A Realistic Depiction of Indian Society: Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is undoubtedly a significant and immense figure in Indian English literature, recognized primarily for his realistic depictions of characters, drawn from his personal experiences of the settings and situations portrayed in his novels. *Untouchable* is a novel that has gained immense applaud worldwide, as it vividly presents an authentic and transparent depiction of pre-Independence Indian society, where the untouchables and other marginalized groups endured extreme hardship due to their oppressed status. Anand is widely regarded as a novelist of the downtrodden and dispossessed, and in this novel, he portrays the pain and struggles of Bakha, a low-caste protagonist subjected to constant torture and humiliation by the so-called protectors of Indian society. The novel compels the objective reader to confront the dreadful social maladies that plagued colonial India and persisted in the following decades, weaving a touching narrative of the social injustices suffered by the marginalized.

Keywords: Pre-Independence Indian society, downtrodden, social injustices, marginalized

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand is recognized as one of the pioneers of Indian English literature. He has a strange capacity for depicting realistically the sad and miserable plight of the low classes. His novels are full of sympathetic feelings about the people and places he knows from his first-hand knowledge. He is a marked realist and has a profound imaginative and sensitive apprehension of the Indian society in all its ramification. His works often reflect the socio-economic conditions of his time, addressing issues of class, caste, and the struggle for identity. *Untouchable* serves as a critical lens through which the oppressive structures of Indian society are examined. The novel's narrative, centered around Bakha, encapsulates the plight of the untouchables and critiques the broader societal norms that perpetuate inequality. His faithful account and realistic presentation of the prevailing orthodox Hindu society are quite valuable in bringing a positive change in the society. The word 'Untouchable' refers to an Indian caste system that includes the lowermost of the lower working class of India, and is vindicated by different ideas especially religious one. The 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 isolation forced upon him by caste society.

Historical Context

The socio-political scenario of early 20th-century India was marked by colonial rule, social reform movements, and a burgeoning national consciousness. The caste system, deeply rooted in Indian society, dictated social interactions and hierarchies, often relegating entire communities to the margins. During this period, reformers like B.R. Ambedkar began

advocating for the rights of the untouchables, challenging the oppressive structures of the caste system. Anand's *Untouchable* reflects this backdrop, offering insight into the lived experiences of those subjected to systemic discrimination.

Realism in *Untouchable*

Anand employs a realist approach in *Untouchable*, shuning romanticized depictions of Indian life in favor of a raw and unfiltered portrayal of societal injustices. The narrative follows Bakha, a young sweeper, as he navigates the harsh realities of his existence. Through Bakha's experiences, Anand captures the daily humiliations faced by untouchables, from being shunned in public spaces to enduring verbal and physical abuse.

Characterization

Bakha, the protagonist, is a multifaceted character representing the aspirations and struggles of the untouchable community. Anand's nuanced portrayal allows readers to empathize with Bakha, as he embodies both the pain of discrimination and the yearning for dignity. The character's internal conflict is evident when he grapples with his societal position and dreams of a better life, a tension that resonates with many marginalized individuals.

Other characters in the novel, such as Bakha's father, a traditionalist, and the well-meaning yet paternalistic Hindu reformer, showcase the varied responses to the caste system within Indian society. These interactions underline the complexities of social reform and the challenges faced by those who seek to change entrenched societal norms.

Themes

Anand's exploration of several themes in *Untouchable* further enriches its realistic portrayal of Indian society:

1. **Caste and Identity**: The novel vividly illustrates how caste shapes individual identity and social interactions. Bakha's experiences highlight the stigma attached to being an untouchable, showcasing how caste identity dictates one's place in society.

2. **Social Injustice**: Anand's depiction of systemic injustices faced by the untouchables serves as a powerful indictment of the caste system. The relentless humiliation Bakha endures symbolizes the broader plight of his community, drawing attention to the urgent need for social reform.

3. **Aspiration and Alienation**: Bakha's dreams of education and social acceptance underscore the theme of aspiration in the face of alienation. His encounters with educated individuals, who are either indifferent or hostile to his plight, reflect the broader societal disconnect between different social strata.

4. **Tradition vs. Modernity**: The tension between traditional values and modern aspirations is a recurring theme. Bakha's longing for change is juxtaposed with the adherence to caste-based norms, representing the struggle between progress and entrenched traditions.

Narrative Technique

Anand's narrative technique further enhances the realism of *Untouchable*. The use of free indirect discourse allows readers to delve into Bakha's thoughts and feelings, creating an intimate connection with his character. The stream-of-consciousness style effectively captures Bakha's internal struggles and societal observations, making his experiences more relatable.

Additionally, the incorporation of colloquial language and dialects authenticates the narrative, grounding it in the cultural and linguistic realities of Indian society. Anand's attention to detail in depicting the settings and daily lives of his characters contributes to the novel's realism, enabling readers to immerse themselves in the world he portrays.

Social Critique

Anand's *Untouchable* serves not only as a narrative of individual suffering but also as a broader critique of societal norms. The novel addresses the apathy of the privileged classes, who often turn a blind eye to the injustices faced by the untouchables. Through the character of the reformer, Anand highlights the limitations of well-meaning individuals who fail to grasp the depth of the problem, illustrating that change requires more than superficial gestures.

Moreover, Anand's portrayal of the complexities within the untouchable community itself complicates the narrative. The characters are not mere victims; they exhibit agency and resilience, embodying the struggle for dignity and recognition. This complexity adds depth to the critique, suggesting that the fight against oppression must involve a recognition of the humanity and aspirations of marginalized individuals.

Contemporary Relevance

Despite being written nearly a century ago, *Untouchable* resonates with contemporary discussions surrounding caste and social justice in India. The persistent inequalities faced by Dalits, coupled with ongoing debates about identity and rights, underscore the novel's enduring significance. Anand's work serves as a reminder of the need for continued advocacy against systemic discrimination, emphasizing that literature can play a crucial role in raising awareness and inspiring change.

The rise of social movements advocating for Dalit rights and the increasing visibility of these issues in public discourse echo the themes presented in Anand's novel. In this context, *Untouchable* not only documents the struggles of the past but also serves as a call to action for future generations.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* stands as a landmark work that realistically depicts the social landscape of India, particularly the harsh realities faced by untouchables. Through the character of Bakha and the novel's intricate themes, Anand invites readers to confront the injustices of the caste system and reflect on the broader implications for society. By employing a realist narrative style and crafting complex characters, Anand creates a powerful critique of social norms that remains relevant today. Ultimately, *Untouchable* not only serves

as a poignant reflection on the past but also as an enduring testament to the struggles for dignity and equality in Indian society.

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