

# The Progressive and Untouchable Body: A Reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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**Abstract:** The so-called Indian Renaissance in the nineteenth century was characterized by a reform movement that attempted to rid society of its old orthodoxies regarding caste, class and gender. Women's education, widow re-marriage, equality before God were some of the issues taken up by the leaders in different parts of the country. Yet strangely enough in the creative literature of that period the low caste people and the outcastes are virtually invisible. The situation was not very different in the early decades of the twentieth century. Except for a Telugu novel *Mala Palli* (1921) by Unnava Lakshminarayana which deals with the Malas, an untouchable community of Andhra Pradesh no novelist in India seems to have focussed on the large section of the dispossessed and exploited people. Premchand's novel *Rangbhumi*, (Hindi: 1925) was the next attempt made by an Indian writer to write about caste and untouchability questions. Though Sivarama Karanth's *Chomanadudi* (Kannada: 1933) is another attempt to depict the life of an untouchable family, its English translation was not available till 1978. From that point of view Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) seems to be a pioneering attempt to give visibility to the silent and shadowy community who maintain cleanliness and health of the upper caste people.

The present paper looks into how Indian upper caste writers who were privileged to write in English treated Dalits in their creativity. Taking Mulk Raj Anand's famous novel, *Untouchable* for detailed analysis the essay raises questions, such as, how do the progressive writers like Mulk Raj Anand treat caste as fictional subject? Why is it so important to talk about caste and untouchability in the first half of the twentieth century?, etc.

*Keywords:* Caste, untouchable, progressive, Indian writing in English

The so-called Indian Renaissance in the nineteenth century was characterized by a reform movement that attempted to rid society of its old orthodoxies regarding caste, class and gender. Women's education, widow re-marriage, equality before God were some of the issues taken up by the leaders in different parts of the country. Yet strangely enough in the creative literature of that period the low caste people and the outcastes are virtually invisible. Because education was not available to them, they formed no part of the readership. And since caste Hindu life had been organized to keep them at the peripheries, they did not figure in the Indian language novels about social and domestic life that began to be written in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The situation was not very different in the early decades of the twentieth century. Except for a Telugu novel *Mala Palli* (1921) by Unnava Lakshminarayana which is said to deal with the Malas, an untouchable community of Andhra Pradesh no novelist in India seems

to have focused on the large section of the dispossessed and exploited people. Premchand's novel *Rangbhumi*, (Hindi: 1925) was the next attempt made by an Indian writer to write about caste and untouchability questions. Though Sivarama Karanth's *Chomanadudi* (Kannada: 1933) is another attempt to depict the life of an untouchable family, its English translation was not available till 1978. From that point of view Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) seems to be a pioneering attempt to give visibility to the silent and shadowy community who maintain cleanliness and health of the upper caste people. After him Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* (Malayalam: 1948), Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* (Odia: 1948), U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* (Kannada:1965) and *Bharathipura* (Kannada:1973), Shanta Rajeswar Rao's *Children of God* (English:1976), Romen Basu's *Outcast* (English:1986), Bonomali Goswami's *Untouchables: A Novel* (English:1994), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (English:1995), Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (English:1997), Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010) are some Indian novels where Dalits are the central characters. In recent years, however, we have a new perspective on the lives of the lower castes in the literature written by these exploited people themselves which is collectively known as Dalit Literature. The present paper looks into how Indian upper caste writers who were privileged to write in English treated Dalits in their creativity. Taking Mulk Raj Anand's famous novel, *Untouchable* for detailed analysis several questions will be raised in the essay, such as, how do the progressive writers like Mulk Raj Anand treat caste as fictional subject? Why is it so important to talk about caste and untouchability in the first half of the twentieth century? What was Mulk Raj Anand's perspective as a progressive writer to bring an end to caste exploitation in Indian society? These and many other questions will be asked throughout the essay. But before we discuss the novel at length it is important to understand the primacy of caste and its off-shoot untouchability.

### **Caste and Untouchability**

The ancient dharma sastras (religious texts) of the Hindus not only defended the institution of Varnashrama, but also imposed a series of social, political economic and religious restrictions in the lower castes making the untouchables completely dependent on those above them. They were relegated only to menial occupations. They lived outside the village and fed on the left-overs of the high caste people. Physical contact with untouchables was said to be "polluting" and worse still, even their shadows were considered defiling. Even in the early part of this century reports are coming that the untouchables have no access to public facilities, such as wells, rivers, schools, roads, markets, post offices and courts. Even for a basic necessity like water they are helplessly dependent on the good will of the higher castes. They are denied entry into temples and rest houses and shrines connected to temples are also beyond their reach. Comforts such as riding on horseback, use of bicycles, the use of palanquins and goods connected with luxury such as umbrellas, foot wear, gold and silver ornaments, etc. are forbidden for them.<sup>1</sup> The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their neck so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their foot prints would be erased before others set their eyes on them.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the untouchables lived a life full of physical degradation, insults and mental humiliation. The few writers who attempted to portray their lives tended to be driven either by their zeal for social reform or by sentimental compassion. Rarely did a writer

take up an untouchable character and treated him realistically like an ordinary human being full of vitality, hope as well as despair and perplexity. Mulk Raj Anand is important because he attempted precisely this.

That this attempt should be made by an Indian who writes in English is also a fact worth noticing. It may well be that this new branch of the Indian novel, not being burdened with an existing tradition, could strike out in new directions, and deal with themes customarily not considered 'literary'. It is also possible that English not being the language of daily use at that level of society, helped to distance the writer from his material, and in any case the word 'untouchable' was much more sanitized and free of stigma than any of its Indian language equivalents.

### Indian Novels in English

The Indian novel in English is a relatively new phenomenon which gathered momentum only in the twentieth century. The three major writers who emerged in the thirties are Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. India, as Jawaharlal Nehru has observed in *The Discovery of India* (1946) does not have a monolithic culture. The writings of these three writers give us glimpses of three different orders of social reality. Raja Rao began his writings with the exploration of the freedom struggle and the influence of Gandhi in a village of Karnataka in *Kanthapura* (1938). Some of the characters in this novel are untouchables who join the Gandhian movement, but they are seen from the perspective of a sympathetic Brahmin widow, who is the narrator.

All the later works of Raja Rao highlight the Sanskrit and Brahmanic heritage of the past and the present. Mulk Raj Anand writes about just the other face of the same world - he focuses on the wrongs that were perpetrated by the so called great tradition. R. K. Narayan stays somewhere in between, concentrating on the middle class and their ordinary preoccupations in a place that is neither rural nor metropolitan.

Mulk Raj Anand is a prolific writer and has written a large number of novels and short stories. Other than imaginative fiction, his books cover a whole range of subjects - from Indian curries to Hindu view of art. This breadth of interest makes him unusual among Indian novelists.

Right from the beginning of his writing career, Anand is known for his concern with social injustice. He deals with the working classes and underdogs of the society and often he gives them a central place in his creative work. In this connection Srinivasa Iyenger writes of Anand, "In writing of the pariahs and the bottom dogs rather than of the elites and the sophisticated, Anand had ventured into a territory that had been largely ignored till then by Indian writers."<sup>3</sup> Elena J. Kallinnikove writes that, "Anand believes neither in Shiva, nor in Jesus Christ, but in ordinary man. It is precisely a simple toiler whom Anand praises in his works."<sup>4</sup> The very titles of his works testify to this fact: *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *The Village*, *The Barber's Trade Union*, etc.

In his first novel *Untouchable* (1935), Anand deals with exploitation based on caste. He shows here an untouchable family that has been inhumanly deprived of all the basic social necessities of living. While the novel examines the nature of the degradation imposed on the lower castes by the caste Hindus, it also expresses the upper caste's hypocrisy and double standards. The novel will be discussed in detail later.

In his next novel *Coolie* (1936), Anand analyses the problem of oppression in terms of class. The protagonist, Munno, though he belongs to a higher caste, undergoes a lot of suffering due to poverty. In the novel Munno declares, "Castes did not matter. I am a

Kshatriya and I am poor, and Verma, a Brahmin, is servant boy, a menial, because he is poor. No! Caste does not matter....There must only be two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor.”<sup>5</sup>

The next novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) deals with the miseries of the migrant labourers in a Tea Estate, who are displaced, exploited and victimized. This was a subsidiary thread in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* also, where the Skeffington Coffee Estate served as the opposite of the agrarian village Kanthapura, one a conglomeration of rootless workers, and the other an organic community, hierarchical but human. In Anand's novel *Gangu*, a worker of the tea garden is shot dead while rescuing his daughter from the physical assault of the supervisor of the plantation.

Thereafter Anand wrote a trilogy: *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickles* (1942). All three novels trace the growth and experience of a Sikh peasant boy, Lalu Singh. Lalu is a child in the first book and grows to be a young man in the second. In the third novel, he graduates into manhood and travels outside the country as a soldier. On his return he becomes politically conscious and fights against the injustice done to the entire peasant community. In these three novels Anand shows the longing of an individual for a free world.

Anand's next novel, *The Big Heart* (1945) portrays the marginalization of the village artisan with the onset of industrialization. The setting up of factory poses a big threat to the lives of the coppersmiths. In the ensuing battle between the industrialists and Ananta, the rebel leader championing the cause of coppersmiths, Ananta meets with death at the end of the novel.

Anand returns to the problem of untouchability twenty five years later in his novel *The Road* (1961). The recurrence of the theme in Anand's works points to its perennial significance especially because it involves a large section of Indian populace to whose condition India's attainment of independence has made little difference. Though Bhikhu, the protagonist of *The Road* is a road worker and not a sweeper as Bakha is in *Untouchable*, his condition is no different from Bakha's which the novel *The Road* purports to emphasize. What is significant in the novel is that it views Bhikhu's situation as expressive of the chronic malaise with which Indian society is stricken - a malaise which makes it difficult for him to survive with dignity and with unimpaired self-esteem. Bhikhu has to contend with the ideology of a power structure which tends to perpetuate itself through the maintenance of the status quo. That is the reason why despite his resentment and attempt to seek expression for his rebellious spirit he finds himself fighting a losing battle. The road becomes the central issue with which the protagonist has to contend.

Thus, in Anand's tension-ridden world we always see a struggle for social justice going on although the attempts at resistance are not always successful. We also see the traditional Hindu society being posited as the enemy of the lower castes. In Anand's rural novels the villains are several: the high caste Brahmin or the priest, the landlord and the moneylender, all of whom squeeze the poor peasant or worker to the utmost. Even if Anand cannot show the underdog winning his battle - it would indeed be unrealistic to portray such a victory - by giving us his perspective of the struggle, he imbues these mute victim figures with dignity. In this venture, Mulk Raj Anand has more in common with the first generation of African writers in English like Chinua Achebe who wrote to restore the dignity of his people, reminding them that their past was not one long period of darkness critically exploring the strengths and weakness of his culture. Writing with the same purpose, Anand as a critical insider examines the darker aspects of his own

society. He does not offer a cure for the disease, he merely diagnoses, hoping to raise consciousness about a situation most people in India tend to take for granted. Chekov once wrote in a letter "between the solution of the question and the correct setting of a question, the latter alone is obligatory for the artist".<sup>6</sup> It is with this view that we have to look at Anand's famous novel *Untouchable*.

### **The Making of the Novel *Untouchable***

Anand in his "Afterword" tells us how his novel *Untouchable* came to be written and how it acquired its present shape. "I could not have started off writing my first book, *Untouchable*, if I had not noticed your own sympathy for the outcastes of India in your famous book", writes Anand in a tribute to his revered friend E.M. Foster. And we know from Forster's "preface" to *Untouchable* that this "famous book" is certainly no other than *The Passage to India*. Anand does not elaborate on this further, but as readers of *A Passage to India* we feel that Anand may be thinking of the centrality given to the pankhawala in *A Passage to India*:

"Almost naked, and splendidly formed ... he had strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race rears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god - not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impressed her".<sup>7</sup>

Anand learnt from James Joyce "the stream of consciousness" and the literary techniques, as he himself confesses. Further, the plays of the Irish writers which dealt with peasants, fishermen and slum dwellers also helped Anand. Another great influence on Anand was Mahatma Gandhi whose "editing (and) censoring" gave the novel its final shape. In recognition of this, in later editions Anand dedicates the novel to Gandhi also.

Anand had read the story of the sweeper boy Ukha, written by Gandhi in *Young India*. Anand's hero Bakha, his father Lakha, and his brother Rakha seem to derive their names from the historical Ukha, an untouchable boy serving in the household of Gandhi.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps, the reason why Anand wanted to show the manuscript of the *Untouchable* to Gandhi, but when he came back from England, a different experience awaited him at Gandhi's ashram. Gandhi would not entertain Anand in his ashram until the latter took three vows: not to look at women with desire, not to drink alcohol in the ashram and to clean latrines once a week. Within three months of staying there and practising the vows he had taken, Anand developed a new approach to life. He writes, "I found myself being converted to some sincerity, simplicity and truth and to the love of people". Gandhi suggested that from his manuscript Anand should cut the high sounding passages, the comic and tragic motifs, a deliberated attempt by which the novelist had made a few scenes melodramatic. Thus, the two hundred and fifty pages of the original manuscript was reduced to just a hundred and fifty, the present novel.

### ***Untouchable*: A Critical Reading**

The novel *Untouchable* opens with the description of the outcaste colony which is located at the fringes of the town Bulandshahar and at a considerable distance from the caste Hindu settlements. This reminds us of the description of the similar situation in Sivarama Karanth's Kannada novel *Chomanadudi* (translated into English as *Choma's Drum* by U. K. Kalkur in 1978) where Choma's hut stands in solitary seclusion at the edge of the forest,

because he is a Holeya, an untouchable by birth. The untouchables' quarters are situated outside the village all over India even now because they are considered "polluting". The untouchables live in huts made of mud walls just like the "slumblings and rickety hovels" of the coppersmiths in another novel by Anand *The Big Heart*. The surroundings of the outcaste colony are filthy because the civic amenities are not extended to the untouchables. Anand describes. "There are no drains, no lights, no waters of the marsh and where people live among the latrines of the townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere; of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night pitch-dark."<sup>9</sup> There live the scavengers, leather workers, washer men, barbers, water carrier, and grass-cutters - all are untouchables and they live in miserable and sub-human conditions.

Bakha, the hero of *Untouchable* is born and brought up in these surroundings. Lakha, his father is the Jemadar of all the sweepers in the town and in the cantonment. By profession, they do all the cleaning work in the town and in the cantonment. Socially deprived as they are, they also remain economically poor. Their meagre earnings make them dependent on the upper caste people for their basic need such as food, clothes etc.

Anand gives Bakha, a young man of eighteen, a strong and supple body almost like Forster's pankhawala thereby making him mythical as well as real. Because the lower class people do hard physical labour, their bodies are muscular when young, and bony when old. Anand chooses as his hero an adolescent - a boy at the threshold of manhood - so that he can depict both his childish playfulness, as well as the stirrings of adult passion and questioning.

The novel covers one day - from morning till evening. In this period, Anand presents the various ugly manifestations of the caste system and exposes the hypocrisies of the orthodox Hindu society. By using this narrative device of collapsing many experience within a limited time span, Anand packs his novel with events and introspection. On this crucial day Bakha encounters different forms of discrimination and wakes up, as it were, from an unthinking boyhood when he had taken all his suffering passively as his fate, to a self-reflexive state of manhood.

Everyday Bakha starts his duty much before the day begins. Sleepily and shivering in the cold he starts cleaning the latrines. Daily he has to clean three rows of latrines repeatedly. He is responsible for bringing cleanliness to a place that would otherwise remain filthy and possibly breed diseases. Bakha is an efficient worker who works quickly and earnestly. When he works, "Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass,....What a dexterous work man the onlooker would have said. And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean".<sup>10</sup> Anand writes.

The physical description of Bakha is realistic no doubt, but not untinged by a slight romanticization. This heightening is deliberately done because Anand wants to positively focus on the human potential of the boy. The description reminds us of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Anand is an Indian and Achebe a Nigerian, but both the novelists are writing about a people who were looked down upon and not considered as human beings by the ruling class and the novels want to emphasize and generate their own self-esteem. By remarking, what a dexterous workers the onlooker would have said - Anand reminds us of the attractiveness of hard work and a well - made body. This sentence cannot be taken as a simple realistic statement. It has a lot of complex resonances for a society divided on caste lines. Here the novelist is showing his upper caste readers that beauty is not dependent on its surroundings, that work itself is beautiful.

We also know through his hockey hero Havildar Charat Singh that Bakha plays hockey well. Bakha proves this later in the day when he scores a goal for his team against the 31st Punjabis. Anand uses the motif of game effectively to show a common denominator that unites persons of unequal age and different castes. Also we already know of Bakha's excellent body. That he should be skilful in sports follows naturally.

In spite of the talent Bakha has, he does not get a proper chance to develop his sportsmanship due to his poor socio-economic conditions. Bakha's servility when he salutes Charat Singh in the hope of getting a hockey stick is something the author wants us to be disturbed about. Instead of demanding from the world what is his due, Bakha seems to be overly grateful for small favours:

It is due to the trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers: the weakness of the downtrodden, the helpless of the poor and the indigent sullenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog suddenly illuminated by the prospect of fulfillment of a secret and a long cherished desire.<sup>11</sup>

Anand's anger seems to come from the individualistic tradition of Western civilization, rather than from the hierarchical tradition of Hindu society to which he himself belongs. It is possible that his prolonged stay in England where the society is relatively more egalitarian made Anand more sensitive to these issues of inequality which most other Indians passively accept.

Just as within any upper caste there are innumerable castes and sub-castes, so the lower castes are also graded in many layers. Those who are slightly high in this hierarchy look down on the others who are supposed to be inferior to them. When Sohini, Bakha's sister, comes to the well, she is naturally snubbed by Gulabo, a washer woman. Even later we find among Bakha's playmates there is a subtle but sure distinction among the subdivisions of the untouchable community.

The appearance of the priest, Pandit Kali Nath on the scene brings hope for the untouchables who are waiting for a "kind hearted Hindu" to come to give them water from the well. It is to be remembered that untouchables are not permitted to draw the water from the caste Hindus' well for the fear of "pollution". Pandit Kali Nath draws water for physical exercise more than as an act of generosity. More despicable still is his voyeuristic appreciation for Sohini:

The fresh young from whose full breasts with their dark beads of nipples stood out conspicuously under her muslin shirt, whose innocent look of wonder seemed to stir the only soft chord in his person, hardened by the congenital weakness of his mind, brazened by the authority he exercised over the faithful and the devout. And he was inclined to be kind to her.<sup>12</sup>

The physical description of Sohini parallels Bakha's in the sense that both are realistic as well as exotic. Although degraded socially, both of them are physically attractive. In Anand's portrayal of Sohini there is also a hidden agenda. Anand gives the readers an impression that Sohini is almost nude. He does this deliberately to draw our attention to a naked truth: the impoverishment of the untouchable. In other words, Sohini's poverty is her nakedness.

Pandit Kali Nath takes advantage of his caste and later in the day tries to molest Sohini in the temple yard. And when she screams, he comes out shouting that he has been defiled. This is not just a caricature of a lecherous Brahmin priest taking advantage of his status; it raises questions about the logic of "pollution" also. In this connection C.D. Narasimhaiah comments:

We are now shown brother and sister suffering ignominy and shame, with the lie not in their hearts but in those who pretended to keep the truth of God, His abode and themselves in pristine purity. The untouchables, Anand's art has made us to see, are not Bakha and his sister, but those others who called them so.<sup>13</sup>

Sohini is not the only untouchable girl in literature to be shown as a victim of the lust of the higher castes. Similar examples could be cited from Sivarama Karanth's *Chomanadudi*, Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan*, U. K. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* (Kannada; 1965) and many others. In all the above mentioned novels the caste Hindu men either molested or raped the untouchable women exploiting their helpless socio-economic conditions. It is as if chastity is important only for the upper caste and upper class women. Sexual exploitation and economic exploitation are often carried on simultaneously.

Anand takes us to the market area of the town with Bakha just to show us another face of caste discrimination. Here the novelist draws our attention to Bakha's taste: he smokes "Red Lamp" cigarettes and loves to eat jalebis. Earlier we have been shown how he likes the clothes of the Sahebs. Bakha's wishes and aspirations are as human as anyone else's. Bakha's desire for foreign clothes and aspiration for learning English could signify his vague hankering for a different way of life. He has the normal urges of a teenager, wanting to taste good food, smoke and play games. Anand here could also be countering the misapprehensions about the untouchables: they eat carcass, live in unhygienic condition and wear dirty clothes by their own choice. One recalls the prejudices of Moorthy in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* when he entered an untouchable home for the first time. Even though intellectually he had stopped believing in caste, instinctively he recoiled from drinking water because he imagined a stench coming from the backyard of Rachama's house.

The untouchables provided the caste Hindus with their labour doing all sorts of menial jobs and getting paid in cash and kind. We see Bakha in the market spending the little cash he had earned. When Bakha goes to the silversmith's gully we see him getting paid in food. The Hindu community fed the untouchables, but the food they offered was fit for the dustbin. Rakha, Bakha's brother has collected the food which is "full of broken pieces of chapattis, some whole ones and lentil curry in a bowl". It becomes clear to the readers that if untouchables eat leftovers, it is because they have no option. They cannot till land and produce their own food, nor can they earn enough to buy raw material for cooking at home.

The dietary world of the untouchable has been explored by other writers also. In some places the untouchables have been shown as eating dead animals. Sivarama Karanth in his novel *Chomanadudi* presents the eponymous hero fondly eating the meat of a dead buffalo. When the peasant announces to Choma the death of his she-buffalo, Choma is supposed to have jumped and danced with joy anticipating a feast. Karanth writes, "Inwardly very happy, Choma pretended lack of interest."<sup>14</sup> The scene obviously projects the biased view of a caste Hindu novelist. Karanth fails to see the truth that the untouchables do not eat carcasses out of their choice but to live and survive when there is absolutely no other way of getting their food.

Another writer of this century Sivasankara Pillai in his novel *Scavenger's Son* not only condemns the upper caste prejudice that "A scavenger who cleaned up dirt was compelled to eat dirt"<sup>15</sup> but also clarifies the overt statements through his character Chudalamuttu. Chudalamuttu, though a scavenger does not allow his son, Mohan to do scavenging duty. Instead he sends him to school and hopes that his son will not be a scavenger. Contrary to Chudalamuttu's belief the upper castes people treat Mohan as a scavenger in spite of his cleanliness, education etc. This enrages Chudalamuttu and he reveals himself:



It seemed to Chudalamattu that he should take a pot with him in the morning. Everything he got from the house the previous day's mouldy payasam or the water, the rice had been washed in, or the stale porridge; all this he should put in the pot, set it on the muck cart and bring it back to give to the child. That was the way he should grow up. A scavenger's child could not grow up without eating that dirt. Even if he did not give it to the child, the child would want it. That dirt was something a scavenger's child found more tasty than biscuits. For a relish for that sort of thing was inherited.<sup>16</sup>

The recently available Dalit Literature counters such bias seen in the writing of even sympathetic upper caste writers like Shivaram Karanth when they are writing about untouchables. Bandu Madhava's powerful Marathi short story "The Poisoned Bread" (1992) makes a telling point about food, especially about the age-old and dehumanizing tradition of collecting food from the upper castes, which makes them slaves forever. As the story goes, Yetalya, an old Mahar is driven away from his duty by Bapu Patil without any payment for his day-long labour. For his survival, Yetalya has to collect the stale crumbs smeared with dung and urine left by the oxen of Bapu Patil. The old man dies after eating these crumbs. Before his death he makes a statement urging all the untouchables of the land to give up the old habit of eating leftover food and to educate themselves as much as possible to fight against exploitation. Using bread as the metaphor for physical as well as psychic degradation he says: "never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man".<sup>17</sup>

Through repeated humiliation Bakha becomes conscious of the injustice on which his entire life is based. There is this moment of truth when he broods alone, and after that can no longer accept his fate like his father or even his brother. The end of the novel *Untouchable* brings Bakha in contact with people who offer him solutions to his problem. The British clergyman of the town - Hutchinson, Mahatma Gandhi and the poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar - the three offer him their sympathies and suggestions for the eradication of the discriminatory system of untouchability.

The Padre's abstract Christian discourse fully studded with biblical quotations does not interest or convince Bakha because both the rhetoric and ideas are alien to him. Moreover we feel the author himself is reluctant to give this solution the importance it deserves since the representation of the wife of the missionary borders on caricature. Her angry outburst on "dirty bhangis and chamars" can undo all the kind words of Mr. Hutchinson and exposes their unreality. Mary Hutchinson's tirade drives Bakha away. Anand reduces Bakha's attraction for the Padre to a matter of two old trousers which Bakha longed to get from him. In Sivrama Karanth's *Chomanadudi*, like Bakha the hero is confronted with Christianity as a solution to his misery. Conversion might have solved his immediate problems, but he rejects Christianity for very personal reasons of faith and identity, even though he cannot articulate his stand properly. Anand thus is not alone among the Hindu upper caste writers who oppose casteism and conversion in the same breath.<sup>18</sup>

Anand seems to bring in Gandhi's visit to Bulandshahar as a climatic event in the novel only because of his (Gandhi's) sympathies for the untouchables. The dividing line between the "real Gandhi" and "fictitious Gandhi" is very thin. Even Anand had to quote some lines from real Gandhi's speech on untouchability in his fiction (for example, "I regard (the) untouchable as the greatest blot on Hinduism and so on."<sup>19</sup>) to make his point clearer.

The preaching of the fictional Gandhi in this novel that untouchables should realize that a Bhangi should remain a Bhangi for ever and not aspire to be anything else. He also says that untouchability is not just a social question but a moral and religious one. This corresponds to the belief of the historic Gandhi indirectly supported Varanshrama Dharma. Bhiku Parekh's comment on this is relevant here: "By taking a narrowly religious view of untouchability, Gandhi not only reinforced harijan passivity but also betrayed his own profound political insight that no system of oppression could be ended without the active involvement and consequent political education and organization of its victims."<sup>20</sup>

But Anand's portrayal of the Hindu society and the practice of untouchability are very different from Gandhi's understanding of the problem. Anand's socialistic and materialistic understanding of the situation interrogates Gandhi's religious and moral stand on untouchability. Calling the untouchable 'Harijan' Gandhi made them into the children of god, but acknowledged their separateness nevertheless. Anand presents, to a certain extent, both Gandhi and the padre as mystics, because they both talk of ignorance and sin rather than of economic and social inequity.

Bakha at the end of the day hears about a machine which has the potential to liberate him from the manual task of carrying filth. This captures his imagination and lingers in his mind as he starts towards his home. The fact that he receives this information from a poet is also significant. Anand seems to be suggesting that the technology that would give him freedom is part of the futuristic vision of the poet of a new era. The first option, Christianity, is not for a moment considered seriously by Bakha. The two things that remain in his mind are: Gandhi and the machine. He dreams of the future and wants to share the dream with his family from whom he had felt estranged earlier in the day.

## Conclusion

*Untouchable* is an open-ended novel and not a novel like *Scavenger's Son* which ends in scavengers forming a union. Through this well-organized union the scavengers of Alleppey in *Scavenger's Son* have learnt to speak with a united voice. The result is, "Today's scavenger knows how much he earns; he has also learnt to get change for his money without getting cheated. He even has the nerve to want more wages...."<sup>21</sup> Apart from this, Pillai gives the scavengers of Alleppey human dignity. To quote him,

There is a widespread complaint that scavengers are insolent. If you try to substantiate that complaint, you will get the answer that they are indeed insolent ..... you should see the way he walks in the evening ! He uses talcum powder, he wears a jubba, he smokes cigarettes he is not subservient .... The Alleppey scavenger has learnt quite a bit. He knows how to think on the basis of what he knows and so get to know more. So he behaves as one lost in thought. He has realized that a scavenger is a human being.<sup>22</sup>

While Anand explores in *Untouchable* the humiliations and frustrations of an adolescent whose only sin is that he is born in a sweeper family, he does not offer a neat solution to Bakha's problem. The novel was written at a time when even legal or constitutional measures had not been taken to correct the social inequality in India, and the writer himself was not sure in which direction a future solution might lie. Today, after nearly a century we know that mere changes in the legal system do not transform the values of society. Of the three possibilities suggested at the end of *Untouchable* Anand's outright rejection of Christianity can be seen in his mocking attitude to the Hutchinson. Gandhi's

words are emotionally soothing to Bakha, but the real change in the material condition of a scavenger, Anand seems to suggest, can be brought about by technological innovation that will free him from the degradation of manually carrying other people excrement. This fits in with his progressive ideology and faith in human progress achieved through reason and science.

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- Anand's rejection of conversion as a way out of the treat of untouchability can be seen as a part of the third world novelist's attempt to build the hegemony of the West and to evolve what Makarand Paranjape calls 'the contestatory model of the third world novel'. Karanth's fiction can also be read profitably from such a perspective. See Makarand Paranjape, "The Ideology of Form: Notes on the Third World Novel", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1 1991.
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