

# Dignity and Suffering: Reading of Human Rights in *Untouchable* by Anand

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**Abstract**—Cultural stories are political. They register cultural phenomena and their relations with the world and society in term of their existence, function, characteristics by using different context. This paper will provide a new way of rethinking which will help us to rethink the relationship between fiction and politics. It discusses the theme of human rights and it shows the relevance between art and politics by studying the civil society through a literary framework. Reasons to establish a relationship between fiction and politics are the relevant themes and universal issues among the two disciplines. Both disciplines are sets of views and ideas formulated by the human mind to explain political or cultural phenomenon. Other reasons are the complexity and depth of the author's vision, and the need to explain the violations of human rights in a more active structure which can relate to emotional and social existence.

**Keywords**—dignity, human rights, politics and literature, *Untouchable*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**U**NTOUCHABLE, among other novels, is a novel written by Mulk Raj Anand in the nineteen thirties during which Indian struggle for independence was at its peak. Anand's hatred of imperialism and of hypocrisy of Indian rites with its castes, habits and customs were the greatest motifs for his art. He was aware of the immense suffering of people from poverty and humiliation due to the political and social system of that time.

Anand's major concern revolves around humans and human rights. He believes that art and literature are instruments of humanism [1]. In *Apology for Humanism*, he states his position as a humanist:

The humanism which I prefer does not rest on a Devine Sanction... but puts its faith in the creative imagination of man, in his capacity to transform himself, in the tireless mental and physical energy with which he can, often in the face of great odds, raise himself to tremendous heights of dignity and redeem the world from its misery and pain... [2]

*Untouchable* is Anand's first novel. This novel suggests more to the human rights practices; especially that this work was published thirteen years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The word "untouchable" refers to an Indian cast system that includes the lowest of the lower working class

of India, and is justified by different ideas especially religious ones. The untouchables in fact were slaughtered as a sacrifice to the gods, beaten, and abused. It was also popular, back then, that they have polluted soles [3]. Anand's purpose is to show that even a person belonging to the lowest social class is a human being who has a dignity and suffers from the alienation forced upon him by caste society. The story depicts a day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy, and reveals the effects on him of the events of that day. Bakha belongs to the lowest fraction of the low social casts. Through this novel, it is clear that the social structure is divided into many classes and the political regime is corrupted and undergoes colonial power.

Reasons to establish a relationship between fiction and politics are relevant themes and universal issues among the two disciplines. Other reasons are the complexity and depth of the author's vision, and the need to explain the violations of human rights in a more active structure which can relate to emotional and social existence. Human rights during the nineteen thirties were in conflict; therefore, the author presents a fictitious framework through which he offers a Hindu political thought represented by Mahatma Gandhi and his speech to combat human rights violations, which narrates most of the UDHR articles.

## II. HUMAN RIGHTS CONFLICTS

In this work, human rights appeared to be restricted to those who control the civil society based on religious interpretations and the political regime.

"The existence of Untouchability has been justified within the context of Hindu religious thought as the ultimate and logical extensions of Karma and rebirth. Indus believe that persons are born Untouchables because of the accumulation of sins in previous lives. Hindu texts describe these people as foul and loathsome, and any physical contact with them was regarded as polluting" [3].

Hinduism prevents the Hindus from touching the sweepers or even touching anything a sweeper has touched. For example, in *Untouchable* we see the confectioner throws the "jalebis" to Bakha and his assistant splashes water on the nickel coins Bakha has placed on the shoe-board. In addition, if a Hindu mistakenly touches an untouchable "the shortest cut to purification after unholy touch, was to cancel it by touching a Mussulman passing by"[4]. Ironically, the Hindu man who accidentally becomes defiled by the touch of the sweeper slaps Bakha which causes another touch.

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Furthermore, human rights are denied and abused because of the social and religious structure in India during that time. The high caste Hindus are given the authority to degrade the lower-caste. For example, the low castes are deprived from their simplest and basic right which is water. "The out castes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of three upper castes would consider the water polluted"[4]. They are also not allowed to come near the stream for the same reasons. Additionally, they cannot afford the money to make themselves a private well. So, they have to wait all day long for some caste Hindus, who would be kind enough, to fill their pitchers with water.

As a result of this social and religious philosophy, human rights are abused even among the low-caste. The low-caste consists of hierarchal classes according to their hereditary professions. The working class consists of many levels, the lowest, and most discriminated, is the sweeper. The sweeper is a polluted object to the orthodox who must identify himself loudly in public streets 'sweeper's coming'. The highest degree of caste among the low-caste is washermen, then leathermen, and then sweepers. In *Untouchable*, Gulabo thinks of herself as superior to every outcaste, "because she claimed a high place in hierarchy of the castes among low-caste"[4] which gives her the right to fill her pitcher before Sohini, Bakha's sister. In addition, Bakha and Chota dare not to attend Gulabo's daughter's wedding due to their social status. Instead, they watch the wedding party from a distance and wait for their friend Ram Charan to bring them sweets.

Bakha suffers humiliation due to the neglect of human rights and reaches a state of mind where he accepts all indignity and hates himself. He considers himself the meanest of mankind not appropriate even to touch others. All this is because of the lack of awareness of human rights principles and public ignorance which created this social injustice.

In addition, human rights in this novel are in conflict because they undergo the British colonial system. Freedom is only enjoyed by colonial subjects. "Anand examines the depredations caused by colonization. By contact with the British, Bakha rejects his own culture, seeing the colonizer as 'superior people', and guarding his new English cloths from 'all base taint of Indianness'. Any contact with the colonizer distorts and renders the cultural aboriginal"[5]. Bakha feels ashamed of his father and uncle for which they adopt a spitting habit that the Tommies would never do.

The reason Bakha panics from the mem-sahib's verbal abuse hundred times more than the fear rouse from the outburst of the touched man is because the anger of a white person matters more. "The mem-sahib was more important to his slavish mind than the man who was touched, he being one of many brown countrymen. To displease the mem-sahib was to him a crime for which no punishment was bad enough." [4]. Bakha is a harmless kid. His crime is that his presence disturbs other due to his social status.

In an attempt of retrieving dignity, Bakha considers conversion. He is astonished by the colonel's speech about

Christianity and is almost into Christianity until colonel Hutchinson introduces the idea of original sin. In *Untouchable*, Christianity is not "a religion at all, but as some mysterious convention of the sahibs which was observed on Sundays at which these priests officiated"[2]. Anand finds Christian padres like other English officers living the superior expensive life of sahibs [6]. The Christian priests are like the Hindus hypocrite and covered. They both contribute to the violation of human rights.

### III. A UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Anand's project is to increase the education of human rights and to improve human rights practices. His work conducts a public awareness campaign. He offers a huge improvement in human rights throughout fiction. Many human rights themes appear in this novel. Anand depicts the importance of human interests, values and dignity dominant. The most obvious theme is the theme of intolerance, racial and religious discrimination.

Racial and religious profiling is highly practiced. For instance, priests are above the law and a sweeper must notify his presence by saying 'Posh keep a way, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming!' [4].

In addition, Anand goes further to encounter the UDHR. He stresses that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" (UDHR: article 1.) This article is spoken out through Gandhi's speech, "as you know, while we are asking for freedom from the grip of a foreign nation, we have ourselves, for centuries, trampled underfoot millions of human beings without feeling the slightest remorse for our inequality" [4].

In addition, Anand insists that "No one shall be subject to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." (UDHR: article 5.) In the novel, Bakha is blamed for the child skull injury, the mother does not listen to her eldest son's story but keeps blaming and shouting at Bakha; and the man who slaps Bakha blames him for not warning people of his presence. All these examples are to show the abuse of human dignity and the emotional and psychological struggle an out-caste suffers.

Moreover, the author expresses the right to education (UDHR: article 26) throughout Bakha's impulse for paying a boy an anna per lesson because he always wished to learn how to read and write. The cast system would prevent him from sitting side by side with children of the high-caste. Furthermore, teachers wouldn't teach the outcasts for fear that their fingers would touch the outcasts' books while guiding them across a text and then be polluted.

Finally, Anand concludes his project by implying that "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment..." (UDHR: article 23.) Bakha hears a poet's

remark about a proper drainage system which simply would eliminate the whole problem of untouchability. The poet, Iqbal Sarshar, suggestion is a way out for the untouchables from the practice of untouchability.

#### IV. HUMAN RIGHTS ACTORS

There are many factors that played essential roles to bring transformation in human rights such as compassion and empathy. These factors are represented by different themes and people. Compassion is the first reason for writing this novel. Anand's compassion is directed to the untouchables. In this novel, the practice of the untouchability is made a crime. He protests the miserable life of the untouchables. Anand also protests against the mystic origins in the matter of religion [6]. He mocks the hypocrisy and hollowness of the Hindu religion for its conception of pollution by touch, and its justification of manipulation. The confectioner, for example, charges Bakha double price for the sweets and the Hindu kid accuses Bakha of hitting him. The priest who molests Sohini, and the Hindu woman who treats Bakha as garbage and wants to be called 'mother' are all hypocrite.

Then, there is the presence of Gandhi in order to enhance interfaith efforts and to present a Hindu political thought which provide effective measures that can ensure equality. Gandhi is also a political phenomenon in which it politically struggles colonial power, social system, and abuse of human rights. His occurrence in the novel is a strong force that can promise society redemption. It can help shaking the conflict of human rights and renew the social structure of that time. The young poet, Iqbal Sarshar, believes that "we must destroy caste, we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations. We must recognize an equality of rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone"[4].

Gandhi is presented in this novel to establish a transformation in human rights. He provides an understanding of and empathy with people with different values or ways of life. Gandhi is very keen for uplifting the untouchables. He calls them 'harijans' meaning "men of god"[4]. He regards "untouchability as the greatest bolt on Hinduism"[4], and asserts that it is "satanic" to assume anyone in Hinduism is born polluted. Gandhi then narrates the story of a Brahmin boy and a sweeper in his ashram and shows sympathy for the sweeper. He thinks that if the Brahmin "wanted the ashram sweeper to do his work well he must do it himself and set an example"[4]. He also prays that he gets to reborn as an out-caste untouchable. Bakha finds relief in Gandhi's words as well as his skin color, "he is black like me," Bakha says [4]. Gandhi speaks to the common man mind in order to improve the effort of protecting human rights. He links emancipation of untouchables with the protection of the cow, which the Brahmins worship.

In conclusion, this novel creates a link between fiction and politics through its promotions of human rights. It speaks to the intellectual before the common man's mind to tell these minds that salvation of mankind depends on human rights

adoption and actual practices. Anand's project was the first step to human rights universal declaration.

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