

**B.Yasmin Banu**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Department of English**  
**Jamal Mohamed College**  
**Trichy -20**

**Untouchable-Mulk Raj Anand**

**Author Introduction:**

Mulk Raj Anand (12 December 1905 – 28 September 2004) was an Indian writer in English, recognised for his depiction of the lives of the poorer class in the traditional Indian society. One of the pioneers of Indo-Anglian fiction, he, together with R. K. Narayan, Ahmad Ali and Raja Rao, was one of the first India-based writers in English to gain an International readership. Anand is admired for his novels and short stories, which have acquired the status of classics of modern Indian English literature; they are noted for their perceptive insight into the lives of the oppressed and for their analysis of impoverishment, exploitation and misfortune. He became known for his protest novel *Untouchable* (1935), which was followed by other works on the Indian poor such as *Coolie* (1936) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937). He is also noted for being among the first writers to incorporate Punjabi and Hindustani idioms into English, and was a recipient of the civilian honour of the Padma Bhushan, the third-highest civilian award in the Republic of India.

**Summary:**

Set in the fictional Indian town of Bulashah, *Untouchable* is a day in the life of a young Indian sweeper named Bakha. The son of Lakha, head of all of Bulashah's sweepers, Bakha is intelligent but naïve, humble yet vain. Over the course of Bakha's day various major and minor tragedies occur, causing him to mature and turn his gaze inward. By the end of the novel Mulk Raj Anand, the author, has made a compelling case for the end of untouchability on the grounds that it is an inhumane, unjust system of oppression. He uses Bakha and the people populating the young man's world to craft his argument.

Bakha's day starts with his father yelling at him to get out of bed and clean the latrines. The relationship between the father and son is strained, in part due to Bakha's obsession with the British, in part because of Lakha's laziness. Bakha ignores his father but eventually gets up to answer the demands of a high-caste man that wants to use the bathroom. This man is Charat Singh, a famous hockey player. At first Singh also yells at Bakha for neglecting his cleaning duties. The man has a changeable personality however. It isn't long before he instructs Bakha to come see him later in the day so he can gift the young sweeper with a prized hockey stick. An overjoyed Bakha agrees.

High on his good fortune he quickly finishes his morning shift and hurries home, dying of thirst. Unfortunately there is no water in the house. His sister Sohini offers to go fill the water bucket. At the well Sohini must wait behind several other outcasts also queued up. Also waiting for water is Gulabo, mother of one of Bakha's friends and a jealous woman. She hates Sohini and is just barely stopped from striking the young woman. A priest from

the town temple named Pundit Kali Nath comes along and helps Sohini get water. He instructs her to come clean the temple later in the day. Sohini agrees and hurries home with the water.

Back at home Lakha fakes an illness and instructs Bakha to clean the town square and the temple courtyard in his stead. Bakha is wise to the wily ways of his father but cannot protest. He takes up his cleaning supplies and goes into town. His sweeping duties usually keep him too busy to go into town, and so he takes advantage of the situation by buying cigarettes and candies.

As Bakha eats his candies, a high-caste man brushes up against him. The touched man did not see Bakha because the sweeper forgot to give the untouchable's call. The man is furious. His yelling attracts a large crowd that joins in on Bakha's public shaming. A traveling Muslim vendor in a horse and buggy comes along and disperses the crowd. Before the touched man leaves he slaps Bakha across the face for his impudence, and scurries away. A shocked Bakha cries in the streets before gathering his things and hurrying off to the temple. This time, he does not forget the untouchable's call.

At the temple, a service is in full swing. It intrigues Bakha, who eventually musters up the courage to climb up the stairs to the temple door and peer inside. He's only standing there for a few moments before a loud commotion comes from behind him. It's Sohini and Pundit Kali Nath, who is accusing Sohini of polluting him. As a crowd gathers around, Bakha pulls his sister away. Crying, she tells him that the priest sexually assaulted her. A furious Bakha tries to go back to confront the priest, but an embarrassed and ashamed Sohini forces him to leave. Bakha sends his sister home, saying he will take over her duties in town for the rest of the day.

Distraught over the day's events, Bakha wanders listlessly before going to a set of homes to beg for his family's daily bread. No one is home, so he curls up in front of a house and falls asleep. A sadhu also begging for food comes and wakes him. The owner of the house Bakha slept in front of comes out with food for the sadhu. Seeing Bakha, she screams at him and at first refuses to give him food. She finally agrees to give him some bread in exchange for him sweeping the area in front of her house. As Bakha sweeps, the woman tells her young son to relieve himself in the gutter where Bakha is cleaning so he can sweep that up too. A disgusted Bakha throws down the broom and leaves for his house in the outcastes' colony.

Back at home, it's only Lakha and Sohini. Rakha, Bakha's younger brother, is still out collecting food. Bakha tells his father that a high-caste man slapped him in the streets. Sensing his son's anger, Lakha tells him a story about the kindness of a high-caste doctor that once saved Bakha's life. Bakha is deeply moved by the story but remains upset. Soon after story time, Rakha comes back with food. A ravenous Bakha starts to eat, but then is disgusted by the idea of eating the leavings of the high-caste people. He jumps up and says he's going to the wedding of his friend Ram Charan's sister.

At Ram Charan's house, Bakha sees his other friend, Chota. The two boys wait for Ram Charan to see them through the thicket of wedding revelers. Ram Charan eventually sees his friends and runs off with them despite his mother's protestations. Alone, Chota and Ram Charan sense something is wrong with their friend. They coax Bakha to tell them what's wrong. Bakha breaks down and tells them about the slap and Sohini's assault. Ram Charan is quiet and embarrassed by Bakha's tale, but Chota is indignant. He asks Bakha if he wants to get revenge. Bakha does but realizes revenge would be a dangerous and futile endeavor. A melancholic atmosphere falls over the group. Chota attempts to cheer Bakha up by reminding him of the hockey game they will play later in the day. This reminds Bakha that he must go and get his gift from Charat Singh.

Bakha goes to Charat Singh's house in the barracks, but cannot tell if the man is home. Reluctant to disturb him or the other inhabitants, Bakha settles under a tree to wait. Before long, Singh comes outside. He invites Bakha to drink tea with him and allows the untouchable to handle his personal items. Singh's disregard for Bakha's

supposed polluting presence thrills Bakha's heart. Thus he is overjoyed when Singh gives him a brand-new hockey stick.

Ecstatic about this upswing to his terrible day, Bakha goes into the hockey game on fire. He scores the first goal. The goalie of the opposite team is angry over Bakha's success and hits him. This starts an all-out brawl between the two teams that ends when a player's younger brother gets hurt. Bakha picks up the young boy and rushes him home, only to have the boy's mother accuse him of killing her son. Good mood completely destroyed, Bakha trudges home, where his father screams at him for being gone all afternoon. He banishes Bakha from home, saying his son must never return.

Bakha runs away and takes shelter under a tree far from home. The chief of the local Salvation Army, a British man named Colonel Hutchinson, comes up to him. He sees Bakha's distress and convinces the sweeper to follow him to the church. Flattered by the white man's attention, Bakha agrees, but the Colonel's constant hymn singing quickly bores him. Before the two can enter the church the Colonel's wife comes to find him. Disgusted at the sight of her husband with another "blackie," she begins to scream and shout. Bakha feels her anger acutely and runs off again.

This time Bakha runs towards town and ends up at the train station. He overhears some people discussing the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in Bulashah. He joins the tide of people rushing to hear the Mahatma speak. Just as Bakha settles in to listen, Gandhi arrives and begins his speech. He talks about the plight of the untouchable and how it is his life's mission to see them emancipated. He ends his speech by beseeching those present to spread his message of ending untouchability. After the Mahatma departs a pair of educated Indian men have a lively discussion about the content of the speech. One man, a lawyer named Bashir, soundly critiques most of Gandhi's opinions and ideas. The other, a poet named Sarshar, defends the Mahatma passionately and convincingly. Much of what they say goes above Bakha's head, so elevated are their vocabulary and ideas. However, he does understand when Sarshar mentions the imminent arrival of the flushing toilet in India, a machine that eradicates the need for humans to handle refuse. This machine could mean the end of untouchability. With this piece of hope Bakha hurries home to share news of the Mahatma's speech with his father.