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GENDER, SUBALTERNITY, AND SILENCE: RECOVERING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN
MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

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ABSTRACT

This is an age of Science & Technology, and awakening of social and human rights. In this modern age, the concept of untouchability draws an enormous attention from the civilized society and all have become conscious of their rights especially the oppressed, long suppressed, downtrodden sections of society and marginalized. Though the concept of untouchability is fully man-made from the ancient time, the society as well as the upper class has absorbed it as a stereo-typed ideology to subjugate the untouchables in economy, politics and society until the present kind. This paper intends to mark Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* as an instance of subaltern studies with twofold significance and implication and investigates the dominant discourses or the ideological assumptions in traditional Hindu society. Through this novel, the novelist adheres to the doctrine of Gandhianism and Humanism and presents a casteless and classless nation.

KEY WORDS: Gandhianism, Humanism, Untouchability, Downtrodden, Marginalized.

INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English has excessively flourished today by many Indian writers. Through their creative writings, many Indian writers raised their voice against those who are downtrodden, Subalterns, and those who are dalits. Among many writers, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* also pointed out the subjugated sections of society. At the very beginning, the concept of untouchability began with the religion of Hinduism and later it has extended to the roots of the Hindu societies in India. Usually, the upper classes who are often known as Brahmins, dominate the lower class people. The concept of untouchability is put into action mainly on lower caste and class. During the first half of the twentieth century, Mulk Raj Anand played a crucial role to bring India's controversial issues. In Antonio Gramsci's *On the Margins of History*:

History of the Subaltern social groups, the term Subaltern means the exploitation of the marginalization of sections of people in societies. Similarly, according to the group of subaltern studies, the term also refers to subordinationin terms of class, caste, gender, and age. (167)

The protagonist of the novel, Bakha, an uneducated man of eighteen years, represents a fairly complete sociological experience. He was subjected to embarrassment and alienation by high-born Hindus, like others of his community. Nevertheless, he was born in a sweeper-family, so he had improper bringing to come like a civilized person. An incident occurs in the main street where Bakha goes to sweep the market road and the temple yard. After doing both, he wants to buy four anna's worth of cheap sweetmeat. Anand presented this scene,

which holds back Bakha's feelings and emotions before buying sweetmeat:

Eight anna in my pocket, he said to himself, dare I buy some sweets? If my father comes to know that I spend all my money on sweets; he thought and hesitated, but come, I have only one life to live: he said to himself, let me taste the sweets; who knows, tomorrow I may be no more. (*Untouchable* 51)

The protagonist suffers morally, socially, and economically. The exploitation of simple and ignorant people, the blood sucking high castes especially custodians of religion, in the form of priest, etc. is really heart-melting. The dalits, who are brutally tortured by the upper class considered to belong to the lowest among them. Bakha's sister, Sohini, adapts the role of a 'submissive', 'patient', and 'peaceful' woman. She waits for a caste Hindu to draw water for from the well. As she is an untouchable girl, she herself is not allowed to pollute the well. Pundit Kali Nath, the upper class priest in the nearby temple, decides to draw water from Sohini as reward of Sohini's patience. But then, she was sexually abused by Pundit Kali Nath but Bakha brings the blame somewhat on Sohini's physical attractiveness. A women, therefore, needs to toe the lines instructed by men of higher caste and should ingrain in themselves the feminine virtues like 'patience', 'submissive' in order to appropriate the role of an ideal women. Most men do not find anything wrong with this standardization of women. Through his work, Mulk Raj Anand has made an attempt to analyze the subalternity of women in the society. This novel underlines the marginality of women as she is made to suffer under the prevalent class structure, flourishing on rich-poor disconnect. Women become the weaker construction of strong men. Sexualisation and gendering also play prominent role in keeping the women down at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

DISCUSSION

Why are we always abused? The Sentry Inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I

came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That's why they don't touch us, the high-castes. The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhammadan. They don't mind touching us, the Muhammadans and the sahibs. It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers. From them I am a sweeper, sweeper—untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!' (*Untouchable* 43)

In *Untouchable*, the humanistic vision of Anand presents subaltern sweeper boy, Bakha, higher than the high-caste people. The diverse methods of the de-sexualisation and merciless dictatorship over women are completed in Anand's novel. In most of the theories, the female individuality is given great honour, but in real life women are ashamed, dominated and depersonalized. A coordinated attempt is being made to make a woman realize her location in relation to men, from the beginning. The spirit of the occasion suddenly becomes very controlled right at the birth of a girl child. She is made to realize that she is not a permanent member of the family and a burden on her father brings the whole family in a contradictory anatomy. In *Untouchable*, Bakha is similar in this context. His sister, Sohini's body is a danger to his family and the burden is on her to keep the body away from the threatening male absorption. In his anxiety, he assumes that his sister is born to put down and abuse the whole family: "Why was she born a girl in our house, to bring disgrace upon us?"(6).

Pundit Kali Nath breaks away from his responsibility in the sexual abuse of Sohini, while Bakha holds his sister answerable for the whole catastrophe. Therefore, female sexuality needs cautious supervision in a society where men are not supposed to have any willpower in matters of sexual desire. In this context, Foucault refers to an "inspecting gaze, through which each individual exercises surveillance over and against himself." (7)

The playmates of Bakha were sweepers and the boys who attached to the regiment in which his father was working. In fact, the protagonist of the

novel is drawn after the sweeper boy with whom Anand played appears in this autobiographical novel. The author has given us the explanation of the occurrence, which is completely implanted in his subconscious mind:

The cruelty of the god made order (Brahmins, Vaishya, Kshatriya, outcastes) come home to me, when Bakha, a sweeper boy brought me home bruised in the head by an accidental stone. My mother abused him for carrying me. And she bathed me even though I was bleeding. This little incident was to remain in my cautious-unconscious and became a passion for injustice against the old fixtures of non human discrimination against untouchables. (*Literary Criterion*)

Bakha has obtained a pair of old breeches from Tommu and a pair of old boots from a sepoy, he would if he could, like to look like the white foreigner and so be in the 'fashun'. His work of latrine-cleaning also appears as the day dawns. He is a clever and stable worker. Three rows of latrines to clean single handed and several times too, to bring cleanliness in the dirt, such as Bakha's daily toil, which he turns into a proficient art. Bakha brings an injured boy, in hockey match, to house but he could not get praising and appreciating and he is attacked and charged with violating the injured boy. She abuses him, "Give me my child! You have defied my house May you die." Here, Bakha is taken as impurity because he cleans and touches dirt. Through this character, the author portrayed an indirect representation of millions of Bakha in our country. The creation of Bakha's inner life makes 'Untouchable', the kind of novel that has great social as well as human significance. Bakha neither leads a rebellion nor tries actively to change his circumstances. Anand had a great sympathy towards dalits.

Again, Sohini is expected not to show her teeth in the presence of men. This defilement of coded feminine behaviour is considered as an act appropriate only a prostitute. Consequently, girls gradually become simple and inactive and boys aggressive of themselves. Additionally a serious incident occurred when Bakha touched a Lallaji. To

pollute Lallaji was not the intension of Bakha. This directs a boundless gush of vulgar abuses from the touched man. He feels regretful and requests his forgiveness. Then, Lallaji gave a sound slap on Bakha's cheek for what he has done and it gathered a huge crowd that continued to scold him cruelly. By absorbing this incident, Dr. G.S. Balarama Gupta rightly asserts:

The climax of the novel, the incident where in Bakha 'touches' the Lallaji, is especially significant for the slap dealt on Bakha's face is symbolic not only of all the cruelty to which untouchables are subjected, but of the scornful treatment meted out to the underprivileged all over the world as, for instance the Negroes in the U.S.A. (*A Study of His Fiction in Human Perspective* 28)

While Lallaji slapped him, his poor jelebis scattered in the dust and his turban fallen on the ground. By that time nobody was a bit affectionate to him except a tongawalla who attempts to lift Bakha. For the cruel and inhuman behavior of Lallaji, Bakha was very much angry on him. Anand clearly explained Bakha's revolutionary feelings and the following passage shows a fundamental change in protagonist's personality:

He stood aghast. Then his whole countenance lit with fire and his hands use no more joined. Tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. The cumulated strength of his giant body glistened in him with the desire for revenge, while horror, rage, indignation swept over his frame. (*Untouchable* 55)

The author made Bakha as a symbol of modern and free India who has numerous dreams. He thinks certain people are skeptical towards the low class families and he is wondering how they are so unfair and tyrant and they do not realize that the low class people are made of flesh and blood and should be treated as human beings. Though he performs her duty well, he is a neglected person in the society. He had known that the sepoys did not hesitate to touch him. Anand compares him with a loin, tiger and elephant in order to prove his bravery. But, in contrary, the people of upper class curse him as pig, dog, bull and swine who acts as a

young and healthy animal, to keep inviolate his life morality and sanity. On seeing his dutiful and efficient work, the upper caste Havildar Charat Singh promises to give him a new hockey stick. In spite of all worries, this gives him happiness and fresh hope and turns to continue his work for the rest of the day.

The analysis of the character of Bakha shows that the life of a lower caste Hindu that is more painful than the life of a slave. What Forster argues is true in a sense because a slave is always bound to his/her master. S/he can earn his/her freedom by satisfying the master. But there is no escape from the curse of untouchability for the lower caste Hindus. The cause is that the whole Hindu society internalizes the ideology of untouchability in society's grand narrative and gives it a view of institutionalized concept. The untouchability cages the lower caste Hindus with iron chains from where it is very difficult to come out. The protagonist of *Untouchable* (Anand, 2001), Bakha has also fallen into the same vicious cycle of untouchability. But he wants to escape from this condition and unconsciously he is attracted to the English soldiers and their life style in the army barrack. "... Bakha was a child of modern India. The clear cut styles of European dress had impressed his naïve mind (2)." Apparently he imitates the English because of the impression of feeling good but in his mind there is an intense desire to become superior so that he can turn into the dominator from the dominated. The mimicry of Bakha can be seen from two perspectives. One is from the larger point of view in which he stands between the British colonizer and the Indian colonized. The other angle is from within the Indians who view him as a creature between the upper class Hindus and the lower class Hindus (Muslims and Christians are also seen as the lower class in the eyes of the upper class Hindus). Here Bakha's desire to be an English man is going straight to the position and power of the English colonizers who are superior, compared to the Hindu upper class people. This unconscious desire to elevate his position and power confronts the two dominating forces. The desire of a lower class colonized Indian like Bakha can be compared to the concept of 'the mirror image' by the Indian

postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994):

It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. It is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated: the phantasmic space of possession that no one subject can singly or fixedly occupy, and therefore permits the dream of the inversion of roles.... The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger ... It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness-the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body (Bhabha, 1994:44-45).

In Indian society, the sexual purity of a woman is made necessary where a woman is doomed to live in shame and imposed blame once her purity is lost. Mulk Raj Anand creates one of the most significant scenes in the recent Indo-Anglian fiction but he does not introduce any tricky situation. Bakha meets three men with different solutions to his deep-rooted problem, after being turned by his angry father. First, he meets Hutchinson; the bishop of the Salvation Army proposes to baptize Bakha in order to abolish the mark of caste. But Bakha inherently turns to Gandhi who realizes himself with the untouchable by acknowledging that he wishes to be reborn as an untouchable. Nevertheless, he feels something about the solution of Mahatmaji. The final solution is of poet Iqbal Nath Sarkar who enumerates about water closets and main-drainage all over the country, which means a definite demolition of the hard system of caste. He has the opinion that the introduction of flush-system will complete all the troubles of both untouchables and untouchability. Anand rejects the casteism by the creation of untouchable, as a horrifying practice involving man's inhumanity to man. This novel not only demonstrates the evil effects of caste system, but also generates the element of compassion among readers for the protagonist also. Bakha is a flawless

human whose excellence is defected by his low caste for which he is definitely not responsible. Bakha's embarrassment in all the scenes discloses how unfairly the untouchables are treated by caste Hindus. Thus by creating a powerful character like Bakha, Mulk Raj Anand achieves at the evils of the society and argues for the social justice to the down-trodden section of Indian population. Anand chooses his protagonist, Bakha, from the subaltern class background, for narrating the worst effect of untouchability in Hindu society. He reveals all the disappointment, hope, suffering, anguish, despair and tender feeling of his protagonist that were the result of his daily struggle with society.

Socio-economic status can be improved by the better opportunities for subalterns. He also believes that modernity and scientific approach can eradicate age old traditions, superstitions, religious taboos, casteism and classism from the society. After using modern and new scientific equipments no untouchable will wait for the mercy of high castes for water, no untouchable will clean human excreta manually and will not carry the human excreta on their heads. The main reason for their suffering is the poor socioeconomic condition of subaltern class. For getting job opportunities as well as better education for reconstructing their socioeconomic condition can be supported by their democratic outlook.

CONCLUSION

Untouchable analyzes the depression of untouchables or lower class people and their rage against the upper caste. It flashes light on the rural experience and displays the critical and tense relations among Muslims, Christian British colonizers, untouchable subalterns, and upper caste Hindus. In order to alter the subaltern's status, writers of Indian English trying to give voice to the lower class and poor people. This is an attempt to shake the foundation of the societal stereo-typed ideology and making them to think about the whole problems of subalterns. Through his work Anand gives the abjection of caste system because it splits the society into various sections. Being influenced by the Marx's ideology and Gandhiji, he believes that the outlook of democracy will be helpful to lift the social conditions of the subalterns. A woman is

almost a product of a good possession in Patriarchal society. The site on which dominant power hierarchy dictates its rules is the sexualized body. The female virginity is what makes a woman precious. In this novel, Anand portrays woman who is steadily cornered in the social system by class, caste and patriarchal privileges. He also distinguishes all the aspects of Hindu hierarchy and gives the bulletin of humanism which is important for an individual development as well as for its betterment.

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