

## UNIT 4

### UNTOUCHABLE BY MULK RAJ ANAND FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

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#### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit we shall;

- know about the Indian English novel *Untouchable*,
- become aware of the social injustices,
- evaluate the novel with reference to the relationship between literature and society.

In the end, you should be able to;

- know about the author and his novel,
- understand the need to abolish the injustices and bring reformation in the society,
- understand that how literature and society mirror each other.

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#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the earlier unit, we have seen that literature and society share an interconnected relationship. The same was shown with various examples of literary texts influencing society and vice a versa. Here, we shall learn the same concept in-depth with a special concern to the novel *Untouchable*. History of human civilization tells human society was divided into two broad sections, one was intellectually, culturally, and monetarily powered class and the other was the exploited , victimized class. It was not merely the truth of past. Even today it is the truth. *Untouchable*, a novel by Mulk Raj Anand depicts the Indian society and the situation of downtrodden and backward people of a certain caste; resulting in the inhumane and unjust

treatment inflicted by the upper-caste Indians. This literary text, a novel; shows the realistic picture of the Indian society of that time.

*Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand From the Point of View of Relationship between Literature and Society

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## 4.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR – MULK RAJ ANAND

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The period of spanning the 1930s and 1940s was momentous both in the history of Indian nationalism and in the history of the Indian novel in English. The fiction of the 1930s and 1940s is dominated by the voice of Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) who was born in Peshawar of Undivided India. He studied in University College, London and did his Ph.D. from the Cambridge University, UK. He developed his friendship with the Bloomsbury group; which was made up of English writers, intellectuals, and philosophers. Anand was a good friend of George Orwell, who is famous for his novel *Animal Farm*. Anand returned to India in the year 1946, he supported India's Freedom Struggle by his writings. He was an Indian writer, who chose to write his works in English language. He was one of the first India-based writers in English to gain international readership. He has been awarded with the prestigious Padma Bhushan and International Peace Prize.

Anand was a novelist, short story writer and an autobiographer also. Some of his notable novels are *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942).

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## 4.3 ABOUT THE NOVEL – UNTOUCHABLE

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The novel *Untouchable* was published in 1935; it was Mulk Raj Anand's first novel. It happens to be the first novel written by Mulk Raj Anand under the deep influence of Mahatma Gandhi. The genesis of Anand's first novel recounts his decisive shift from Bloomsbury to Sabarmati. It is possibly Anand's most accomplished novels. The novel is set in Bulashah, a fictional town of India. This novel depicts a realistic picture of the injustices prevalent in the Indian society of that time. It depicts the sufferings of the lower-caste people of India, Bakha is the protagonist, a young boy who is sweeper and cleans latrines. Bakha becomes the representative of the downtrodden and outcaste people. These sections of people suffer because they are by birth, considered as outcastes by the upper-caste Hindus. The story of this novel revolves around a single day in the life of Bakha. By birth he belongs to a lower-caste family, by profession he is a toilet-cleaner. This novel presents an account of the humiliation and struggle that he and others like him have to go through, due to the hypocrisy and artificiality of the upper-caste. The lower-caste people were not allowed to draw water from the well, entry in the temple was prohibited, their touch to things or other people was considered polluted; hence they were called 'Untouchables'. Bakha was subjected to mental and physical abuse by the upper-caste Hindus. Bakha struggles with the ill-treatment received by the people of the village; and desires to pursue a better life by educating himself.

### 4.3.1 Central Characters :

**Bakha :** *Untouchable* is an exemplary novel dealing with the nastiest evil of Indian society i.e., untouchability executed by the varna system

advocated by *The Laws of Manu*. Bakha the hero of the novel, an untouchable epitomizes the lowest strata of Indian Society. Bakha is the protagonist, a central figure and character, around whom the story is woven. Bakha is an introspective young sweeper who lives in the outcastes' colony in a small cantonment town in northern India. Bakha's day-to-day labor is to clean the latrines more than twice a day— a job detested by the upper caste people. The novel portrays the events that happen in one day of Bakha's life. A sensitive boy, Bakha suffers a great deal of degradation at the hands of caste –Hindus. The pretense and hypocrisy of the Brahmin priest who curses him for contaminating the temple by his standing outside the door and who does not mind mistreating his sister Sohni irritate him. When he touches Lallji in the market inadvertently, the latter slaps him. When he finally encounters Colonel Hutchinson, the Christian Missionary, Mahatma Gandhi and Iqbal Nath Sarshar, he begins to dream of becoming an honorable man. The novel is a powerful indictment on the caste discrimination and hypocrisy of the Hindus, especially Brahmins. A chain of humiliating experiences leave Bakha searching for some yet unknown release from the degradation of his life. He is the representative of the down-trodden, underdogs who suffer injustices due to the social–evil of caste–discrimination. He struggles to search and establish his own identity, so that he can find the significance of his life.

**Lakha :** Bakha's father, is the head of all Bulashah sweepers and toilet–cleaners. He is a submissive person, who quietly accepts the inferior status of his community and the ill–treatments of the upper–caste.

**Sohni :** Bakha's sister is an attractive woman, who takes care of the family and does the household chores. She is molested by the Hindu priest Pandit Kalinath. Her character is important because the author exposes the corruption and double–standards of the upper–caste Hindus through her.

**Charat Singh :** This character is an exception from the upper–caste Hindus. Charat Singh is a 'havaladar' in the army, as well as a good hockey player. He is a kind–hearted person and treats Bakha affectionately. One of Bakha's idols, and his personality is humorous. At the beginning of the novel he humiliates Bakha to clean the latrines but later on he gives Bakha a brand new hockey stick. His inclination to share his afternoon tea with Bakha shows his lack of conviction in untouchability.

**Iqbal Nath Sarshar :** Sarshar is a young poet with revolutionary ideas. He is against the practice of untouchability. According to him, a new technology of flush system in toilets will help to remove this evil, because then there will be no need for a certain caste of people to clean the toilets, dirt and filth of others.

### 4.3.2 Literary Analysis of Untouchable :

The main theme of this novel is 'untouchability'. The people of the untouchable caste were sweepers, washermen, barbers, and grass-cutters. One day, Bakha accidentally touches an upper-caste Hindu in a market place, that person is infuriated and abuses Bakha by addressing him as 'swine' and 'dirty dog'. Bakha feels ashamed and is angry; but is hardly able to retaliate.

This novel can be considered as a psychological novel, because it provides a vivid account of Bakha's thought process, ponderings and wanderings of a day in his life. It helps the readers to see a larger picture as well as innate perspectives of Bakha's character.

The imagery of the sun and a river frequently occur in the novel. So it can be analyzed that the sun is the symbol of life-force and vitality, contrastingly, these qualities are missing in the lives of Bakha's community. A river is a symbol of flow and changing times, it conveys that the grief and sufferings of the outcastes will eradicate with the passage of time.

Since Anand is an Indian writer in English, he retains Indianness through the usage of Hindi and Punjabi words in this English language novel. For e.g. 'ghar', 'jalebi', 'Harijan'. Through this he represents the realistic and relatable picture of the Indian society.

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### 4.4 UNTOUCHABLE AND RELATIONSHIP OF LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

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As we know that 'literature holds up a mirror to the society', here the literary form, a novel *Untouchable* also shows us the mirror of the society; by depicting the social evils prevalent at that time in the Indian society.

*Untouchable* holds up a mirror to the realistic scenario of caste-discrimination existing in the Indian society.

Bakha and his community is considered as the 'untouchables'. An upper-caste throws a chapatti towards Bakha, like one would throw towards a dog. Bakha initially loved an upper-caste girl, whom he can't marry because of caste-discrimination; and he belongs to the lower-caste. When Bakha accidentally touches an upper-caste Hindu in a market-place, that person abuses Bakha. Bakha is shattered by the incident and bursts out in anger : "Why are we always abused ? The sanitary inspector 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 caste." Untouchability was one of the most evil practices of caste system in India. Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar have taken steps to eradicate this evil, due to which socially and economically backward class people suffered.

Anand captures the predicament of the untouchables; when through Bakha he reveals that the the outcastes were denied even the basic need of life, water. In most of the situations in the novel, Bakha remains helpless, but says : "All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused ?

Because we are sweepers. I am a sweeper, sweeper—untouchable I am an Untouchable!”

The author provides the readers with the different solutions for these untouchables. Mulk Raj Anand includes various views which can prove to be the remedies for the ill-fated lower-castes of the Indian society. The first and foremost is education. Gandhiji's view on untouchability is that, he considers the practice of untouchability as a sin, so it must be abolished; and according to Dr. Ambedkar, education is a tool which can make the lower-caste aware of their situation, so that they can raise their voice against injustices. The second solution is that of religious conversion. Christianity is devoid of caste-system, so Bakha is advised to convert to Christianity, so that he can be free from all the atrocities. The third solution is technology. The rise of technology with which the dirt and filth can be cleaned automatically through toilet flush machines, can prove to be a remedy for the predicaments of the untouchables. These solutions provide a ray of hope to Bakha and thousands of lower-castes like Bakha, who suffer the physical, mental, and emotional tortures at the hands of the upper-castes of the India society.

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#### 4.5 KEY WORDS

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**Untouchable** : not able or allowed to be touched or affected; of or belonging to the lowest-caste Hindu group or the people outside the caste system.

**Downtrodden** : oppressed or treated badly by people in power.

**Inhumane** : without compassion for misery or suffering; cruel.

**Protagonist** : the leading character or one of the major characters in a play, film, novel, etc.

**Outcaste** : a person who is expelled from their caste.

**Hypocrisy** : the practice of claiming to have higher standards or more noble beliefs than is the actual case.

**Molest** : assault or abuse (a person, especially a woman or child).

**Eradicate** : destroy completely; put an end to.

**Reformation** : the action or process of reforming an institution or practice, changing for a better situation.

**Stigma** : dishonour

**Endowed** : gifted

**Monetarily** : money wise

**Dalit** : down trodden

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#### 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, you have learnt about the author and his novel, Mulk Raj Anand and Untouchable; respectively. The novel depicts the predicaments of the lower-castes, known as untouchables. Bakha is the representative of that community. He is abused and suffers injustices because he is a toilet-

cleaner, and thus he is untouchable. The author provides the readers with the alternatives which can bring reform in the society and eradicate the evil practices.

The realistic picture of the Indian society, showing main concern towards the social vice of untouchability and caste-discrimination and its remedies are portrayed in *Untouchable*, which is a literary novel. This establishes the relationship of interdependence and interconnectedness between literature and society; as 'Literature mirrors society, society mirrors literature'.

***Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand From the Point of View of Relationship between Literature and Society**

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#### 4.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

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1. Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2001.
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untouchable\\_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untouchable_(novel))
3. ePathshala, MHRD, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHNF4ThCmwY>

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#### 4.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS.

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1. Prepare a brief note on Mulk Raj Anand and his works.  
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2. Give a brief note on the novel *Untouchable*.  
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3. Prepare a character-sketch of Bakha.  
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4. What are the various injustices practiced on the untouchables ?  
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5. What are the alternatives to bring a social reform in the society ?  
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6. How *Untouchable* holds up a mirror to the society ?  
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## ANSWERS

1. Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) was born in Peshawar of Undivided India. He was one of the first India-based writers in English to gain international readership. He has been awarded with the prestigious Padma Bhushan and International Peace Prize. Anand was a novelist, short story writer and an autobiographer also. Some of his notable novels are *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942).
2. The novel *Untouchable* was published in 1935; it was Mulk Raj Anand's first novel. The novel is set in Bulashah, a fictional town of India. This novel depicts a realistic picture of the injustices prevalent in the Indian society of that time.
3. Bakha is the protagonist, a young boy who is sweeper and cleans latrines. Bakha becomes the representative of the downtrodden and outcaste people. He struggles to search and establish his own identity, so that he can find the significance of his life. When Bakha accidentally touches an upper-caste Hindu in a market-place, that person abuses Bakha. He says, "All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused ? Because we are sweepers. I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an Untouchable!"
4. The untouchables were not allowed to draw water from the well, entry in the temple was prohibited, their touch to things or other person was considered polluted. The basic need of water was also prohibited. The untouchable girls were molested by the upper-castes. These untouchables suffered the abuses of physical, mental, and emotional kinds being inflicted on them.
5. Mulk Raj Anand includes various views which can prove to be the remedies for the ill-fated lower-castes of the Indian society. The first and foremost is education. Gandhiji's view on untouchability is that, he considers the practice of untouchability as a sin, so it must be abolished; and according to Dr. Ambedkar, education is a tool which can make the lower-caste aware of their situation, so that they can raise their voice against injustices. The second solution is that of religious conversion. Christianity is devoid of caste-system, so Bakha is advised to convert to Christianity, so that he can be free from all the atrocities. The third solution is technology. The rise of technology with which the dirt and filth can be cleaned automatically through toilet flush machines, can prove to be a remedy for the predicaments of the untouchables.
6. The novel *Untouchable* depicts the predicaments of the lower-castes, known as untouchables. The realistic picture of the Indian society, showing main concern towards the social vice of untouchability and caste-discrimination and its remedies are portrayed in *Untouchable*, which is a literary novel. This establishes the relationship of interdependence and interconnectedness between literature and society; as 'Literature mirrors society, society mirrors literature'.

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