

## THE EMPIRE WRITING/RIGHTING ITSELF?: A READING OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

### Introduction

Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, describes post Second World War nation states as “projects the achievement of which is still in progress” (Anderson 105). He sees the the novel and newspaper as “the technical means of ‘representing’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (30) thus foregrounding the seminal role played by print media in imaging and imagining the nation. From Anderson’s analysis of nationalism and nation building and the vital impact of print capitalism on these exercises, we could surmise that a nation, for it to be accepted as such, must have a literature of its own, a literature that gives expression to the nation. Such a national literature would be particularly vital to “post Second World War nation states”—by which Anderson means nations such as India that gained independence after World War II—and are therefore seen by him as “projects [...] in progress.” In the late nineteen twenties and early thirties, a group of writers calling themselves the “progressive writers” attempted to provide India with such a “national literature.” Their endeavour, I would like to suggest, is not merely an attempt to “write back” to the colonial centre and thereby “write” the nation anew but also a mission to “right” the nation in terms of the “wrongs” or injustices in the existent orthodox Hindu and Muslim status quo of the native culture. As a founding member of the All-India Progressive Writers Association,<sup>1</sup> Mulk Raj Anand was an important part of this project. Mine is a reading of Anand’s 1935 novel *Untouchable* with the above agenda in mind, in order to examine the novel in the light of its attempt to write/right the nation.

A reconsideration of *Untouchable* seems particularly important at this point in time when postcolonialism is itself being reviewed and reassessed due to a feeling that it has lost its original critical and radical calling and edge. The editors of *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Loomba *et al* 2005) respond to these criticisms by highlighting the significance of postcolonial studies to critiquing the present, employing the analytical tools and methodological practices used to appraise the colonial past. Thus, while asserting the excitement with which the “dimensions of the field” are as yet being discovered, Peter Hulme states in his contribution to the same volume that he means by this

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<sup>1</sup> AIPWA hereafter.

both that the field is getting bigger as the characteristic language and thematic concerns of postcolonial studies spread across many disciplines and at the same time we are unearthing a lot of anticolonial work, often neglected at its time of writing, that is allowing us to piece together a fuller history of the development of postcolonial studies. (42)

It is in this sense that a re-examination of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is pertinent. This essay therefore proposes to read *Untouchable*, by placing it within the context of the AIPWA, as the movement represents the radical critical tendencies in literature and the arts in the Indian subcontinent of the early twentieth century, proposing through its agenda both social change and political freedom for India. In this sense the movement can be seen as a precursor to postcolonial studies, representing the "radical" and "critical" edge of its early period and its social and political commitment. *Untouchable* itself as a text that has given rise to much critical debate over the decades is an important text. This essay seeks to first locate Anand's text within the AIPWA and its critical agenda and then move onto a consideration of the existing criticism on the novel by considering Anand, its author, as one who through education and habit was deeply imbricated in British culture and the novel as being implicated in the dominant discourses of colonialism. The essay will then consider the resistance posed by *Untouchable* to both colonialism and the native orthodox Hindu/Muslim status quo, despite its seeming betrayal of the AIPWA agenda on national independence. This last move will enable a reconsideration of the text that provides a view of it within the "historical moment of the AIPWA" (Priyamvada Gopal's term), a specific and significant historical moment, when India was poised for independence; independence desired but not yet gained speaks of a moment of "becoming". It is this "moment" that the AIPWA addresses. *Untouchable* can be read as a text that engages with this moment, proffering ethical insights with the motive of influencing national "becoming".

Moreover, a discussion of *Untouchable* in the light of national "becoming" seems particularly apt for, as Timothy Brennan has pointed out, "it was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one yet many' of national life" and perhaps more importantly, "[i]ts manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation" (49). While one could argue for the contentious nature of these claims on the grounds that other genres can be as effective in this task as the novel, Brennan goes on to state that in the hands of the novel "'tradition' becomes what Hobsbawm calls a 'useable past', and the evocation of deep, sacred origins – instead of furthering unquestioning, ritualistic reaffirmations of a people (as in epic) – becomes a contemporary practical means of *creating* a people" (50, italics in original). It is this process of "creating a people" that *Untouchable* too participates in as I will argue in the sections that follow.

### **Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* and the AIPWA**

Sajjad Zaheer states that he and his Indian friends, who were to later collaborate in the formation of the AIPWA, were searching for "a philosophy which would help [them] understand and solve the different social problems [of India]." He also declares that they "were not satisfied with the idea that humanity had always been miserable and would also

remain so" (Zaheer quoted in Coppola 6).<sup>2</sup> These then were the ideals that eventually led to the formation of the AIPWA and many of these sentiments find an echo in Anand's proclaimed intentions in writing *Untouchable*. For, according to Anand, "*Untouchable* was in its sources a ballad born of the freedom I had tried to win for truth against the age-old lies of the Hindus by which they upheld discrimination" (Anand quoted in George 29). In the version of the AIPWA manifesto published in the Indian Journal *Hans* in October 1935, the declared duty of Indian writers is to give expression to "existent changes in Indian life and [...] assist in putting the country on the path of construction and progress."<sup>3</sup> The writers also determined to break what they call the "monopolistic control" of priests, pundits and other conservatives over literature and art and "to bring these art forms nearer the people." Further, "they should be made to reflect life and reality so that [they] may be able to light [their] future." The manifesto also resolves to "comment pitilessly on the decadent aspects of [their] country." The version of this manifesto published in the *Left Review* is somewhat different from the *Hans* version on this particular point, for it is slightly more explicit: "...we shall criticize ruthlessly in all its political, economic and cultural aspects, the spirit of reaction in our country; and we shall foster through interpretive and creative works (both native and foreign resources) everything that will lead our country to the new life for which it is striving."<sup>4</sup>

*Angare* (Live Coals), an Urdu journal published in 1932 and its four contributors Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmad Ali, Rashid Jehan and Mahmudduzzafar are generally regarded as providing the initial impetus for the formation of the AIPWA, particularly with regard to its ideals as detailed earlier in this paper. The article "In Defence of *Angare*" by Mahmudduzzafar and Ahmad Ali which appeared in *The Leader* (Allahabad) in 1933 following the ban on *Angare* is also considered significant in this respect.<sup>5</sup> However, Carlo Coppola calls Anand the "second most important individual in the development of the AIPWA" (Coppola 8). Given the fact that Anand framed the first manifesto of the AIPWA, the above assertion appears valid. Surjit S. Dulani taking this obvious connection between Anand and the AIPWA a step further suggests that Anand had written the original draft of the manifesto three years prior to the formal inauguration of the association in 1934,<sup>6</sup> placing the composition of the manifesto and the writing of his novel *Untouchable* roughly in the same time period. He therefore proposes that many of the ideas that went into the Association's manifesto "must have evolved from the gestation and writing of his first

<sup>2</sup> What Sajjad Zaheer seems to mean when he states that they were not prepared to accept that "humanity had always been miserable and would also remain so" is that he and his friends had resolved to strive against social injustices that led to the disempowerment of certain segments of society. Coppola states that "Zaheer was deeply concerned with events in Italy and Spain, but especially in Germany and their consequences on the lives of people" (6). Hence Zaheer refers to the marginalized and persecuted around the world.

<sup>3</sup> All references to the AIPWA manifesto are to versions of it presented in Carlo Coppola, "The All-India Progressive Writers' Association: The European Phase."

<sup>4</sup> See Carlo Coppola (1981) "The Angare Group: The Enfants Terribles of Urdu Literature" for a detailed discussion of this.

<sup>5</sup> See Carlo Coppola, (1981) "The Angare Group: The Enfants Terribles of Urdu Literature."

<sup>6</sup> *Untouchable* was written in the early 1930s while Anand was reading for a PhD at the University of London and was revised subsequently at the Gandhi ashram. The manuscript is dated 1933 although the novel was first published in 1935.

novel,” further asserting that “practice as a writer went hand in hand with and helped generate the theoretical framework for literature that Anand and his Indian writer friends were in the process of creating” (Dulani 189). Thus, there appears to be an intimate connection between Anand’s literary credo and the AIPWA and its manifesto.

Indeed, Mulk Raj Anand in writing *Untouchable* appears to be in perfect alignment with the AIPWA’s manifesto and its purported literary agenda. For, by espousing the cause of the “untouchables” and by depicting the deplorable conditions under which they live, he is delineating “present day realities” and “the problems of hunger, poverty, social backwardness” which were the problems that the “new literature of India” should address according to the theoretical framework of the AIPWA. Further, Anand is also very critical of orthodox Hinduism and those who uphold the traditional status quo—as is obvious in the portrayal of pundit Kali Nath, the sly, lascivious Hindu priest in *Untouchable*—thus satisfying and conforming to the Association’s avowed intention to “comment pitilessly on the decadent aspects of [their] country.” Largely Marxist in its approach, Anand’s *Untouchable* appears to be the perfect progressive novel, attempting to reflect the “great changes taking place in Indian society” with its portrayal of the Gandhian movement and modernization through which “the foundations of old ideas and beliefs are being shaken” (the AIPWA Manifesto in *Hans*).

Anand’s desire to redress the persisting injustices perpetrated on the “untouchable” community seems to have prompted him to highlight their plight by capturing their experience in his novel. “I have written a novel about a day in the life of Bakha- about how he is slapped on the face by a caste Hindu [...] I feel I want to tell the story,” he tells the Mahatma, when asked why he wrote a novel about a “harijan” (Anand 1994). The manner in which the novel is constructed is quite deliberate in that it gives us a day in the life of Bakha, but in a way in which all the degradations, humiliations and disappointments of the “untouchables” in general and Bakha in particular are encapsulated within these twelve or so hours. Bakha is rudely pulled out of his bed by his father with “Get up, oh you Bakha, you son of a pig” and leaves home to a further barrage of “Oh you scoundrel of a sweeper’s son! Come and clear a latrine for me!” (*Untouchable*15). The protagonist works assiduously cleaning the latrines and drains but he is still abused, first in town for “touching” a caste Hindu (50) and in the temple for “defiling” the whole service and the temple by his presence on the steps of the temple, (61) where he also comes to know of the lecherous Hindu priest’s attempt to molest his sister Sohini (62-63). He then goes begging for food, which is really his due, as payment for cleaning people’s toilets and drains. His food, which he finally gets, is thrown at him and falls into a drain and despite a deep feeling of revulsion he is compelled to take it in the end. In the lane where he begs, he is again yelled at for falling asleep outside a house and thus “polluting” it (71-4). Although a gift of a hockey stick by Havildar Charat Singh delights him, the hockey game itself is ruined when the babu’s little son is injured and Bakha takes him home, only to be subjected to the vituperations of the boy’s mother. Thus, throughout the day depicted in the novel Bakha’s spirit is gradually and systematically broken and he is forced to come to terms with his lowly position in society. The rendering of this inhuman treatment of Bakha is no doubt designed to gain sympathy for Bakha and others like him and to shock Indian society into a fundamental change in attitude towards what had by then become an institutionalised form of discrimination: “untouchability.” In this respect, the novel seems to be imbued with a spirit of humanism.

### A Colonial “Cringe”?

However, this humanism, as Susie Tharu convincingly argues in her article “Decoding Anand’s Humanism,” and his sympathy for the oppressed as well as his dedication to fight for the marginalized, is limited. This, she contends, is due to the fact that “the categories of his humanism remain, not just liberal and in keeping with the commitments of his time, but those of liberalism transmuted by the biases of British racism” (Tharu 31). The fact that *Untouchable* was written in English and first published in England—in marked contrast to the tenets set out in the AIPWA manifesto—is also significant for the intended readership appears to be western and upper class Indian. Although Anand strives to create for himself an identity that is shaped by Eastern traditions and philosophies in both *Apology for Heroism* and *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, even this endeavour appears to be due to a reaction to the Bloomsbury group with whom he was in close contact, while a Doctoral student in London. One could even argue that the AIPWA was at least partially inspired by the Bloomsbury Group for its first meetings were held in London, with the British leftist critic and essayist Ralph Fox acting as a kind of catalyst in its inception. The activities of the group of Indian writers which included reading out their work to the group and critiquing each others work appear somewhat similar to the pursuits of the Bloomsbury group. Furthermore, the fact that E.M. Forster first sponsored Anand and was invited to write the preface to his book *Untouchable* appears to confirm this close alliance. Thus, although Susie Tharu commends Anand for his choice of theme at a time when most writers were concentrating on Nationalist revival and reasserting Indian identity and traditions (30), his choice of theme is not particularly surprising in view of Anand’s close association with the Bloomsbury Group and writers like Forster and their line of thinking. For institutions like child marriage, “untouchability” and “sati” were practices that Europeans, both of right and left wing political persuasions, found abominable and a condemnation of these, particularly by an Indian, would have won the approval of the western intelligentsia.

Accordingly, it seems as though Anand’s determination to “comment pitilessly on the decadent aspects of India” is mediated through liberal humanism. Although this in itself might not be a problem, the manner in which “the tenets of British racism, the criteria used for judgement, its value systems” and the way “its distorting effects are reaffirmed by the narrative” are problematic (Tharu 31). Thus, as Tharu points out, instead of imaging and critiquing the society from the perspective the novel purports to present, in the guise of the point of view of the ‘untouchable’ what in fact emerges is “an ideological formation whose roots lie as much in the racist commitment that dogged that humanism as in liberalism itself” (31). The descriptions in the novel, for which Anand is usually praised, are consequently tinged with the European’s view of India as both disgusting and exotic in turn. Thus, while professing to render a narrative from the point of view of the “untouchables”, or attempting to give a voice to a subaltern character, what emerges in fact is a narrative from the viewpoint of a European and more insidiously, a reaffirmation of the colonialist view of the colonised.

What occurs at the level of description can also be seen at the level of characterization. Leela Gandhi in her analysis of humanism in relation to postcolonial theory states that “[t]he humanist valorisation of man is almost always accompanied by a barely discernible corollary which suggests that some human beings are more human than

others – either on account of their access to superior learning or on account of their cognitive faculties” (Gandhi 29). These are the tenets on which the British Empire built its discourse of superiority over India. This is splendidly brought out in Thomas Babington Macaulay’s infamous minute of 1835, where he states that “[...] all historical information which has been collected in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England.” Thus, this logic would suggest that those of superior intellect and knowledge should “educate” and “lead” the others. Interestingly, these are the very foundations of Bakha’s exceptionality in *Untouchable*. Bakha, unlike his friends and the other “untouchables” values knowledge and English education. Thus, on seeing the Mahatma for the first time he thinks, “he must be very educated” (*Untouchable* 143). Bakha also commissions the Babu’s son to teach him English. Further, “[r]ecently he had actually gone and bought a first primer of English” (39) we are told. Although poverty stricken and in want of even the basic necessities, he agrees to pay the boy “an anna per lesson,” (40) which amply demonstrates his keenness to learn.

In addition to Bakha’s superiority in terms of his desire to “better” himself through knowledge, the depiction of Anand’s protagonist buys into yet another colonialist myth - the ideals of maturity and masculinity propagated by the colonizer and the notion of the ideal colonial subject. Ashis Nandy illustrates this binarism between the “good” and “bad” colonial subject. The childlike Indian viewed as positive by the European colonizer is “innocent, ignorant but willing to learn, masculine, loyal.” He is therefore deemed “corrigible.” In opposition to this “acceptable” Indian is the “childish” Indian, thought of as ignorant but unwilling to learn, ungrateful, sinful, savage, unpredictable violent, disloyal and thus “incorrigible” (Nandy 16). The contrasting relationship we see between Bakha and the other “untouchables” is drawn along these lines. Thus, as demonstrated above, Bakha though ignorant is not only willing to learn but is also very keen and in fact actively seeks knowledge. In contrast, Bakha’s friends as well as his brother Rakha, who is always viewed in unflattering contradistinction to Bakha, are content to remain in the ignorance and squalor into which they were born. Further, Bakha is also the preferred “masculine” type for while he is physically strong and “manly” in appearance, he is not “savage” and given to “unpredictable violence.” Accordingly, Bakha is roused to anger only when his dignity as a “male” is threatened. Thus, in the “touching” scene that occurs in town when Bakha fails to announce his approach and accidentally “touches” a caste Hindu, the slap on the face he receives prompts the following reactions:

He stood aghast. Then his whole countenance lit with fire and his hands were no more joined... The strength, the power of his giant body glistened with the desire for revenge in his eyes, while horror, rage and indignation swept over his frame. In a moment he had lost all humility, and he would have lost his temper too (*Untouchable* 50)

Bakha’s smouldering rage at the indignity he suffers is acceptable, understandable, reasonable, and would therefore gain him sympathy from any equally “reasonable” readership. The second instance when Bakha is goaded into anger is when he hears that his sister Sohini is molested by the Hindu priest. Here, Bakha “responds in the true spirit of enraged patriarchy” as “the attack on the woman is regarded as also an affront to the good

name of her family" (Tharu 39). Thus, while Bakha stands looking "ruthless, a deadly pale" and "livid with anger and rage," (*Untouchable* 62) he is reminded of a similar incident which foregrounds the true cause of his anger. "A rustic had teased a friend's sister as she was coming home" her brother, presumably acting as the representative of patriarchy and guarding his family's honour, "had gone straight to the fields with an axe in his hand and murdered the fellow." (62). Bakha's instinctive response to the attack on his sister is that it is "such an insult" which reveals the patriarchal and proprietorial underpinnings of his anger. His feelings of concern for his sister come subsequently. This incident is reminiscent of the scene in E.M Forster's *A Passage to India*, presented with deep irony by the author, when British masculinity is roused to protective anger at the thought of a supposed threat to British femininity from the "savage" Indian males, after the alleged attack on Adela Quested (171-180). In *Untouchable* however, Bakha's response is presented seriously as the most acceptable reaction under the circumstances. Thus, Bakha would not only be totally acceptable to a European readership, but as a "good," "masculine" colonial who is built along the lines that the colonial project decreed, he would even be admired. In fact, it is precisely because he is so "admirable" that the abominable treatment meted out to him generates unreserved sympathy for Bakha and equally strong revulsion for high caste Hindus.

Bakha is also invested with certain values that the colonisers upheld as important; values which even provided the rationale for the Imperial project. Marlow, the narrator of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, says that the only thing that makes the enterprise of Empire worthwhile is the quality of the work that the imperialists do in their colonies. In Marlow's words, "What saves us is efficiency and devotion to efficiency" (*A Heart of Darkness* 10). This is also a value that is strongly embedded in Bakha's consciousness. The approval that is accorded to Bakha within the narrative for his efficiency is perhaps best seen in a contrastive analysis of the presentation of Bakha and Rakha. Rakha, Bakha's younger brother, is described in a most unflattering manner. He is referred to as "lazy," "listless," "lousy" and "a friend of the flies and mosquitoes, their boon companion" (*Untouchable* 84). The differences in the descriptions of the two brothers appear almost to echo the difference perceived in the binary opposition created by Orientalist discourse between the East and the West. Of Bakha we are told:

And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean. He didn't even soil his sleeves, handling the commodes, sweeping and scrubbing them. "A bit superior to his job" they always said "not the kind of man who ought to be doing this." For he looked intelligent, even sensitive with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean (16).

The contrast cannot be clearer. If Rakha is filthy and seems to luxuriate in his squalor, Bakha, even when cleaning latrines is "relatively clean." In fact, in Havildar Charat Singh's words, "here was a low caste man who seemed clean," (16) and seems therefore to be the exception to the case of the "ordinary scavenger" who is, as a rule, uncouth and unclean. This judgement of the "ordinary scavenger" is confirmed in the description of Rakha, with his running nose and fly-infested face. While Rakha is drawn and long jawed from fatigue, Bakha glows with energy even at work and is described in positive terms:

He worked away earnestly, quickly, without loss of effort. Brisk, yet steady, his capacity for active application to the task in hand seemed to flow like constant water from a natural spring. Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass. He must have had immense pent up resources lying deep in his body, for as he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity...he seemed as easy as a wave sailing away as a deep-bedded river (15-16)

This praise, poetic in its exuberance, is at the expense of other ordinary “untouchables.” Thus in Anand’s schema Bakha appears to be presented as an exceptional untouchable to be read along liberal humanist lines. This comparison can also however be interpreted in quite different terms as will be done in the next section of this essay.

It is however not merely the work ethic that Bakha imbibes from the colonial masters. Ashis Nandy in his analysis of the psychology of colonialism states:

Since about the seventeenth century, the hyper-masculine over-socialized aspects of European personality had been gradually supplanting the cultural traits which had become identified with femininity, childhood and later on, “primitivism”. As part of a peasant cosmology, these traits had been valued aspects of a culture not wedded to achievement and productivity. Now they had to be rejected as alien to mainstream European civilization and projected on to the “low cultures” of Europe and on to the new cultures civilization encountered (36).

It is through a process of hyper-masculinization that Bakha seeks to “empower” himself. Thus we are told that “[as] a child, Bakha had often expressed a desire to wear rings on his fingers, and liked to look at his mother adorned with silver ornaments”; however, “now that he had been to the British barracks and known that the English didn’t like jewellery, he was full of disgust for the florid, minutely studded designs of the native ornaments” (*Untouchable* 55). This then is his rejection of the “feminine” at a very superficial level. However, the fact that Bakha is depicted as almost a masculine ideal is quite clear through the physical descriptions of him and the fact that he is presented as excelling in manly sport. The hockey match for instance, where Bakha manages to secure a goal despite the throng of defenders attempting to stop him is significant in this light (*Untouchable* 114–5). The things he longs to buy are also an indication of this masculine ideal that Bakha has embraced. Thus, we are told that he longs to buy “the scarlet and khaki uniforms discarded or pawned by the Tommies, pith solar topees, peak caps, knives, forks, buttons, old books and other oddments of Anglo-Indian life” (11). This, then, is the stuff of which Bakha’s dreams are made. It is this world that beckons him and he longs to belong to. It is a distinctively masculine world, inhabited by the “Tommies” and Bakha’s commitment to it is amply illustrated by the fact that he decides to spend his hard-earned money on the apparel of a “Tommy” and the enjoyment of “Red Lamp” cigarettes. In opposition to this, we are shown the distinctly feminized world of his mother. His mother, missed terribly by Bakha, was “a bit too old fashioned for his then already growing modern taste, Indian to the core, and sometimes uncomfortably so” (14). The mother’s feminised world is viewed as essentially Indian. This is the world that Bakha rejects on his path towards “progress”. Hence, despite the fact that Bakha’s mother is portrayed sympathetically and projected as



positive “so loving, so good, and withal generous, giving always giving, kindness personified,” (14) Bakha “didn’t feel sad to think that she was dead. He just couldn’t summon sorrow to the world he lived in, the world of his English clothes and Red Lamp cigarettes because it seemed she was not of that world, had no connection with it” (14). Thus, Bakha seems to divorce himself from emotions traditionally associated with femininity in the reason vs. emotion dichotomy.

Ironically, although the character of Bakha is constructed along the lines mentioned above, mainly to critique the Hindu status quo for its brutal and unjust treatment of the untouchables, he is also, as Susie Tharu suggests, objectified (Tharu 32-33) and I would like to suggest, romanticized. In a passage describing Bakha at work (*Untouchable* 17), he is described as a “marvel of movement, dancing through his work.” But in the course of his work, “the sway of his body was so violent that once the folds of his turban came undone and the buttons of his overcoat slipped from their worn out folds.” This would naturally imply the violent exertions of Bakha’s labour, but the narrative voice informs us that “this did not hinder his work” and the implication is that despite the discomfiture caused by his clothes Bakha carries on working unperturbed. And so “Bakha broke the tempo of his measured activity to wipe the sweat of his brow with his sleeve. Its woollen texture felt nice and sharp against his skin, but left an irritating warmth behind. It was a pleasant irritation however, and he went ahead with renewed vigour” (17). This romanticized account of Bakha is reminiscent of the description of the *punkah-wallah* in E.M.Forster’s *A Passage to India* (201) as both depictions ignore the difficulty and tediousness of the work carried out by the characters. The fact that both these descriptions romanticize is clearly brought out in a comparison of the two with Krishan Chandar’s short story “Kalu Bhangi”. In this short story, the author foregrounds Kalu Bhangi’s marginality from the outset through the middleclass, educated narrator’s consciousness and first his unwillingness to write Kalu Bhangi’s “story” as it is not deemed significant or fashionable enough and later through the narrator/writer’s awareness of his inability to adequately represent a character as marginal as Kalu Bhangi. Hence, Chandar’s depiction of the “untouchable” is on the whole more complex for Kalu Bhangi is neither romanticized nor exoticised. Chandar’s strategy of foregrounding the voice and consciousness of the middleclass narrator rather than the “untouchable” who is the actual subject of the short story demonstrates a deep awareness of the complexity of representing subaltern voices.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Even within the Subaltern Studies collective there are debates on whether subaltern voice can ever be represented. Thus, Veena Das for instance identifies a particularly significant fact about the Subaltern Studies Group and their methodology in attempting to unearth histories from ‘below’. “[T]he contributors to *Subaltern Studies* make an important point in establishing the centrality of the historical moment of rebellion in understanding the subalterns as subjects of their own histories” (312). Das here refers mainly to *Subaltern Studies* vol. xi although her comments may be applicable to the other volumes as well. Ranjit Guha however asserts that even when writing a history of subaltern rebellion, whether in the genre of colonialist historiography, Indian bourgeois history writing or “History-of-the-Freedom Struggle” type, the rebel “is an *abstraction* called Worker-and-Peasant made to, *an ideal rather than the real historical personality of the insurgent*, made to replace him in the type of literature discussed above” (33). This seems to point to the complexity of the issues involved in such a venture. Gayatri Spivak who devotes a great deal of critical attention to the issue of representing subaltern consciousness states at the end of her essay “Can the Subaltern

Hence, the portrayal and presentation of Bakha in *Untouchable* is problematic on at least two counts. The first problem is that by presenting Bakha as an exceptional individual, constantly contrasted with the “ordinary” untouchables, Anand gains sympathy for only a certain type of “untouchable.” Indeed, most of the untouchables are depicted in such a harsh light that they tend to arouse a feeling of revulsion if not antipathy rather than the sympathy that their plight should rightly evoke, thus damaging their cause. Further, as the only “untouchable” presented as defying stereotyping, Bakha is also the only one capable of providing an “untouchable” leadership. However, as observed by Arun P. Mukherjee, “[t]he discourse of sympathy presents the protagonist Bakha as a mere recipient of others actions and discourses” (37) and as such is unable and incapable of assuming a leadership role, thus reinforcing and confirming the case for an elite leadership from the “outside.”

The second problem stems from the mode of emancipation that Bakha seems to select. Bakha seeks to liberate himself from the oppressive caste system and gain membership in a certain kind of world; one in which English, Western clothes, and the attitudes and values he has assimilated through his contact with the “Tommies” will be useful. Interestingly enough, Anand’s theory of progress appears to be in perfect alignment with the theory of social progress Ashis Nandy identifies with the colonizer. According to this theory, reforming the native (the “good,” “corrigible” native that is) would be carried out through Westernisation and modernization or Christianization (Nandy 16). The ultimate goal of this project is “partnership in the liberal utilitarian or radical utopia within one fully homogenized cultural, political and economic world” (Nandy 16). Given the fact that this theory of social progress evolved in and emanated from Europe one might easily assume that this “homogenized cultural, political and economic world” would be under the hegemonic control of Europe with its cultural, political, economic systems as the “norm.” Does *Untouchable* follow this prescription for progress with westernisation and modernization on its agenda? Is Anand then violating one of the most important tenets of the AIPWA manifesto: gaining political freedom for India? For, “advan[cing] on the path towards *India’s freedom*” (emphasis mine) is as important to them as gaining “social progress” (AIPWA manifesto 12).

### **Twin Goals: Social Reform and National Independence**

In seeking answers to these questions it is important to keep three significant factors in mind. Firstly, the desire for an independent state and Indian nationalism cannot be equated with a simple form of nativism as Gandhian philosophy encompassed both the “traditional Indian and modern western” (Bondurant, 107). Hence Gandhi’s political practice speaks of a complex mixture of modernisation and traditionalism. This is particularly apparent in the earlier South African phase of his political career for, it was by virtue of being a “British educated barrister [that] he demanded many things as a matter of right [...] which other Indians before him had never probably even had the courage to ask for” (Chandra, 172). Clearly then, Bipan Chandra et al attribute his very demand for equality to his British

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Speak?” that the subaltern cannot speak and that the circumscribed task of the (female) intellectual is to highlight the blank or empty space that is the (gendered) subaltern in literature. I feel that Krishan Chandar’s representation of Kalu Bhangi reflects a deep awareness of the issues discussed above and is therefore a more complex literary depiction of a subaltern character.

education and by extension, exposure to the discourses on equality and justice associated with it. Furthermore, as Partha Chatterjee points out in "Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society", this fusion is also apparent in Gandhian thought on industrialisation; on the one hand, exploitation—passive or active—of the villagers was attributed to industrialisation and Gandhi therefore promoted manufacturing for use. He thus advocated the spinning of cotton at home for consumption as a way of evading European exploitation. This advocacy of "khadi" and traditional Indian attire over imported material and European garments was a way of privileging the traditional and the local over the foreign and modern. On the other hand however, one can also see how a synthesis of the modern and the traditional is discernible in this demand: by asking all Indians to spin their own cotton regardless of whether it was the occupation of their caste, Gandhi was transforming the existing caste based social system as well. Secondly, the AIPWA manifesto speaks both of Indian independence and "social progress." Thus, the AIPWA was dedicated to both social reform and nationalism. Further, mainstream Indian nationalism also contained a strong social reform agenda<sup>8</sup> as

constructive work—organised around the promotion of *Khadi*, national education, Hindi-Muslim unity, the boycott of foreign cloth, and liquor, the social upliftment of the Harijans (low caste "untouchables") and tribal people and the struggle against untouchability—formed an important part of nationalist strategy especially during its constitutional phases (Chandra et. al. 25).

The twin goals of social reform and nationalism were however often in conflict with one another throughout the nationalist period. Two of the most significant issues that gave rise to this variance in Indian nationalism were the "women's question" and the caste issue. The first of these was, as Partha Chatterjee asserts, jettisoned by nationalism after "resolving" it in a way that was beneficial to nationalism, even though it meant a different and refashioned form of patriarchal oppression for women. The caste question was not, in this sense, "resolved" as it continued to play a significant role within nationalism as "[a]ll arguments about the rule of colonial difference, and hence about the inherent incapacity of Indian society to acquire the virtues of modernity and nationhood, tended to converge upon this supposedly unique Indian institution" (Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 173). The spiritual/material, home/world binarisms created by nationalism in its ideological battle with colonialism (that shaped nationalism's "resolution" of the women's question as Chatterjee points out in "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question") also had an impact on the issue of caste and untouchability. Thus, it is chiefly on account of nationalism's allegiance to spirituality in the form of orthodox Hinduism that B.R. Ambedkar chastises nationalism and the Indian Independence Movement in "Annihilation of Caste." For Ambedkar

caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down.

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<sup>8</sup> Gandhi's satyagraha and his determination to reform the caste system, the middle-class attack against the devadasis, objections to child marriage and the treatment of widows are a few famous examples of Indian social reform movements associated with the Indian Independence movement.

Caste is a notion, it is a state of mind [...] Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognised that the Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman or wrong headed. They observe caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion which has inculcated this notion of caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with, is not the people who observe caste, but the *Shastras* which teach them this religion of caste (Ambedkar 37).

Ambedkar's indictment of Hinduism as the root-cause of the malady cannot be clearer.<sup>9</sup> A reading of Ambedkar's text alongside Gandhi's response to it<sup>10</sup> provides an insight into the problematic nature of Gandhian nationalism's response to the issue of caste.

Caste has nothing to do with religion [...] But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth. *Varna* and *Ashrama* are institutions, which have nothing to do with castes. The law of *Varna* teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties [...] It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status. The callings of a Brahmin [...] and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried equal merit before man (Gandhi 53).

Gandhi's conceptualisation of *varna* reflects an extreme form of idealism on the one hand, a seeming blindness to reality vis-à-vis caste based discriminations in Indian society at the time and a refusal to accept Ambedkar's stance. As Partha Chatterjee points out, Gandhi's view exemplifies one strategy adopted by Indian nationalists in responding to the charge of caste discrimination. The other response, associated with the nationalist left as well as the Marxists, constitutes a condemnation of caste as an "oppressive and antiquated institution inconsistent with modern society" (Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 174). Tension between the two irreconcilable positions was apparent in the Indian Independence Movement and its treatment of social reform. This friction was also to an extent reflected in the AIPWA's programme. Their determination to critique decadent practices in the orthodox Hindu culture and link a belief in Marxism and socialism with a movement towards modernity can be interpreted as a form of infidelity to tradition, culture and religious spirituality, the features that had come to characterise nationalism in the nineteen thirties and forties. The AIPWA's project can therefore be seen as inimical to Indian independence. In a sense, Ambedkar's prescription for reforming society comes quite close

<sup>9</sup> It is also interesting to note the reception of these assertions in India, for, the text was originally written as a speech to be delivered at the Annual Conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore in 1936 and was subsequently published by Ambedkar himself because the speech was never actually delivered. The Conference was cancelled by the Reception Committee "on the ground that the views expressed in the speech—linking caste to the Hindu religious tenets and calling for their destruction if caste is to be eradicated—would be unbearable to the conference" (introductory note in Ambedkar 3).

<sup>10</sup> Gandhi's response was originally published in *Harijan* (July 18, 1936) and has been published as an appendix to Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (2007).

to the second response to caste outlined above and the AIPWA's reform agenda: "that the Hindu society must be reorganised on a religious basis which would recognise the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" (Ambedkar 56). Given Anand's involvement in the AIPWA, his leftist political leanings and on the other hand his connection with Gandhi, especially at the time of rewriting this novel, it is not surprising that these discourses are in conflict within *Untouchable* as well.

Priyamvada Gopal asks a pertinent question that is worth considering in the light of the current discussion: "What might we learn from Anand's convoluted attempts to weave Gandhian thought into an anti-caste novel such as *Untouchable* which, by his own admission, was revised to conform to a Gandhian 'Talisman'?" (148) However, although *Untouchable* has indeed been presented as a "Gandhian" novel, largely due to the fact that Anand himself speaks of revising the novel with Gandhi's insights and encouragement, the novel in the final analysis does not read like a "Gandhian Talisman." Rather, it is quite critical of the kind of emancipation offered to untouchables within Gandhian nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, although it may seem as though the novel contains a colonial "cringe" of sorts with Bakha's liberation imagined through his partnership in a modernised world based on western and specifically colonial standards and ideologies as discussed above, the fact that the novel was banned in India by the colonial administration when it was first published provides fresh fodder for thought.<sup>12</sup> The novel was clearly not banned by the British Raj for its critique of high caste Hindu culture. A close analysis of the comparison offered of Bakha and his brother Rakha and the last section of *Untouchable* proves instructive in arriving at a possible explanation. Thus, Rakha, who is the "true child of the outcaste's colony" (*Untouchable* 84), and the other untouchables who are seen in contrast to Bakha can be read as posing a threat to colonial ideologies: they cannot be contained within the discourse of sympathy Anand creates for Bakha. More significantly, by refusing to be inscribed by them Rakha also poses a challenge to hegemonic British discourses like those associated with cleanliness, duty and efficiency, the discourses that went into making and advancing the British empire and were the very basis of the civilising project, providing it with a rationale and *raison-d'être*. In this sense, Rakha becomes a figure of resistance exposing the limitations of and resisting and challenging the colonial discourses that *seem* to have successfully interpellated Bakha.

Interestingly however, the case of Bakha is not as straightforward as it may seem either: at one level, the fact that Bakha embraces the hyper masculinised world of the coloniser is not surprising given the manner in which he and the other untouchables are

<sup>11</sup> See Teresa Hubel's *Whose India? The Independence Struggle in British and Indian Fiction and History*, for a detailed discussion of how Anand problematises the Gandhian paradigm (170-73).

<sup>12</sup> Suresht Benjen Bald states that Anand's novels "got favourable reviews in *Indian Writing*, a Quarterly popular among Indians in England." However, he also states that "during the British Raj (Pre 1947) all of Anand's writings were banned in India. This [...] served to stimulate the public's interest" (473).

marginalised and discriminated against within traditional Hindu society. More cogently however, although Bakha initially seems infatuated with the “Tommies” and the culture that they represent as discussed above, when he sees the District Superintendent of Police (DSP) at the congress rally which Gandhi attends at the end of the novel, a change in attitude occurs. The DSP holds “all the qualities of the sahibs,” (144) that, for Bakha, were very desirable earlier on in the narrative. However, observing the DSP at the rally Bakha states that “[...] the foreigner seemed out of place, insignificant, the representative of an order which seemed to have nothing to do with the natives” (144). At this point in the narrative a defamiliarization effect comes into play when the “gaze” usually directed towards the colonised is reversed and turned on the coloniser. Thus, when Bakha’s gaze is turned on the DSP, the “foreigner” seems “out of place” and “insignificant,” in short, bereft of all authority and cutting a fairly pathetic figure, alien to the place and alienated from the people. This process effectively divests the coloniser of his allure and controlling authority. The fact that these observations are made by Bakha, who was earlier so besotted with everything the DSP stands for, makes the commentary even more powerful. It is useful at this point to consider Homi Bhabha’s conceptualisation of the effects of mimicry according to which “the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and the ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence” (Bhabha “Of Mimicry and Man” and also quoted in Young 147). The disempowered figure of Bakha, in “regulation overcoat, breeches, puttees and ammunition boots,” (10) stands as a “partial” representation of the coloniser, for he has accrued the external traits and identity markers of the sahibs but lacks their power. Hence, by being “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 89) Bakha menaces colonial authority by destabilizing it and revealing its internal contradictions. Moreover, through mimicry Bakha also unsettles colonial discourses’ attempts to “know,” “fix” and “define” the colonised within the self/other binary, which is its basis.

Similarly, while Anand’s connection with the Bloomsbury group is certainly very important and he was undoubtedly inspired by their literary genius, and the AIPWA may have been inspired by the Bloomsbury group leading to similarities between the two groups, they were also very different in one very significant respect: i.e. their response to politics. The Bloomsbury group had an “undeclared ban on political talk (*Conversations in Bloomsbury* ix) but the AIPWA manifesto clearly indicates an overt engagement with politics. Thus although Teresa Hubel, (mis)quoting Suresht Renjen Bald states that *Untouchable* addressed a “small class of privileged educated Indians” (174), what Bald actually says is that Anand’s “political visions were communicated to the Western-Educated elite, a group to which he himself belonged, which formed the core of a politically conscious intelligentsia” which is very different and highlights the group’s engagement with politics. In a project of “creating a people”/ nation, addressing a moment of national becoming, it is perhaps even essential to address this group as the would-be leaders and ideologues of the independent nation. Thus, in writing *Untouchable* in English, a language that had by this time become a common denominator among this class of Indians, one can argue that Anand was placing him self in an ideal position to right/write the new nation through his text.

Finally, I agree with Arun P. Mukherjee and Teresa Hubel that *Untouchable* fails to provide a model of untouchable leadership in the figure of Bakha, because he “does not go so far as to question the very notion of authority” and therefore “seeks another patron—

this time in the form of the saviour politician in the form of the poet or Gandhi—in which to place his trust” (Hubel 175) and with Hubel who feels that as long as Bakha

remains bound by *any* structures of authority and does not embrace that authority himself, as Ambedkar recommended to all untouchables seeking political redress for their problems, but which Anand's *Untouchable* stops short of suggesting, Bakha will continue to serve someone else's interests rather than his own and, consequently, will perpetuate the system that dictates his or another's oppression (175).

While she may be correct in saying that Bakha's representation is problematic because he continues to be bound by structures of authority, her statement that *Untouchable* stops short of suggesting such a possibility may be more problematic in the light of a statement made by the fictional Gandhi in Anand's novel in his discourse on “Harijans.” He says, “[...] if I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable condition” (147). The fact that Gandhi wants to be *born* as an untouchable so that he can free himself and other untouchables seems to speak of at least a tentative acceptance of an untouchable leadership to gain their emancipation on Anand's part. The fact that neither Gandhi nor the poet is accepted in the text as a saviour figure is also significant in this light. Further, it is important to remember that the AIPWA manifesto advocates that literature “should be made to reflect life and reality so that [they] may be able to light [their] future” (AIPWA manifesto 10). In this sense imagining an untouchable leader in the figure of Bakha may even have been problematic and even counter productive as within the historical moment captured within the text this possibility may not have existed. Moreover, one can also argue that it is not the romantic possibilities that are explored through Anand's text, but that it wishes to highlight the problem inherent in the fact that no such promise exists.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis then *Untouchable* seems to explore the options available to untouchables and critique them for their inadequacy, rather than offer prescriptions for emancipation. Such a social critique would also be in keeping with the AIPWA's objective that literature “should be made to reflect life and reality” (AIPWA manifesto 10). Thus, Priyamvada Gopal's insight into the literature produced by the AIPWA as “a literature of *reconstruction* in the wake of colonialism and nation formation, proffering ethical insights without being reducible to ahistorical morality tales” (149) can usefully be employed to think of Anand's achievement in *Untouchable* as well. *Untouchable* then can be thought of as engaging with the writing/righting nation agenda to highlight the need for social transformation within the nation and thereby helping to create the kind of nation that would no longer marginalise a section of its people.

The significance of this kind of interventionary literature for postcolonialism today is the unearthing of a history that clearly demonstrates the vital manner in which literature can and did contribute to the politics of the day, not by being narrowly prescriptive but by articulating the nature of societal problems and the inadequacy of the solutions offered.

*Untouchable* can, in this light, be read as a pioneering venture in postcolonial literary production with a radical edge.

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