

Untouchable Themes of the novel "Untouchable"

You Are What You Wear=

Habiliments, known in contemporary vernacular as clothing, play a pivotal role in *Untouchable*. For starters, Anand uses characters' clothing to signify everything from religion to caste level. During the beginning of Bakha's day, clothing is used to differentiate the many men that come to use the latrines. The Hindus are naked except for their loincloths. Muslims are distinct from Hindus because they wear long white cotton tunics and baggy trousers (Anand 32). Furthermore, when the crowds gather to hear the Mahatma speak, they are separated into their various castes and religions. The "Hindu lallas," or high-caste Hindu ladies, are "smartly dressed in silks" while members of the outcaste colony are dressed in rags (Anand 264).

Clothing as a signifier of religion and caste level is only one aspect of the "you are what you wear" theme. Through the eyes of Bakha, clothing becomes a metaphor for superiority and enlightenment. He marvels at the "clear-cut styles of European dress" and considers those that wear them "sahibs," or superior people. He thinks that if he were to wear these habiliments, he would cast off his untouchable status and become a sahib too (Anand 20). To this end, he begs Tommies for their extra clothing no matter how loosely they fit him. Though seemingly superficial, Bakha's musings about clothing reflecting the inner person have a strand of truth. His own getup, though ill fitting, supposedly "removes him above his odorous world" in the eyes of the onlooker as he cleans the latrines (Anand 30). The onlookers are perplexed that someone dressed as Bakha is from the untouchable caste. Here is a clear example of the theme "you are what you wear."

Rejection of Indian Roots=

The rejection of Indian habits and social customs is a central idea of *Untouchable*. Bakha is the best personification of this theme in the novel. We are first introduced to his distaste for certain Indian habits when he watches the Hindu men performing their morning ablutions. Anand writes that after working in the British barracks Bakha had become ashamed of the "Indian way" of washing up (Anand 34). Other Indian habits that Bakha shows contempt for are how some Hindu men and women relieve themselves in the open on the streets (Anand 36), the Indian tendency to wear "florid ornaments" (Anand 107), and even the Indian way of drinking tea (Anand 62). The disapproval Bakha feels for these various habits stem from British feelings about them. For example, when the British see Hindus relieving themselves on the ground in public, they say *kala admi zamin par hagne wala* (black man, you who relieve yourself on the ground) (Anand 35). These words are a condemnation and something to be embarrassed about, in Bakha's opinion. His rejection of Indian ways of life is directly correlated to his embracement of British ways of life. If the British sahibs dislike something, they must be right, and he must emulate them in all things.

The rejection of Indian roots is closely intertwined with Britain's colonization of India and extends far past Bakha to Indian society as a whole. Bakha is not the only Indian fascinated by English culture. The presence of the Salvation Army in Bulashah is a testament to this. It shows that there are some Indians interested in Christianity, the religion of the colonizer. Further, at the end of the novel it is suggested that accepting the European "machine" (i.e.,

moving away from an agricultural economy to an industrial one) might be the path to salvation for untouchables. Rejecting the Indian way of clearing waste and embracing the European way of flushing it away without human contact could mean an end to the demands that sweepers satisfy, which would allow them to seek out other types of work that wouldn't make them untouchable.

However, things aren't always so straightforward. An example of this is the British-Indian penal code the poet Iqbal speaks of near the end of the novel. This code recognizes the rights of every Indian before the court, which on the de jure level makes everyone equal. And yet, the Hindu caste system simply adjusted and made profession the determinant of caste level. Because families typically have the same profession across generations, this did not alter much. After walking a day in Bakha's shoes it is clear that the caste system persists despite British attempts to eradicate it. While certain ways of Indian life have been rejected in the face of supposed British superiority, others are upheld. Here the push and pull between Indian and British sociocultural mores can be seen.

Class Struggle=

At its core *Untouchable* is a tale about class struggle. The paralyzing and polarizing differences between the various caste levels shape Bakha's day and fuel the narrative. Class and caste play a role in every interaction Bakha has over the course of his day. When his hero Singh speaks with him in the morning, it is with a "grin [that] symbolized six thousand years of racial and class superiority." When Singh promises to give Bakha a hockey stick, he calls forth a "trait of servility" embedded in Bakha that he inherited from his forefathers. Bakha is "queerly humble" and passively content like a "bottom dog" (Anand 31). This is clear example of how caste levels and what they symbolize about your station in life can be internalized and then manifested in your personality and demeanor.

Inter-caste inequality is not only about personal interactions. It is fueled by a set of rules that limits the lives and rights of outcastes, particularly the untouchables. For example, the outcastes are not allowed to draw their own water from the public well because this would make the water polluted in the eyes of the upper-caste Hindus. They must prevail upon the charity of higher-caste people drawing water to share some with them. Particular to the untouchables is the law of their untouchability. They must take care not to touch those of other castes, and to shout a warning about their presence wherever they go.

Though the struggle between the caste levels takes precedent in the story, intra-caste conflict also exists. Gulabo, Ram Charan's mother, is a great illustration of this. Though she is an outcaste like Bakha and his family, because she and her family are washer people, they occupy a higher place within their shared outcaste status than the sweepers. Gulabo uses her higher station to terrorize Bakha and Sohini. Thus the stratification of the castes isn't only an "inter" issue but also an "intra" one.

Charity=

Charity occupies an interesting place in the world of *Untouchable*. The outcastes are dependent on the charity of higher castes for fresh water (Anand 50), food (Anand 130), clothing (Anand 20), etc. Oftentimes the begging of the outcastes is met with derision and

anger by the higher castes. This uncharitable reaction is shortsighted when considering that outcastes must beg for water since the caste system deems them unworthy of drawing their own. The higher castes are unable to see the poverty of the outcaste is their own doing, not that of the outcaste.

On the other hand, in order to maintain their current status and/or rise in the caste hierarchy in the next life, Hindus must perform acts of charity. The Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, the two upper castes in Hindu society, claim they earned their positions because of all the good deeds they did in previous lives. So in a way the higher castes are dependent on charity as well.

Cyclical Oppression=

The suffering of the outcastes is cyclical, generational, and perpetual. This is the idea that is at the center of *Untouchable*, the idea that Anand seeks to highlight and criticize. The Hindu caste system and the stigmas it casts upon the outcastes ensure that they stay poor and destitute while the other castes maintain their higher standings and better lifestyles. The inability of the outcastes to draw their own water from the community well or even gather together the funds to build their own well ensures they will always be dependent on charitable Hindus for water (Anand 43). Shopkeepers and food vendors charge outcastes higher prices, “as if to compensate themselves for the pollution they [court] by dealing with outcastes” (Anand 87). This is nonsensical, making poor people that lack money pay more than rich people with money, and yet is somehow justified in the eyes of the higher castes. Furthermore, because teachers refuse to teach untouchables for fear of pollution, most of them cannot read and so must pay to have texts read to them or letters written (Anand 74). The answer would be teachers that are untouchable, but who would first teach them? Here we see the cyclical nature of the outcaste’s plight.

The life of the outcaste is cyclical not only because it is perpetuated by corrupt interpersonal dealings, but also because it is generational. The oppression and terrible life standards the outcastes face persist across generations. Bakha began working in the latrines as a sweeper at the age of 6, same as his father, his grandfather, great-grandfather, etc. (Anand 75). His status and life as a sweeper was inherited and passed down by his forefathers. Unless untouchability is abandoned, the Hindu caste system eradicated, and the unequal treatment of outcastes stopped, Bakha’s children will pick up the cross their father bears.

The Untouchable’s Responsibility/Burden

Deeply intertwined with the themes of class struggle and cyclical oppression is the idea of the untouchable’s responsibility or the untouchable’s burden. Aside from their job as sweeper, the untouchables are also tasked with ensuring they don’t touch higher-caste people and higher-caste people don’t touch them. Bakha first mentions this responsibility after he bumps into a caste man. Surrounded by a mob of angry Hindus, Bakha realizes that “he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier... but a moral one. He knew that contact with him, if he pushed through, would defile a great many more of [the] men” (Anand 92). Instead of the burden being on the men to make sure they don’t touch Bakha, he is the one that must take care. Bakha reinforces this idea when he apologizes to the man he bumps into and says, “I have erred now. I forgot to call. I beg your forgiveness” (Anand 94). The call Bakha refers to is “Posh keep away, posh, sweeper coming, posh posh...” (Anand

98). Untouchables must shout this as they walk to notify others of their approach. Not only must they clean up the refuse of others, they must also protect the cleanliness of others.

The untouchable's burden is another means of keeping the untouchable suppressed. This is best illustrated by Sohini's brush with Pundit Kali Nath in the temple. Here we have a Hindu high-caste man that willingly touched Sohini in an amorous manner. When she rejected him, Nath cried "polluted, polluted" and accused Sohini of defiling him (Anand 120). Because she is an untouchable, Sohini has no means of defending herself. She cannot argue that Nath touched her of his own volition, because such a defense would make no sense to Hindus that observe the caste system. Making bodily contact negligence on the part of the untouchable and not the caste person allows sexual assaults like Sohini's to be permissible. This is another example of the class struggles between untouchables and caste people, and another way untouchables are reduced to a subhuman status.

Religion=

Religion is the thread that connects all of the themes in Untouchable. Anand uses clothing to separate the Hindus from the Muslims from the Christians. The rejection of Indian roots is in part made manifest by the conversion of Indians from Hinduism to Christianity. The class struggles between the different caste levels and the cyclical oppression the outcastes experience is rooted in the hierarchy Hinduism created, as is the need for the higher castes to be charitable. Furthermore, Bakha sees his responsibility of alerting the world to his presence as a moral obligation.

There are a few ways that religion acts as an explicit mediator between the characters of Untouchable as well. Of course Hinduism influences interactions such as Gulabo's with Sohini and Bakha's with the caste man he touches. There are other examples however. Colonel Hutchinson's interest in Bakha is fueled by his belief that Bakha wishes to convert to Christianity. Also, though alienated from his father Lahka, Bakha feels a connection to him when thinking about how his father, his mother, and their forefathers all worshipped Rama, god of the Hindus (Anand 244). While religion is a source of the many issues the novel grapples with, it is also the force that brings our characters into contact with one another.