
Superstition, a Preventive Way for Civilization: A Critical Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract

Superstition is the belief that particular events happen in a way that cannot be explained by reason or science. According to superstition, breaking a mirror brings bad luck. Traditionally it has been continuing from ancient to modern. And this belief makes us paralytic from all rational thinking. Therefore we lose our stamina to develop ourselves. *Untouchable* is one kind of superstitions that makes a separation among the people in the society. Though we know better it is not a rational idea but cannot remove from our mind as we suffer from a lack of conscience. It affects in our everyday life that cannot provide a superior thinking. If we make a journey through *Untouchable* an Indian novel by Mulk Raj Anand we can see how it makes a suffering in the life of Bakha and his family. Bakha the novel protagonist is untouchable as he belongs to the lower class and traditionally carries the profession of sweeper. Anand here depicts our uncivilized manners through the class struggle. The paralyzing and polarizing difference between the various caste levels shape Bakha's day and fuel the narrative. Class and caste play a vital role in every interaction Bakha has over the course of his day. So the novel throws a message to the society to become conscious from superstitious idea. And it tries to make the equality among all by leaving the unjust system of society. Thus my paper seeks to pinpoint all these various issues which are not only valid but necessary to eradicate the evil of superstition from our society.

Keywords- *Superstition, Religion, Casteism, Culture, Gender Discrimination*

Introduction

Customs are the manifestation of culture. The disclosure of traditional customs is the source of all evil work according to the experiments of science. And these kinds of activities create the world into dark. Thus this darkness cannot be erased from mindset of human being. Naturally people believe these incidents are the result of sin that presided over the man by God. In this regard the word ‘superstition’ shapes itself into a big frame where religion, casteism, colour, gender discrimination etc. have been belonging since the ancient history of the world. There is no existence of rational thinking in superstition. It is totally irrational, arises from ignorance, a misunderstanding of science or causality, a positive belief in fate or magic, or fear of that which is unknown. The word superstition is first used in English in the 15th century, modeled after an earlier French superstition. Due to the pejorative implications of the term, items referred to in common parlance as superstition, are commonly referred to as folk belief in folkloristics.

In the language of Richard Hoggart there is a peculiarity in our everyday common speech. And he has observed the oddity of a common speech habit where he shows us that the fondness for employing ready-made sayings and phrasings whenever we open our mouths, a disinclination to form our own sentences “From scratch”, unless that becomes inescapable. He explores the idioms and epigrams in the poverty setting of the early working class English. He discusses related idioms and epigrams and their evolution from pre-war to present. Hoggart identifies the sayings and special nuances of the English working class people that have made them identifiable as such, from the rude and obscene to the intellectual and imaginative. Hoggart also examines the areas of tolerance, local morality and public morality, elaborating on current usage of words that have evolved from the 14th through the 18th centuries. He touches on religion superstition and time, the beliefs that animate language. And finally he focuses on aphorisms and social change and the emerging idioms of relativism, concluding that many adages still in use seem to refuse to die.

Richard Hoggart clearly explains how a ready-made saying or phrase can be a part of superstition. It then continues and enters into the area of tradition. Whenever we are in danger we remember that this has been said by our elders and we cannot disobey. If we look for such more examples of superstition then we can go through the text *Untouchable* that deals with how superstitious idea leads the rural lives.

Mulk Raj Anand was a prolific Indian fiction writer and his fiction has been shaped by what he himself calls ‘the double burden on my shoulders, the Alps of the European tradition and the Himalaya of my Indian past’. His literary career was launched by family tragedy, instigated by the rigidity of the caste

system known for his realistic and sympathetic portrayal of the poor in India. If we make our journey through his first novel *Untouchable* published in 1935, we find that it paints the picture of true Indian society. It not only portrays the social picture but also the suffering of a family where we found an eventful day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper from the outcastes' colony of a north Indian cantonment town. And this eventful day of Bakha begins with his father yelling at him to get out of bed and clean the latrines, "Get up, oh you Bakha, you son of a pig, Get up and attend to the latrines or the Sepoys will be angry". (*Untouchable*, 05)

During the course of his day various major and minor tragedies occur, causing him to mature and turn his gaze inward. As he goes through the days humiliating routine, a life of torment and degradation, a range of solution by way of release are suggested. After getting up from bed Bakha goes to clean the latrine of Charat Singh, a high-caste athlete. Though he also yells at Bakha for neglecting his cleaning duties but not so cruel as he has a changeable personality. So he tells him to return later in the day to claim a hockey stick as a gift. Later Bahka goes into town to sweep the streets and accidentally brushes up against a high-caste man, who is furious that he has been touched by someone like Bahka:

'Keep to the side of the road, you, low-caste vermin!' Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!' (*Untouchable*- 38)

Thus the man berates and hits Bahka until a Muslim vendor, who has no regard for the Hindu caste system, breaks it up. It really touches our heart by seeing the inhuman behavior of the gentleman. Again some questions arise if someone is touched, does he or she become untouchable? If someone is untouchable is there no right to live in the society? Who makes the division of high caste and low caste among them, none can say and none can explain the cause as we have no words.

Bahka wanders around town, begging for food and performing menial chores in return before becoming too disgusted with high-caste people's cruelty to continue. At home, he tells his father about the high-caste man who hit him. His father reminds him that a high-caste doctor once saved Bahka's life.

Bahka wanders away from home, taking shelter under a tree. A white man, Colonel Hutchinson, approaches him. The head of the local Salvation Army, he invites Bahka to church. Bahka agrees, but on the steps of the church Colonel Hutchinson's wife sees them and pitches a fit about her husband bringing another "blackie" to their church:

Oh, is that what you've been doing, going to this blackies again! I give you up. Really you're incorrigible. I should have thought you would have learned your lesson from the way those Congress wallahs beat you last week!
(*Untouchable*- 122)

After hearing the words 'bhangi' and 'chamar' Bakha feels shame and insulted. Humiliated Bahka then leaves.

Where power lies in position of authority in key economic and political institutions, where the psychological difference that sets elites apart is that they have personal resources, where the elite are resourceful and strive to make the government work who dare to protest against socio-political condition while the rest are incompetent and do not have the capabilities of governing themselves like the family of Bakha as they are not in elite class.

Really we have no words to say after observing the inhuman behavior of the elite class. Thus this observation makes us in a dilemma and some questions repeatedly arise in our mind that Is there any sign of low and high class in the body of a man whether he is poor or rich? Are they really low caste people or their poverty forced them to belong into the lower caste? How strange it is! Because we have no answer to provide a comfortable environment in the society where we together belong and depend on each other. Truly the matter is sensitive and considerable.

On the other hand we get the same picture for Sohini, Bakha's sister when she goes to draw water from the communal well. There she must wait at the very end of the line why because she is outcaste and untouchable as she is belonging in the lower class society:

'The outcastes are not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well as if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the near-by brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream'. (*Untouchable*- 14)

And she must wait until a local priest, Pundit Kali Nath, assists her.

Casteism is one of the rural social problems, which is very peculiar to the Indian society. Indian society is a country of various religions. Each religion is sub-divided into different castes and these castes again into sub-castes. The culture of each caste varies though they all belong to one religion. Among these castes, certain are given a high status and others a low status, depending upon their caste occupation. In such a society, there is every possibility for caste conflicts to occur. These conflicts have their origin in casteism, which refers to the hatred of one caste by the other, or the attempts made by the

members of one caste to gain personal advantages to the detriment of interests of the other caste members. Though conflicts sometimes brings development according to the word of Jakobsons who explains the development of human language through the discourse of two fundamental opposite poles (Metaphor and Metonymy) but in some cases we cannot get any reliable thought over the conflict, rather we enter into the superstitious idea.

In brief, casteism refers to one-sided loyalty in favour of a particular caste. Casteism leads the members of one caste to exploit the members of other caste for their own vested interest in the name of superiority or inferiority. Such as Bakha remembered the past:

‘He had been told they were sahibs, superior people. He had felt that to put on their clothes made one a sahib too. So he tried to copy them in everything, to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances’. (*Untouchable*- 03)

According to R. N. Sharma, ‘casteism is a blind group loyalty towards one’s own caste or sub-caste, which does not care for the interests of other castes, and seeks to realize the social, economic, political and other interests of its own group’.

Using Bakha's story as a vehicle, Anand challenges the barriers and rules that inhibit the lives of untouchables and argues for the education of untouchables. And it can be more cleared when Anand puts Bakha who said to himself:

For them I am a sweeper, sweeper- Untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! They always abuse us by saying this word because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. (*Untouchable*- 43)

Though India’s caste system is still in place today, books like *Untouchable* raised awareness about the crushing inequalities and injustices the system fosters. This has resulted in the passage of numerous anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action initiatives along caste lines in contemporary India. Furthermore, the appearance of one Mahatma Gandhi in the novel explicitly places the book in a distinctive historical context. Finally, from a literary standpoint, *Untouchable* stands out because of its inclusion of Punjabi and Hindu idioms in English.

At the concluding part we can clearly say that man is a social animal. Traditionally people are enriched from uncivilized to civilized life style. And there is no end of this habit among the people in our society. Most of the people believe that conventional things are the source of all development such as

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education, culture, civilization etc. But here arises a simple question, really we are in development or we gain ability to change our mind from evil concepts like superstition, religion, casteism, gender discrimination, social customs etc. Actually here is not a little bit of solution but different kinds of problem are available. Though we are growing mature in education, technology but we cannot remove 'the traditional social customs' from our intellectual mind. Truly we are trying to reach in a digital situation but on the other hand we are not able to break up the relation with tradition. Thus modernity breaks its development. And civilization takes a pause.

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