification of the caste system.

Bakha: The Embodiment of Dalit Struggles: Bakha, the central figure in *Untouchable*, serves as a representation of the everyday reality faced by Dalits in pre-independent India. As a young boy born into the lowest rung of the caste system, his life is defined by constant indignities—whether it is being forced to clean latrines, shouted at for an unintentionally brushing past someone for higher caste, or denied access to basic public resources like water. These encounters are not just isolated incidents; they are part of a broader system of structural violence that marks Dalit existence.

However, Bakha is not merely a passive victim. What sets him apart is his inner

world—his deep desire for respect, for the simple right to exist without shame. He takes pride in his cleanliness, mimicking the habits and attire of British soldiers, and aspires toward a life where dignity is not denied because of birth. His admiration for Western manners reflects his yearning for an identity that rises above caste-imposed boundaries.

Through Bakha, Anand captures the psychological impact of caste discrimination: the sense of confusion, anger, and silent resistance that brews within the oppressed. Although he seldom challenges the system openly, Bakha's introspective nature and longing for equality make him a powerful symbol of Dalit resilience. He embodies not just the suffering imposed by untouchability, but also the beginning of awareness that such suffering is unjust and that change, however distant, is both necessary and possible.

Literary Techniques and Narrative Style: Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* stands out not only for its social message but also for the powerful way it is told. Anand moves beyond a traditional storytelling approach by using a narrative style that closely follows the inner thoughts of Bakha. Through a stream-of-consciousness method, the novel gives readers a direct line into Bakha's mind, allowing them to witness his feelings of shame, frustration, and hope as he moves through a single, emotionally charged day. This technique makes Bakha's emotional reality feel immediate and deeply personal, drawing readers into the world of someone often rendered invisible.

Anand's writing is also layered with irony. He draws attention to the contradictions in a society that preaches compassion while practicing exclusion. The way upper-caste characters speak of religion and morality, yet dehumanize people like Bakha, is presented in a way that gently but powerfully critiques the hypocrisy of such beliefs. Through subtle satire, Anand questions the sincerity of so-called reformers and highlights how some attempts at social change lack real depth or understanding.

Altogether, Anand's literary approach in *Untouchable* combines emotional closeness with social criticism. His modern style doesn't just tell us about injustice—it makes us feel it, inviting readers to reflect on how deeply rooted prejudices shape lives in ways both large and small.

Intersection with colonialism and nationalism: Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* does more than expose the brutality of the caste system—it also thoughtfully explores how colonialism and nationalism shape the social and psychological world of the oppressed. These broader forces are not mere backdrops in the novel; they intersect with Bakha's daily life, affecting how he sees himself and the world around him.

One of the most telling aspects of this intersection is Bakha's fascination with British culture. From his admiration for the neat uniforms and polished manners of British soldiers to his attempts to imitate their behavior, Bakha's character reveals how colonial influence offered an alternative to the rough Indian caste system—in the appearance. For Bakha, the

British represent a world where people are not defined by birth, where respectability and cleanliness seems to carry more weight than caste identity. His desire to adopt Western ways is not simply mimicry; it's a search for dignity in a society that continuously denies him humanity.

This admiration, however, also points to the deep contradictions of colonial rule. While British modernity appears liberating to Bakha, it is ultimately a superficial hope. The colonial system itself did little to dismantle caste hierarchies; in many ways, it reinforced them by aligning with upper-caste elites for political and administrative convenience.

Parallel to this is the influence of the Indian nationalist movement, particularly the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi. Toward the end of the novel, Bakha hear Gandhi speak about untouchability, calling for the upliftment of Dalit and referring to them as “Harijans,” or “Children of God.” This moment is significant because it introduces a local voice advocating for social reform. Gandhi's speech seems to offer hope— a recognition of Dalit as part of the national community, deserving of respect and equality.

The novel maintains a critical distance from both colonial and nationalist narratives. Gandhi's approach, while well-intentioned, appears idealistic and vague when weighed against the daily humiliations Bakha endures. Moreover, Anand includes another character—a modernist intellectual—who suggests that real change may come not through speeches or spirituality, but through technological progress, such as the introduction of flush toilets that would eliminate the need for manual scavenging. This moment captures Anand's nuanced perspective: that neither colonial mimicry nor abstract nationalism alone can liberate the Dalit community.

What emerges from these overlapping influence is a sense of disillusionment mixed with tentative hope. Bakha stands at the crossroads of traditions and modernity, colonizer and colonized, reform and resistance. He is shaped by force beyond his control, yet he is also beginning to understand that the way things are is not the way they must always be.

Anand's treatment of colonialism and nationalism, therefore, adds depth to the novel's social critique. It reminds readers that the struggle against caste oppression was not taking place in a vacuum it was unfolding within the larger context of the nation under foreign rule, struggling to define itself. For Dalit like Bakha, independent from the British did not necessarily mean freedom from caste. The national movement, while powerful, often sidelined the most marginalized voices in favor of unity and idealism. Untouchable quietly challenges this narrative by making a Dalit character its central voice.

In this way, the novel contributes to a more layered understanding of India's colonial and postcolonial colonial history. It shows how the promise of modernity whether delivered

through British governance or Indian nationalism failed to fully address the entrenched inequalities of caste. At the same time, it leaves space for the emergence of Dalit consciousness, a new way of seeing and speaking that would eventually give rise to the rich tradition of Dalit literature in the decades that followed.

Critical Perspectives: Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* has attracted a range of critical interpretations, each offering a unique lens through which understand the novel's depth and social commentary. Scholars have engaged with the text from multiple angles, highlighting both its strengths, and limitations.

One significant perspective is drawn from trauma theory, which focuses on the emotional and psychological scars inflicted by systemic oppression. Bakha's experiences in the novel go beyond physical humiliation; they reveal the quite, enduring pain of being treated as less than human.

The repeated insults, the enforced segregation, and the internalized shame speak to a form of trauma that is not always visible but deeply embedded in the psyche. This reading emphasizes how caste discrimination leaves lasting emotional wounds that shape identity and behavior.

From the lens of Dalit discourses, the novel has sparked important conversations about representation. While many acknowledge Anand's role in giving voice to a community that had long been silenced in literature, some critics argue that his portrayal of Bakha, though empathetic, may still reflect on outsider's gaze. Anand was not a Dalit himself, and this distance, according to some scholars, occasionally shows in the way certain aspects of Dalit life are romanticized or simplified. These critiques do not dismiss the novel's importance but instead invite a more nuanced discussion about authenticity and agency in storytelling.

Another powerful lens in Anand's humanist vision, which runs through the entire narrative. His portrayal of Bakha is grounded in compassion of dignity, suggesting that no human being should be judged or degraded based on birth. Anand challenges the caste system not through anger or ideological confrontation, but by emphasizing shared humanity. Through Bakha's quiet strength and longing for respect, Anand asks readers to question the moral foundations of social exclusion and to imagine a society based on equality and mutual respects.

Together, these critical perspectives enrich our understanding of *Untouchable*. They show how the novel operates on multiple levels as a social critique, a psychological portrait, and a moral call for justice. Anand's work, despite its complexities and contradictions, remain a foundation text in the evolving conversation around caste, literature, and human rights in India.

Conclusion: Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* holds a lasting place in Indian literature, not just for the story it tells, but for the powerful way it confronts the harsh realities of caste oppression. Through the figure of Bakha— young boy burdened by the stigma of untouchability Anand captures a world where dignity is denied based on birth, and where hope is quietly nurtured in the most dehumanizing circumstances.

Decades after its publication, the novel still speaks to readers across time and place. The social systems may have changed on the surface, but the deeper issues of discrimination, exclusion, and inequality continue to persist in many forms. In this light, *Untouchable* is not merely a historical novel it is a living document that invites us to reflect on the present.

Anand's voice, though shaped by the era of colonial rule and nationalist awakening, carries the universal message about justice, empathy, and human worth. His portrayal of Bakha encourages us to see those of the margins not as victim alone, but as individuals with dreams, emotions, and under yielding desire to be seen and respected. Ultimately, *Untouchable* does more than tell a story it opens up a space for dialogue, for questioning inherited prejudices, and for imagining a more inclusive society. Its relevance today lies in its honesty, its compassion, and its unwavering commitment to human dignity.

Works Cited:

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Penguin Book, 2001.

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Edited by E.M. Forster, Penguin Books, 2001

Rao, Anupama. *The caste Question: Dalits and Political of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009.

Yadav, Shashi. "Critical Analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's Novel *Untouchable*". Research Gate, 2014