

FROM SILENCE TO PROTEST: AMBEDKAR, PALANI BABA, AND MARGINALIZED RESISTANCE IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

Dr. A. Arun Daves¹, Mrs. B. Dhivya², Mrs. V. Sudha³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jawahar Science College, Neyveli, Tamil Nadu, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jawahar Science College, Neyveli, Tamil Nadu, India

³Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jawahar Science College, Neyveli, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

This article examines Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable through the combined perspectives of Ambedkarite social reform and the protest consciousness associated with Palani Baba. The novel portrays the life of Bakha, an untouchable sweeper boy who experiences humiliation, alienation, and social exclusion within the rigid caste hierarchy of colonial India. Through Bakha's suffering, Anand exposes the dehumanizing nature of caste discrimination and presents a powerful critique of social inequality. The study connects Bakha's struggle with the reformist ideology of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who advocated equality, education, constitutional morality, and the annihilation of caste. Simultaneously, the article incorporates the protest testimony and public rhetoric associated with Palani Baba, whose speeches reflected the emotional anger of socially neglected communities. His criticism of humiliation, exclusion, and political hypocrisy is compared with the suppressed resistance visible in Bakha's experiences in the novel. While Ambedkar symbolizes intellectual and constitutional reform, Palani Baba represents emotional protest against social oppression. The article argues that Untouchable becomes both a literary representation of caste suffering and a political text that reflects the emergence of resistance among oppressed groups. Using cultural studies, postcolonial criticism, and subaltern perspectives, the paper demonstrates how Anand transforms social reality into literary protest and humanistic reform.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Palani Baba, Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchable, caste oppression, protest literature, Dalit consciousness, social reform

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature often becomes the voice of communities that history attempts to silence. In India, caste oppression created a deeply unequal social structure in which millions of people were denied dignity, education, and social recognition because of their birth. Indian English literature emerged as an important medium for exposing these realities and questioning the moral foundations of social hierarchy. Among the earliest writers to transform fiction into an instrument of social criticism, Mulk Raj Anand occupies a central position. His novel Untouchable remains one of the most influential literary portrayals of caste oppression and human suffering in colonial India.

Indian English literature has long functioned as a powerful medium for representing the realities of oppression, poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. Among the earliest Indian English novelists who transformed literature into a tool of social criticism, Mulk Raj Anand occupies a central position. His novel Untouchable, published in 1935, remains one of the most influential literary works dealing with caste discrimination and untouchability in colonial India. Through the experiences of Bakha, a young sweeper boy, Anand exposes the cruelty and hypocrisy of caste hierarchy and presents a deeply humanistic critique of Indian society.

The novel is important not merely because it narrates the life of an untouchable boy but because it gives voice to communities that had long been silenced and excluded from mainstream social narratives. Anand humanizes the untouchable experience by portraying Bakha as emotionally sensitive, intelligent, and deeply aware of the injustice surrounding him. Bakha's suffering becomes symbolic of the humiliation experienced by millions of marginalized people under caste oppression.

The concerns represented in *Untouchable* strongly resonate with the social and political philosophy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar regarded caste as one of the most oppressive social systems in human history. He argued that untouchability destroyed equality, fraternity, and democracy by denying human dignity to certain communities. His call for education, self-respect, constitutional rights, and social justice aimed to liberate oppressed groups from centuries of discrimination. Ambedkar's ideology therefore provides an essential framework for understanding Anand's representation of caste oppression.

At the same time, the emotional dimensions of protest and anger represented in the novel can also be connected to the rhetoric associated with Palani Baba. Though controversial in public memory, Palani Baba emerged as a forceful speaker who criticized social inequality, political hypocrisy, and the neglect of marginalized communities. His speeches reflected emotional frustration against systems of domination and humiliation. While Ambedkar relied on constitutional reform and intellectual resistance, Palani Baba's rhetoric emphasized emotional protest and confrontational speech.

By connecting these two ideological approaches with Anand's *Untouchable*, the present article attempts to examine how literature becomes a space where social suffering, protest consciousness, and reformist ideals intersect. The study explores caste oppression, identity formation, human dignity, emotional resistance, subaltern consciousness, and the ethical demand for equality within the novel.

To understand the significance of *Untouchable*, it is necessary to examine the historical reality of untouchability in Indian society. Untouchability emerged from the rigid caste hierarchy that divided society into different social groups based on birth and occupation. Certain communities were considered impure because they performed tasks such as cleaning latrines, removing waste, handling dead animals, and other forms of labor associated with pollution. These communities were denied access to education, temples, public spaces, and social mobility. Untouchables were expected to live separately from upper castes and were forced to follow humiliating social restrictions. The system was not merely economic but deeply psychological and cultural because it institutionalized inequality and normalized discrimination.

During the colonial period, social reform movements emerged to challenge caste oppression. Reformers such as Jyotirao Phule, Narayana Guru, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar strongly criticized untouchability and demanded equality for oppressed communities. Ambedkar in particular argued that caste was incompatible with democracy and modern civilization.

The publication of *Untouchable* in 1935 therefore occurred during a period of intense debate about caste reform and national identity. Anand's novel contributed to this debate by bringing the untouchable experience into literary discourse. Instead of discussing caste as an abstract social issue, the novel presented the emotional and physical suffering of an individual human being.

The historical importance of the novel lies in its realistic portrayal of everyday humiliation. Anand does not romanticize poverty or suffering. Instead, he reveals the violence embedded within ordinary social interactions. Bakha's experiences demonstrate how caste controls not only labor and occupation but also emotions, identity, and human relationships.

One of the major strengths of Anand's novel is its use of realism. The narrative focuses on a single day in Bakha's life, yet within this limited timeframe Anand successfully exposes the entire structure of caste oppression. Every event in the novel reveals how untouchability shapes Bakha's existence.

Bakha begins his day by cleaning latrines, a task associated with impurity in caste society. Though his labor is necessary for maintaining public hygiene, society treats him with disgust rather than respect. Anand exposes the hypocrisy of a system that depends on untouchable labor while simultaneously denying untouchables basic dignity.

The marketplace incident is among the most powerful scenes in the novel. Bakha accidentally touches an upper-caste man while walking through the crowded streets. The man reacts with anger and publicly humiliates Bakha for polluting him. This moment reveals the irrationality and cruelty of caste ideology. Bakha has done nothing morally wrong, yet he is treated as impure because of his birth.

The psychological impact of this humiliation is immense. Bakha experiences shame, anger, confusion, and helplessness. Anand carefully portrays his emotional suffering, allowing readers to understand the destructive effects of caste discrimination on individual identity.

Another important scene occurs at the temple, where Bakha's sister Sohini becomes the victim of sexual exploitation by a priest. The priest who claims religious purity attempts to abuse an untouchable girl, exposing the moral hypocrisy of caste society. Anand demonstrates that the same system which speaks of purity and pollution often protects exploitation and injustice.

The realism of *Untouchable* is not limited to physical description. Anand also captures the emotional reality of oppression. Bakha constantly struggles with feelings of inferiority because society repeatedly tells him that he is unclean and socially worthless. His psychological conflict becomes central to the novel's critique of caste.

The ideas of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar provide one of the most powerful frameworks for interpreting *Untouchable*. Ambedkar argued that caste was fundamentally opposed to democracy because it divided society into unequal groups based on birth. He believed that untouchability represented the extreme form of social dehumanization.

Ambedkar's famous call to "Educate, Agitate, organize" emphasized the importance of intellectual empowerment and collective resistance. Bakha's character reflects a desire for self-improvement and dignity. Though he lacks formal education, he is observant, intelligent, and emotionally aware. He questions the logic of caste discrimination and struggles to understand why society treats him as inferior.

Ambedkar insisted that social reform must go beyond superficial sympathy. According to him, genuine equality required the destruction of caste hierarchy itself. This perspective helps readers understand the deeper meaning of Bakha's suffering. His humiliation is not accidental or personal; it is produced by a systematic structure of social inequality.

Anand's novel repeatedly emphasizes the denial of dignity. Bakha is not asking for charity or pity. He seeks recognition as a human being. This aligns closely with Ambedkar's belief that oppressed communities must be treated as equal citizens rather than as objects of sympathy. Ambedkar argued that social equality could never emerge through mere compassion from upper-caste society; instead, it required justice, rights, and structural transformation. Bakha's emotional suffering therefore becomes symbolic of a larger struggle for identity and self-respect among marginalized communities.

Throughout the novel, Bakha experiences a painful conflict between internal humanity and external humiliation. He possesses kindness, sensitivity, and discipline, yet society refuses to acknowledge these qualities because of his caste identity. Anand exposes the irrationality of a social order in which birth determines worth more than character or morality. This contradiction becomes one of the central ethical criticisms within the novel. Bakha's humiliation in public

spaces repeatedly demonstrates how caste destroys not only social opportunity but also psychological confidence and emotional stability.

Bakha's fascination with cleanliness and modern appearance is also significant. Though society labels him impure, he constantly attempts to maintain personal hygiene and dignity. His admiration for British soldiers and Western clothing reflects not merely imitation but a desire to escape the stigma attached to untouchability. In this sense, cleanliness becomes symbolic of psychological resistance against social degradation. Anand presents Bakha's concern for appearance as an attempt to reclaim individuality within a society that seeks to reduce him to a polluted social category.

Ambedkar similarly emphasized self-respect as an essential element of liberation. He believed that oppressed communities must reject the inferiority imposed upon them by caste ideology. Bakha's silent resistance reflects this desire for self-worth, even though he lacks the political language to express it openly. His emotional responses reveal an unconscious rejection of caste hierarchy and an emerging awareness that social inequality is deeply unjust. Anand thereby transforms Bakha from a passive victim into a psychologically complex figure struggling for recognition and dignity.

The emotional frustration visible in Bakha's experiences can also be connected to the protest testimony associated with Palani Baba. His speeches frequently highlighted how marginalized communities were denied dignity despite their labor and contributions to society. He criticized systems that benefited from the work of oppressed people while simultaneously excluding them from social respect and equality. This protest against humiliation echoes strongly within Anand's portrayal of Bakha's psychological suffering and social alienation.

Untouchable becomes not only a social novel but also a literary testimony of wounded humanity. Anand transforms the everyday experiences of caste oppression into a universal ethical question concerning justice, dignity, and human equality. Through Bakha's struggle, the novel challenges readers to confront the moral contradictions of a society that claims spiritual greatness while denying humanity to millions of its people.

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