

## **Bakha's life in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: Reflections in Gandhi's India**

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### **Abstract**

This paper shows Gandhi's indelible influence on Mulk Raj Anand's writerly life. One of the objectives of this paper is to find why Anand does not as objectively analyze Gandhi as some of his contemporaries. The first half of the paper reflects Mulk Raj Anand's positive notion of India's father of the nation, M.K. Gandhi. The last half of this paper evaluates Bakha's life as a subaltern in pre-independent India. The paper also explores why Bakha remains a peripheral figure at the end of the novel.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Peripheral, Positive-notion, Influence

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) alludes to his "crazed imagination" (Dulai, 1992, p. 192) for depicting the subalterns' story. From his writing, the influence of James Joyce is palpable (Berry, 1968/9, p. 89). *Untouchable* follows techniques such as stream of consciousness and a non-linear approach of narration. Anand, in one of his lectures, mentioned following Joyce's writing "pattern" (Berry, 1968/9, p. 89). In "Mulk Raj Anand Remembers" the author himself writes about meeting a young critic, Edward Sackville West in Virginia Woolf's drawing room. When Sackville came to know from Anand that he was writing about the marginalized class, Sackville dryly replied, "'Oh! There can be no novel about the poor! One can only laugh at the Cockneys like Dickens'" (Anand, 1993, p.178). Anand, in the article, admits to having the sense of loss, trepidation and frustration because of not being able to endure Sackville's harsh words, and gives him a fitting reply.

When *Untouchable* was published in 1935, Gandhi was already an internationally-recognized figure. Anand had a very good rapport with Gandhi. A couple of incidents from Anand's interaction with Gandhi will be worth-noted here. Anand met Poet George Russel in Virginia Woolf's drawing-room. There, Anand discussed the plot of his work *Untouchable*. Russel suggested Anand to travel back to India and meet Gandhi. Russel said to Anand, "Son, go back to Gandhi for a year. He is struggling against the rejection of outcasts; at the same time he is fighting against imperialism" (Anand, 1993, p. 178). Anand blindly followed his words and met Gandhi in Ahmedabad where he had read the manuscript of the novel upon the author's request in one day, and came back with constructive criticism the following day.

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After that, Gandhi advised Anand against using pompous diction. He wanted him to use "simple language and transliterate" and bring to light the eyewitness accounts of outcastes. He requested Anand not to use the title "Untouchable", which Anand ultimately does not abide by (Anand, 1993, p.179). His personal choice was "Horijon". Gandhi gave him the book *Talisman* which reads: "If you are in despair, think of the poorest man you can help and go to him and your despair will vanish" (1993, p. 179) – these lines gave Anand the motivation to spend time at the ashram and observe how horizons led their lives. Anand's second draft, prepared there, was approved by Gandhi. However, the publication of *Untouchable* was proving to be difficult unless the timely support of novelist E.M. Forster had not come. The novel was rejected 19 times before Forester's intervention.

In "Mulk Raj Anand Remembers", Anand writes "The Gandhian ideas of self-help, self-renewal and 'the small is beautiful' are relevant in the present context". In that personal essay, he remains positive about Gandhi. In Anand's "Remember the past, but create anew", readers find a piece of interview between Professor Radhakrishnan and Mulk Raj Anand. Radhakrishnan praises Gandhi for bringing "the pity of the Buddha to the troubled world" and calls upon Anand to impart Gandhi's message (1996/7, p. 23). Rama Jha writes on the impact of Gandhi's socio-political principles on Indo-English literatures of the early 20th century. She calls Gandhi "a man of action" and praises him for assimilating "best of the East with best of the west" (Jha, 1981, p. 164). Suresh Kohli ruminates on the influence of Mahatma Gandhi on Mulk Raj Anand for publishing *Untouchable*. He also pays his debt to RK Narayan and Raja Rao for "vying for a place in the English writing sun" (Kohli, 2004, p. 218) which paved a path forward for the later generation of authors attempting to question the meta-narratives. Reading Kohli's tribute, readers do not find his response to Anand's holistic positive view of Mahatma Gandhi. Instead, Kohli believes that the influence of Gandhi propels Anand to find "solace in Khadala hills in Maharashtra, but also satisfaction in working for the depressed and the downtrodden for which he adopted a village", and bequeath all his possessions to the Sarvodaya Trust (2004, p. 223).

Jasbir Jain in "Changing Image of Gandhi in Indo-English Fiction" notes Anand's positive representation of Gandhi but Anand shows that the Mahatma is as subaltern as Bakha (1979, p. 182). K.D. Verma views Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Anand's *Untouchable* as "monumental" (Verma, 1996, p. 160) works which focus a lot on the downtrodden class, the "lowest dregs of the population – the foundling, the pickpocket, the go-between, the prostitute, the witch, the robber, the castaway ..." (1996, p. 161). Anand's view of Gandhi is not as fractious as V.S. Naipaul's depiction of Mahatma Gandhi in *India: A Wounded Civilization*.

In the 8th chapter titled "Renaissance or Continuity" of *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), Naipaul castigates Gandhi for putting too much emphasis on "Hindu Nationalism" (2010, p. 141), thus ignoring the secular ideals the father of India is supposed to bring forward. Naipaul thinks that Gandhi's idea of non-violence was far-fetched, which began as "a holy man's plea for brotherhood and love" but ended as "nothing" (2010, p. 143). Gandhi, according to Naipaul, failed to keep Indian Hindus and Muslims united; the division led Muslims to preach "the theory of two nations" (2010, p. 143). Naipaul writes: "Irony upon irony; but the South African Indian had long ago been lost in the Hindu mahatma; and mahatmanhood in the end had worked against the Indian cause" (2010, p. 143). Arundhati Roy in *The Shape of the Beast* acknowledges Gandhi for striking "at the heart of the empire", but likewise Naipaul, she also questions the long-term effects of "non-violent resistance" (2010, p. 146) which becomes "more and more symbolic" and "less and less real" --- ultimately meaningless and "ineffective" (2010, p. 146).

Both Anand and Narayan put the public perceptions of Gandhi into good effects in their *Untouchable* and *The Guide* respectively. In *Untouchable*, when Gandhi finishes his speech, Bakha hears different versions of events. Anand brilliantly echoes public sentiments. He does not stop sharing negative public reactions about Gandhi. One of the crowds attending Gandhi's speech, says:

Gandhi is a humbug. He is a fool. He is a hypocrite. In one breath he says he wants to abolish untouchability, in the other he asserts that he is an orthodox Hindu. He is running counter to the spirit of our age, which is democracy. He is in the fourth century B.C. with his swadeshi and his spinning-wheel. We live in the twentieth. I have read Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham and John Stuart Mill (*Untouchable* 146).

Anand shows the emotive response of Gandhi's ardent followers, who, inspired by their guru, "discard foreign cloth" and "throwing their felt caps, their silk shirts and aprons into the pile" becoming a "blazing bonfire" (*Untouchable*, 140). One of the Gandhi supporters quashes the dissenter's statement by saying, "It is very unfair of you to abuse the Mahatma...He is by far the greatest liberating force of our age" (*Untouchable* 142). At the same time, the educated fictive character tries to be objective in his appraisal of Gandhi. He thinks that Gandhi's promotion of the spinning-wheel will be a futile affair, but "in time", the follower admits, "all will learn to love it. And we shall beat our enslavers at their own game..." (p. 142). In *The Guide* (1958), Narayan shows how much the general public is still in awe of Gandhi. In the novel, when Raju receives almost a demi-god status, his followers start having high hopes for him. They say, "Your prayers will surely be answered and save our village...You are not another human being. You are a Mahatma" (*The*

Guide, 1958, p. 93). Although Raju remains self-deprecating, the villagers continue to find in him the resemblance of Gandhi, who, they think, "has left us a disciple in you to save us" (p. 93).

Gandhi still shares a heroic status among most Indians but not the Indian bourgeoisie of his lifetime (Ghosh, 1985, p. 329). According to Ghosh, the Indian businessmen did not support the "Swadeshi movement" and "Other movements started by Gandhi in 1920 and 1930" (1985, p. 329). Ghosh opines that the rich Indians were trying to please the British Empire for keeping their business interests alive. Ghosh severely criticizes Gandhi for his double-standard behavior towards non-violent movements. Ghosh writes: "The boycott of foreign goods was sometimes an act of violence and, at other times, a non-violent act" (1985, p. 330). What ails Ghosh is Gandhi's criticism of Garhwali regiment for not following "commands of a British officer to fire upon and kill unarmed anti-imperialist demonstrators in Peshwar in 1930" (1985, p. 330).

V.S. Naipaul in India: A Wounded Civilization recognizes R.K. Narayan as "One of the earliest and best" (2010, p. 12) novelists writing in English. However, he questions Narayan's tactics of quietism about the pulverizing Indian politics pandering to, as Naipaul argues, an extreme disparity constituting to "one man out of four" (2010, p. 18) having some works to do. Naipaul, the contemporary of Narayan, felt the pangs of India and wanted to understand the nitty-gritty of Indian politics, although from a foreigner's perspective. Naipaul writes: "India is for me a difficult country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far" (Naipaul, 2010, no page number). He also mentions that no state will be able to live on Gandhian ideology because of its "rejection of the west" (Naipaul, 2010, p. 160). Hence, he urges the Indian state to come out of the Gandhian "illusion" and think of "the possibility of a true new beginning" (p. 161).

In Anand's *Untouchable*, Bakha, as a subaltern, is unable to raise his voice against the supremacists. He receives racist slurs and horrendous torments every day. His inability to raise his points without receiving physical abuse creates in him "an endless age of woe and suffering" (*Untouchable* 40). According to Dulai, Bakha enjoys frolicking amidst the laps of nature, which gives him "the spirit of adventure" and being "associated with the men in the barracks" (Dulai, 1992, p. 205). Bakha is afraid of facing human beings superior to his race. He only finds a thing of beauty and a sense of eeriness in nature. Due to systematic oppression towards the Dalit community, Bakha prefers to remain silent.

P. Rajendra Karmarkar in his article "Reality and Realism: An Unorthodox Reading of Anand's *Untouchable*" deliberates on the reasons behind the Hindu

bourgeoisie society's supremacist attitude which is borne out of the caste system that puts the outcastes in the bottom half of society (1996/7, p.114). As the novel was published in 1935 before the amendment of the Indian constitution in 1950, which "reserved 15% of all seats in educational institutions and government jobs for what were to be euphemistically called "scheduled" castes" (1996/7, p. 115) – Karmarkar alludes to the tireless efforts of one untouchable Dr. B. R Ambedkar (1891-1956), who created "these reservation facilities as the chair of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution" (1996/7, p.115). Even Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1948 strategized "anti-capitalist" networks to do away with the "slave constitution" for creating a society without "repression" (Ruparelia, 2015, p. 60). The following lines quoted from Karmarkar's article show the significance of Anand's own life on creating characters for his novel.

When he was very young Anand suffered an injury. A sweeper boy carried him home to Anand's mother, who, rather than expressing gratitude for this kindness, harangued the sweeper for having polluted her son. Moreover, Anand's mother busied herself with bathing her "polluted" son rather than tending to the injury. This incident emerges, transformed, as a pivotal, and poignant, event in *Untouchable* (p.117).

The incident Karmarkar is referring to, readers will find in *Untouchable*. When the central character Bakha sits on a doorstep, the owner of the house hurls abuse at him by saying "Why did you sit down on my footstep, if you had to sit down at all? You have defiled my religion" (*Untouchable* 63). When there is a Sadhu waiting for food, the woman's tone thoroughly changes "Be patient, sadhu ji. I shall go and get you your food" (p.63). In *Untouchable*, he brings an unknown female showing more of a conciliatory tone towards Bakha. The woman, handing out "a handful of rice in one hand and chapati in the other" (p. 63) gives Bakha a word of advice, urging him not to encroach upon another person's territory once again. In *The Guide*, Raju takes on the religious garb for whetting his appetite. He does not beg for food as Bakha does. Bakha is not as diplomatic as Raju is. In one point of the novel, Raju, due to extreme hunger, loses his patience and reveals his unconscious desires for food. He says, "Why don't you leave me alone? If you bring me food, leave it there and leave me in peace, thank you" (*The Guide*, 1958, p. 45).

Whenever Bakha touches anyone from the upper caste, peoples' reaction is like "You've touched me. I will have to bathe now and purify myself anyhow" (*Untouchable*, p. 41). He wants to take revenge on the man who has struck "him the blow" (p. 42). Bakha reflects on the situation (p. 43) "Why are we always abused?" He shows his disgust at the treatment of Hindus towards the sweepers. "For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word!

Untouchable! I am an Untouchable" (p. 43). Sohini shares experience of facing sexual harassment at the working-place: "That man, that man, that man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled" (p. 53). Bakha looks to avenge the Brahmin priest who has defiled his sister.

According to Narayan, "To be a good writer anywhere you must have roots - both in religion and in family" (cited in Srinath, 1981, p. 417). Bakha's family, though poverty-stricken, is not as dysfunctional as Raju's. For instance, Raju's father is almost an absent father figure in *The Guide* but Lakha is an omnipresent figure in *Untouchable*. Both of them are abusive as fathers. Lakha is either yearning for food or cursing Bakha. Lakha wakes Bakha up and urges him to "Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoy's will be angry" (*Untouchable* 05). Since his mother's death, Bakha's life has been miserable. Lakha's tantrums do not prove the fact that he abhors his son. When Bakha gets sick in his childhood, Lakha turns to all corners to save his son at any cost. He seeks Hakim Bhagawan Das's help for treating his feverish son. However, another rich patient of Hakim disperses him by saying "Keep away, keep away, don't come riding on me. Do you want me to have another bath this morning? The Hakim Sahib has to attend to us people who go to offices first, and there are so many of us waiting" (*Untouchable* 71). Although Hakim comes to Lakha's rescue on the eve of the hour, Lakha still dreads over his victimized son's interaction with his superiors. Lakha warns Bakha of his code of conduct with "our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kind" (p. 71). Bakha thinks of putting up stiff resistance, but also knows that he "is bound to his low caste-status, much bound to his low caste-status" (Riemenschneider, 1967, p. 33). His anger and fury only make him painfully aware that in the end his "rebellion will lead nowhere" (1967, p. 33). Riemenschneider hints at Bakha's lack of "education" (1967, p. 34) for not being able to protest vehemently against his oppressors. Dalits or untouchables are not given proper access to education, which Riemenschneider unfortunately overlooks.

When Bakha receives a new hockey stick from Havildar Charat Singh, he becomes "grateful" (*Untouchable* 99). Bakha feels that Charat has treated him exceptionally well, but his reality strikes him when he finds that the babu's boy has received the same equipment from the havildar. The hockey match between 31st Punjabis and 38th Dogras halts because of the referee's poor decision and it ends in acrimony. One of the stones from the opponent half hits the boy. Although Bakha gives the boy first-aid treatment, his mother, instead of thanking him, abuses him: "You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son!" (*Untouchable* 106). The society around Bakha creates doubt in his good-mannered-nature. He wants to keep others happy and receive warmth from his surroundings. True, his neighbors from



the same class treat him as exceptional because of his previous work with the Tommys, but Bakha is more interested in pleasing his superiors. Even though he gets maltreated by them, he takes it with a pinch of salt. The feeling of inferiority and his habit of not questioning the status-quo have turned him into a Spivakian subaltern without a single voice to utter.

C.P. Sivadasan in "Comparative View: Two Proletarian Novels: Similarities in Anand's *Untouchable* and Thakazhi's *Thottiyude Makan*" comes with three recommendations for developing the living standards of the subalterns. "The first" which Bakha does not approve of "is" Hutchinson's advice to him for becoming a Christian (Sivadasan, 1987, p. 124). "The second method" is following Gandhi's approach of considering outcastes as "the greatest evil of Hinduism" and the last approach is put forward by poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar, "who edits the *Nawan jug* (New Era)" who urges toilet-cleaners to change their careers in "the epilogue of the novel" (Sivadasan, p. 124). There are similarities between the second and the third recommendations. These above-mentioned suggestions show that the novelist does not want untouchables to live with their current status. He indirectly wants them to change their profession and start a new lease of life. Anand, through Iqbal's words, talks of modifying Gandhi's ideals and introducing machine-based economy, but does not answer at the end of the novel, whether this technical advancement will replace human resources like the Bakhas. According to B. R. Ambedkar, "Mahatmas have come and mahatmas have gone. But the Untouchables have remained Untouchables" (as cited in Ghose, 2003, p. 94). Therefore, Bakha's untouchable position does not end at the end of the novel.

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