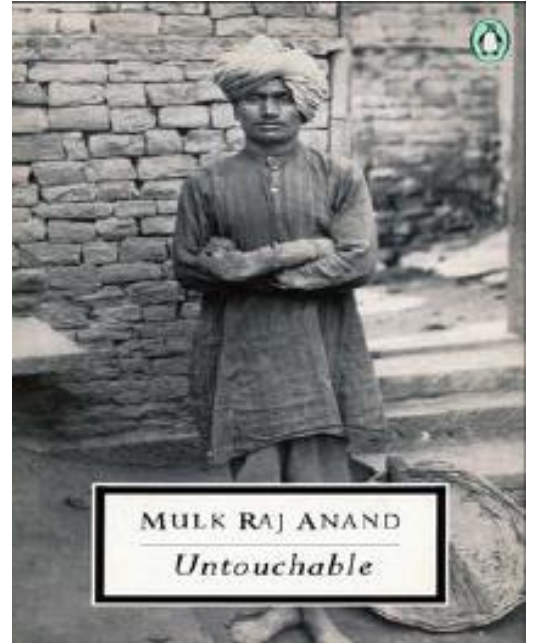


Untouchable

- Veeru

'Untouchable' was the first novel that had presented the sufferings of the dalits to the world. This novel was written by Mulk Raj Anand in English in 1935. He was educated in the universities of Lahore, London and Cambridge; lived in England for many years and finally settled in a village in Western India after the War.

Mulk Raj Anand was born in the caste of Kshatriyas – But as a child he played with the children of sweepers and scavengers attached to an Indian regiment. He had practically seen how the Hindu caste system had been humiliating them at every turn of their lives.



In his novel he made his main concern for 'the creatures in the lower depths of Indian society who once were men and women: the rejected by the society, who had no way to articulate their anguish against the oppressors'.

Mulk Raj Anand was one of the founder members of the Indian Progressive Writers Association (IPWA) and one of the members who drafted the declaration of the IPWA.

He directly attacked the caste system, which was so devilish to outcaste those who carry and clean the human feces and help to dispose the unclean human products.

The sweepers and the latrine cleaners- the scavengers - belong to the outcastes of the Hindu caste system, they are of the lowest caste among them and they are looked down even by the other outcastes.

Mulk Raj took up the wretched life of a young scavenger in an Indian city as the theme of his novel and described a day in his life with every realistic circumstance.

As E.M.Forster in his preface to the novel stated, "the scavenger is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born in to a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the

consolations of his religion". The scavenger as he walks along the public roads it is his duty to call out and warn them out that he is coming. These inhuman and harsh conditions imposed on them by the caste system made the scavengers to for me the brunt of their misery with a resigned air of fatalism. They only get abuse and derision where ever they go. They inherited the spirit of resignation through the long centuries down through counters outcaste ancestors. Serfdom of thousands of years had humbled them. They have come down in the social scale due to their profession imposed on them by the system.

Mulk Raj took up this as a subject of his novel and he exposed the inhuman nature, hypocrisy and beastly nature of the social system, ruthlessly attacking the orthodox Hindu caste system which is supposed to be based on Hindu scriptures and the CODE OF MANU, the basis of abhorrent caste system.

He exposed how the outcastes do not have their own wells for water, since they cannot financially afford to dig them and how they had to wait at the water wells of the upper caste Hindus for hours craving for the pity of the 'gentlemen' of upper castes to draw and fill their pitcher with water.

He also exposed, how the children of outcaste have no schools to go and get education, and how they are barred from the schools of the upper castes, as the children of the upper castes will be contaminated by the touch of the low caste children. Moreover he showed how the teachers wouldn't teach the out castes, lest they should touch the fingers which guided the students across the leaves of out caste's books and be polluted. Mulk Raj exposed this cruelty of orthodox Hindus and their system which forced the children of scavengers to resign themselves to the hereditary lives of their craft – to work at the latrines from the age of six itself.

He depicted vividly, how the scavengers have to beg for their daily bread, in the back lanes of the residents of the city, after cleaning the drains in the gullies, crying "Bread for the sweeper mother! Bread for the sweeper!", till the lady of the house shows pity and throws a chapati or two to them.

He also described how these out-castes get the foal leavings of sepoy who wash their hands in their round brass trays over the leavings of bread and salad, and then throw them to the out-castes.

He also described how these down-trodden, under dogs show their gratefulness even at a single act of charity made to them by the well offs. He showed how these oppressed react to a simple act of kindness as a great generosity. In the story the scavenger boy Bhaka was given a hockey bat as a present by Havildar Charat Singh a caste Hindu. Mulk Raj describes the reaction of Bhaka who overcame by the man's kindness as "Bhaka was grateful, grateful, haltingly grateful, falteringly grateful, stumblingly grateful, so grateful that he

didn't know how he could walk ten yards to the corner to be out of sight of be benevolent and generous Havildar". This shows how Mulk RaJ was masterful in his literary narration, particularly analyzing the psychology of an oppressed under dog and his reaction for a simple act of kindness. The 'untouchable' is a masterpiece of literature with a heart sending content about the despicable caste system, as well as in its literary form of narration.

The one day bitter experiences of Bhaka, a young scavenger boy were like this:

In the morning, he was insulted and abused because as he was walking along, a man happened to touch Bhaka and claimed to have been polluted. He gave a blow to Bhaka. A crowd gathered and abused him. The priest in the temple tried to molest Bhaka's sister Sohini and when she screamed in protest he came out shouting 'polluted, polluted'. A woman of the big house in the silver smiths gully threw a chapati at Bhaka from the fourth story. While he was worrying about these insults and decision, a Salvationist missionary, Hutchinson approaches him. He tells Bhaka that Christ receives all men irrespective of caste, but Bhaka has to confess his sins to the missionary. Bhaka didn't like the idea of being called a sinner. He had committed no sin that he could remember. Moreover the missionary cannot tell Bhaka who Christ is. Bhaka gets bored and felt it was no solution to his problems.

The second solution came from Mahatma Gandhi in a public meeting held in the town in the evening to which Bhaka attended. Gandhi too says that all Indians are equal and narrates how a Brahmin boy was doing sweeper's work in his ashram. But Gandhi advices untouchable scavengers that they have to purify their lives, they should cultivate the habits of cleanliness and they must get rid of their bad habits of drinking and gambling and eating Carrion. Bhaka felt that it is unfair on the part of Gandhi in blaming them. Somehow the solution of Gandhi too had not attracted him completely; but seemed to be hopeful.

Then while he was leaving after the end of the public meeting, Bhaka heard a heated discussion between an England returned barrister, and a modernist poet. The poet says "since the sociological basis of caste having been broken down by the British-Indian Penal Code, which recognizes the rights of every man before a court, caste is now mainly governed by profession. When the scavengers change their profession, they will no longer remain untouchables. If the machine which clears the dung system without anyone having to handle it – the flush system is introduced then the sweepers can be free from stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society". Though Bhaka couldn't understand everything the poet said, he liked the idea of flush system, so that he could clean the latrines without

directly handling the feces. Bhaka returns home thinking of Gandhi and the machine – flush system.

In this way Mulk Raj portrayed vividly the wretched life of a scavenger in pre-independence India imposed by the age old caste-system and discussed the then propounded solutions to the heinous system of untouchability to no avail.

Even after 75 years of so called independence to India, the problem of untouchability and atrocities against out castes- the Dalits, are continuing unabated in various forms.

So the 'Untouchable' of Mulk Raj Anand is relevant even in the present age of 'globalised' world under the dictates of imperialist, neo economic policies of liberalization!

It is a very valuable novel for all to understand the problem of untouchability.