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Casting Ugliness: Redefining Aesthetics in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

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Abstract

This article explores how Mulk Raj Anand, through Untouchable, redefines the aesthetics of beauty and ugliness by challenging caste-based hierarchies in 1930s colonial India. Anand critiques the idealization of upper-caste purity by exposing the moral decay of Brahmins and Chhetris, while attributing ethical and humanitarian beauty to untouchables like Bakha, who embody honesty, humility, and labor worship. Employing Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism, Mukarovsky's idea of socially constructed beauty, and Raymond Williams' critique of aesthetic idealization, the study frames Anand's politics of aesthetics within the discourse of social justice. It also draws on B.R. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste to contextualize the novel's anti-caste ideology. Anand ultimately destabilizes binary notions of beauty and grotesqueness, portraying the oppressed as morally beautiful and the so-called pure as ethically corrupt. The novel becomes a powerful critique of caste orthodoxy and a celebration of the dignity and humanity of the marginalized.

Keywords: Casteism, destabilization, humanity, grotesque-beauty, redefining

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Introduction

Aesthetics in literature has long privileged the beautiful over the grotesque, equating moral superiority with physical refinement and cultural prestige. Alfred North Whitehead in *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* utters: "Art is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment is recognition of the pattern" (228). It captures the essence of aesthetics in literature by highlighting how the structured patterns in literary works evoke aesthetic pleasure through their recognition by the reader. However, these binary collapses when viewed through the lens of subaltern narratives that challenge hegemonic ideals. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1930s), set against the caste-ridden backdrop of colonial India, dismantles this idealization by casting so-called "ugliness" not as moral deficiency, but as a site of resistance, labor, and ethical depth. Through a profound interrogation of caste hierarchies, Anand subverts dominant Brahminical discourses that associate beauty with purity and ugliness with social abjection.

In *Untouchable*, Anand employs literary realism to foreground the daily humiliations and resilience of the Dalit protagonist, Bhaka. Rather than seeking to sanitize or romanticize Bhaka's world, Anand reconfigures aesthetic values by locating dignity in physical labor and moral strength within the so-called polluted spaces of the outcastes. This redefinition aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of *grotesque realism*, which celebrates the body in degradation and views ugliness as regenerative and resistant. Likewise, Raymond Williams' cultural materialism and Jan Mukarovsky's theory of aesthetics contextualized by social function offer critical frameworks to understand Anand's aesthetics as ideologically charged and socially embedded. For Mukarovsky, aesthetics is determined by social context, and so it is political in nature. He asserts: "the aesthetic function manifests itself in a certain social context" (3). It means context determines beauty. Moreover, in *Rabelais and His World,* Mikhail Bakhtin writes: "The grotesque body creates another new body" (317). He means to say that in the modern world, the ugliest is the most beautiful, which challenges the concept of aesthetics.

Anand's narrative strategy critiques the sanitized self-image of upper-caste elites by juxtaposing their moral hypocrisy, embodied in figures such as Pundit Kalinath, with the ethical core of Dalit communities. The novel positions Bhaka not merely as a passive sufferer but as an emerging voice of dissent. His existential frustration, his moral compass, and his eventual political awakening through Gandhi's speech become instruments through which Anand inverts the conventional understanding of beauty and worth. The ugliness traditionally imposed upon Bhaka becomes, in Anand's hands, a site of philosophical beauty, an aesthetic of lived truth, humility, and social justice.

Moreover, Anand challenges the epistemological foundation of caste through the novel's representation of the untouchables not as they are but as they are imagined by the caste Hindu elites. These representations function as what Edward Said would call a "discursive formation" (23), wherein knowledge about Dalits is produced not by their lived realities but by hegemonic narratives. The novel reveals how caste operates as a performative fiction, a system of signs that constructs the untouchable through repetition, exclusion, and myth-making.

In doing so, *Untouchable* not only exposes the grotesque reality of both the privileged and the marginalized but also reclaims the discourse of beauty as a moral and political category.

Anand's humanism lies not in a universal plea for sympathy but in his radical reimagining of aesthetic values as tools of social critique. The so-called ugliness of the Dalits, marked by filth, labor, and bodily exposure, becomes a canvas on which Anand paints resilience, ethics, and humanity. His aesthetics is therefore not merely literary but activist, challenging dominant ideologies and offering an alternative politics of beauty.

Literature Review

Anand's *Untouchable* invites multiple interpretations. On the one hand, the novel exposes the double standard of Indian society; on the other hand, it exposes the hypocrisy of the so-called upper caste people. Shashi Yadav writes:

> Anand also exposed the double standard of society, where on one hand, people are polluted by the shadow of untouchability, and on the other hand, they don't hesitate to try to molest the untouchable girl. Through the character of priest Anand described the incident is described where the temple priest tries to molest Bakha's sister, and when she revolved, she was blamed for polluting him. (49)

It is a striking irony that upper-caste men exploit and harass lower-caste girls, yet accuse these very victims of defilement. Through such incidents, the novelist exposes the deep hypocrisy embedded within caste-based morality, using satire to undermine the self-proclaimed purity of the upper castes. Indian society, as depicted in the narrative, remains entrenched in the oppressive binaries of touchability and untouchability, a system that inflicts lasting psychological and social trauma. As Amit Mehta and Rabindra Kumar Verma observe:

> Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable mirrors the traumatic horror of untouchable life in India. The pathetic sufferings undergone by the untouchables have found voices of resentment, anger, and protest well depicted in the novel. The religious history reveals that the untouchables are part and parcel of Hindu society in their social and religious practices and values. The untouchables are subjected to traditional disapproval of low work and social ostracism. (1174)

The caste system, deeply rooted even within Hindu religious practices, has long served to divide people and institutionalize inequality. Untouchables have been systematically marginalized and dehumanized, condemned to perform so-called low and impure tasks. *Untouchable* reflects these harsh social realities, portraying a society in which lower-caste individuals suffer profoundly due to their assigned professions, sweeping, cleaning, and other stigmatized forms of labor. Sudeb Sarkar argues:

> If we make a journey through Untouchable, an Indian novel by Mulk Raj Anand, we can see how it causes suffering in the life of Bakha and his family. Bakha, the novel's protagonist, is untouchable as he belongs to the lower class and traditionally carries the profession of sweeper. Anand here depicts our uncivilized manners through the class struggle. The paralyzing and polarizing difference between the various caste levels shapes Bakha's day and fuels the narrative. (147)

It is the caste division that leads to discrimination, displaying our uncivilized manners. The caste division paralyzes human beings, polarizing them.

Anand, through his novel, raises the voice of the voiceless. He not only shows his sympathy towards the lower caste people but also writes and fights for them. Elbani Lianthoimoi Hrangkhol utters:

> Mulk Raj Anand, in his novel, gives a voice to the subaltern, specifically the untouchables in the Indian Caste system. They provide a narrative platform to represent in the mainstream literature. By highlighting the subaltern perspective, the narrator challenges the caste divided society and gives out a social message to sympathize with the marginalized. (591)

Giving voice to the unheard and silenced untouchables is the major motive of Anand's writing. By challenging the caste-stricken system, he stands in favour of the marginalized people. Anand's novel reflects the social reality of India, i.e., class as well as caste struggle. Through these concepts, the novel also highlights body politics in Indian society. Pvenkata Sudhakar argues:

> The novel 'Untouchable' indeed offers a telling comment on what might be regarded as a running sore in the Indian body politic. The novel talks about the conflict between two classes of society; though the conflict there is not between the untouchables and the caste Hindus, it is between a class of artisans and a class of capitalists. (49)

He portrays the upper-caste oppressors as the capitalists, highlighting how the untouchables face triple marginalization, social, economic, and cultural. Casteism and untouchability erode the very foundations of social harmony, equality, and human dignity. Even in post-independent India, caste-based discrimination continues to incite violence, brutality, and systemic injustice. Vishnu Kumar writes:

> Casteism and untouchability are the blots on the face of humanity. Anand seems to be fighting for the liberty, equality, and justice of the untouchables and the poor. He appealed for the basic human rights and needs in the newly emerging civil structure of colonial and post-independence India. He had the opinion among all the fundamental rights that human dignity is the highest. (97)

Anand advocates for the poor and the marginalized through his novel, using literature as a tool of resistance. As a committed humanist, he seeks to dismantle the rigid hierarchies imposed by the caste system and challenge the structural injustices embedded in society. His vision extends beyond critique; he upholds humanity and human dignity as the highest expressions of civilization, championing a more just and compassionate social order.

Theoretical Methodology

This study explores how the author, through his novel, challenges caste-based aesthetics by recasting ugliness and redefining beauty. It exposes the hypocrisies of so-called upper-caste Brahmins and Chhetri's, often perceived as pure, while highlighting the humanitarian virtues of the marginalized untouchables. To uncover the subversive politics underlying Anand's literary mission to uphold humanity, it is essential to trace the paradigm shift in aesthetic perception. For this purpose, the study draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism, along with Mukarovsky's and Raymond Williams' critiques of universalized beauty

frameworks that interrogate caste-influenced notions of aesthetic value. Additionally, the critical insights of B.R. Ambedkar are employed to contextualize the caste system and its dehumanizing effects. On the subject of caste, Ambedkar asserts:

> Caste is another name for control. Caste puts a limit on enjoyment. Caste does not allow a person to transgress caste limits in pursuit of his enjoyment. That is the meaning of such caste restrictions as inter-dining and inter-marriage … These being my views, I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the Caste System. (57)

Caste functions as a primary tool for establishing hierarchy and exerting control within society. Contrary to popular belief, Hinduism is not inherently rooted in the caste system; rather, caste was imposed and embedded into the religion through power dynamics that sought to institutionalize inequality. Although relatively recent in origin, the caste system has been naturalized within Hindu practice over time. Norms, values, and aesthetic judgments are not fixed or absolute; they are shaped by social context. In this regard, the perception of beauty and ugliness is not intrinsic but contextually constructed. As Mukarovsky argues in *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts:*

> *This is the essential property of art.* But an active capacity for the aesthetic function is not a real property of an object, even if the object has been deliberately composed with the aesthetic function in mind. Rather, the aesthetic function manifests itself only under certain conditions, i.e., in a certain social context. (3)

Aesthetics is inherently fluid, shaped by time, place, and circumstance, rather than a fixed or universal standard. What is deemed ugly in one era or context may be celebrated as beautiful in another. This contextual nature of aesthetic judgment underscores its deep entanglement with social and cultural frameworks. In this vein, British cultural Marxist and founding figure of cultural studies, Raymond Williams, challenges conventional aesthetic doctrines in his seminal work *Marxism and Literature*. He interrogates the persistent dilemma in literary theory: the very definition of literature. While traditional critics often anchor this definition in formal artistic features, modern theorists, drawing on ideas like Roman Jakobson's notion of "literariness" or "poeticity", emphasize the constructed and socially mediated nature of literary value.

> Williams sees literature instead as a shifting historical product, not a transcendent entity, but a complex, mutating human product linked with concepts such as literacy, imagination, taste, and beauty, all sophisticated by socio-historical conditions. He also notes that criticism and its function have similarly mutated to reflect changing roles. (Leitch 1566)

For Williams, aesthetics is fundamentally a socio-historical phenomenon. He critiques the idealization and standardization of literature, arguing that such notions mask discrimination under the guise of equality by enforcing a universal standard of beauty that marginalizes the grotesque. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin challenges classical aesthetics by elevating the grotesque as a form of beauty. In *Rabelais and His World*, he asserts that "the grotesque body... is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (317). This suggests that creative activity emerges from what is conventionally considered ugly, with the grotesque body symbolizing continual renewal and transformation.

Textual Analysis/Discussion

Anand's mission to subvert hierarchical notions of beauty is realized in *Untouchable*, where all human beings are seen as equally beautiful within their social contexts, an idea aligned with Mukarovsky's evolving concept of beauty. G.S. Balaram Gupta aptly describes Bakha, the protagonist, as a perfect individual whose only flaw is his low caste, a circumstance beyond his control. Gupta writes:

> Bakha is a perfect individual whose excellence is flawed by his low caste for which he is not responsible. But this becomes a serious shortcoming and forms the cause of so much humiliation and ill-treatment suffered by him at the hands of the caste Hindus. Thus, we find that Anand suggests that man's fate in the contemporary world is controlled and shaped by society and men rather than by God. (29)

Though labeled ugly, dirty, and untouchable by upper castes, the lower castes embody true humanity and beauty. Anand's novel rejects the oppressive Hindu caste system imposed on millions, enabling caste discrimination. He envisions liberation through the acceptance of modern values. Bakha's desire to learn English and adopt modern dress symbolizes his aspiration to join modern life and be like the Sahibs.

The depiction of untouchables as dirty, uncouth, and impure reflects the caste Hindus' constructed image designed to justify their inferiority. Anand's narrative dismantles these falsehoods, showing Bakha as a skilled and clean worker:

> 'What a dexterous workman!' The onlooker would have said. 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.' (Anand 98)

High-caste Hindus forcibly dehumanize the untouchables by projecting stereotypical identities onto them. Casteism, therefore, functions as a body of knowledge through which upper castes assert control over outcastes. As Ambedkar famously stated, *"Hindu society as such doesn't exist. It is only the collection of castes." (6)*

Ambedkar asserts that the caste Hindu is a myth that does not exist. Similarly, Anand identifies the caste system as a discourse constructed by the Brahmins. Writing on Hinduism, Kancha Ilaiah states:

> All the Gods and Goddesses are institutionalized, modified, and contextualized in the most Brahmin anti-Dalit bahujan mode. All Hindu Gods were opposed to the Dalit bahujan. The religion, from its very inception, has a fascist nature to suppress the revolts of Dalit bahujans; the Brahminical forces instigated their Gods. (15)

The caste Hindus have neither seriously understood nor studied the untouchables; instead, they created them as a product of imagination. Exposing such Brahmin hypocrisy, Anand disrupts the aesthetic hierarchy, portraying the untouchables as beautiful and authentic, while the Brahmins appear fake and hypocritical.

The untouchables, positioned lowest in the caste order, are revealed as mere constructs of lies and myths within the caste system. Casteism is born from myth, legend, assumption, and theory. It seems that the mere presence of untouchables inspired caste Hindus to fabricate an outcaste figure, uncouth, unclean, dirty, impure, and even immoral. Ironically, however, the temple priests themselves are often dirty and immoral. The narrator reflects:

> And he recalled the familiar sight of all those naked Hindu men and women who could be seen squatting in the open, outside the city, every morning. 'So shameless,' he thought; 'they don't seem to care who looks at them, sitting there like that. It is an account that the Gora white men call them kala log zamin par hagnewalla (Blackman, you who relieve yourself to the ground). Why don't they come here?' (35)

The Hindu castes are shameless and exposed, a truth that demands recognition. As Ambedkar states, "*There cannot be a more degrading system of social organization than the caste system. It is the system that deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity.*" (17) The caste system degrades human society by promoting hierarchy and discrimination.

Anand further depicts the caste system as a source of hierarchization and dehumanization. Even the priests are immoral. Pundit Kali Nath attempts to molest Sohini while she cleans the storehouse. Bakha and Sohini overhear the aftermath of the incident. Bakha exclaims:

> 'Tell me, Sohini,' he said, turning fiercely to his sister, 'how far did he go? She sobbed and didn't reply. Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if [...]' he shouted. 'He-e-e just teased me,' she at last yielded. 'And then when I was bending down to work, he came and held me by my breasts.' (54)

The so-called pure and civilized Pandit Kalinath is, in fact, the ugliest and dirtiest figure, while the protagonist Bhaka emerges as a moral and revolutionary human being. Bhaka defies the boundaries imposed by the high castes, breaking the rules of the caste system. His rebellious spirit is recorded throughout the novel. Submissiveness, rather than mere surrender to the powerful, also serves as a form of resistance. Lakha, for example, exemplifies this complex form of quiet revolt. Anand poignantly describes:

> He halted suddenly, and facing the shopkeeper with great humility, joined his hands and begged to know where he could put a coin to pay for a packet of 'Red-Lamp.' The shopkeeper pointed to a spot on the board near him. Bakha put his anna there. The betel-leaf-seller dashed some water over it from the jug with which he sprinkled the betel leaves now and again. Having thus purified it, he picked up the nickel piece and threw it into the counter. Then he flung a packet of 'Red-Lamp' cigarettes at Bakha, as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop. (33-34)

The so-called upper-caste people insult and humiliate the lower castes to assert their supposed superiority. Though deeply hurt by this, the sensitive boy Bakha continues on, eager to smoke. Anand exposes the upper castes as cruel, while portraying the lower castes as tolerant and resilient despite their suffering and dehumanization. A similar humiliating incident unfolds further along the main street when Bakha stands before a Bengali sweet stall and asks for jalebis worth four annas. He recalls:

> The confectioner smiled faintly at the crudeness of the sweeper's taste, for jalebis are rather coarse stuff, and no one saves a greedy low-caste man would ever buy four annas' worth of jalebis. [. . .] he caught the jalebis, which the confectioner threw at him like a cricket ball, placed four nickel coins on the shoe board for the confectioner's assistant who stood ready to splash some water on them, and he walked away embarrassed, yet happy. (37)

The caste system creates an oppressive and humiliating atmosphere for lower-caste people throughout society. Here, Anand seeks to redefine beauty by standing in solidarity with the untouchables. The writer illustrates how the caste system forces the untouchables to recognize their marginalization. A grave catastrophe occurs in Bakha's life when, overwhelmed with the joy of having sweets, he forgets to call out "Posh, posh, sweeper coming" and accidentally touches a caste Hindu named Lallaji. Bakha does not intend to pollute him, yet he instantly becomes the focus of a crowd of high-caste onlookers. This gathering exposes the harsh social reality faced by untouchables like Bakha. In that moment, Bakha is painfully awakened to his position as an untouchable in the eyes of society. He reflects:

> They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I came here. [. . .] It is only the Hindus and the upper castes who are not sweepers. For them, I am sweeper, sweeper--Untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable. (100)

The upper castes despise the lower castes as untouchables and liken them to excrement, revealing their deep-seated hypocrisy. Anand's intent, however, is to portray the upper castes as inhuman and ugly, while elevating the lower castes as beautiful, echoing Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body: "the grotesque body... is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (317). Bakhtin further notes, "The image of rape, sewerage, dirty body, and the excrement is related to death/birth at the same time" (338), illustrating that the dirt, excrement, and latrines associated with the lower castes are sites of regeneration and thus represent true beauty.

Anand reveals how the untouchables endure a series of humiliations inflicted by the upper castes. The catastrophe of 'touching' becomes a pivotal moment in Bakha's life, awakening him to his social reality. Though careful to announce his presence, Bakha faces yet another insult upon reaching the temple courtyard. As he glimpses the dark sanctuary and idols, he is stunned by the priest's shouts of "polluted, polluted," while another accuses him of polluting through his sister Sohini. Approaching the temple, Bakha is further mocked by worshippers shouting from the steps:

> The distance, the distance! A temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it, and here he was actually on the steps at the door. We are ruined. We will need to have a sacrificial fire to purify ourselves and our shrines. (53*)*

Temples are sites where priests exert control over the outcaste people, creating laws to dominate the lower castes. "These rules were an amalgamation of local custom, caste convention and

a rough and ready... reading of the Shastras" (Baxi, 251). Upendra Baxi further observes that "the marginalized appropriation of illegal archives will undoubtedly bring to us in the future how 'the rule of the law' can be defied and how 'the dignity of the tragic discourse' can be restored" (250). This aligns closely with Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque and carnivalesque: "It is a bringing-down-to-earth renewal and re-fertilization. It digs a bodily grave for a new birth" (174–176). For Bakhtin, the grotesque is the source of creation.

The novel exposes the hidden reality of the upper castes who see themselves as pure, while branding the lower castes as impure and dirty. Another incident deeply disturbs Bakha's mind. One evening, while playing hockey, Bakha carries Babu's injured son home. Babu's wife, furious, accuses Bakha of polluting her son by touching him and even suspects Bakha of causing the injury. She shouts, "'You eater of your masters, you dirty sweeper! What have you done to my son? Oh, you eater of your masters! What have you done? You have killed my son! Give him to me! Give me my child! You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son!" (106). These events reveal the deep injustice faced by the untouchables at the hands of caste Hindus.

Anand's purpose is to redefine beauty by exposing ugliness, that is, to depict the evils of the caste system. Pundit Kali Nath, a respected priest in the town temple, attempts to molest Sohini, an untouchable girl, yet he is highly esteemed by society. Shockingly, he blames Sohini, accusing her of polluting him. He argues:

> *'But* I... I...' shouted the lanky priest, historically, and never finished his sentence. The crowd on the temple steps believed that he had suffered most terribly and sympathized, for it had seen the sweeper boy rush past him. They didn't ask about the way he had been polluted. They didn't know the story that Sohini told Bakha at the door of the courtyard with sobs and tears. (53)

Nobody would believe that a priest could stoop to such low behavior. More so, nobody would accept it as the truth. Even Lakha, Bakha's father, could not imagine that a priest, any priest, would seduce a girl from a low caste family. This reveals how high caste Hindus are unquestioningly valorized, while untouchables are perpetually regarded as filth. Tragically, even the untouchables themselves internalize the belief that caste Hindus are inherently superior. Yet Anand strips the Pandit bare through his wild and animalistic behavior, proving that those deemed beautiful by caste are, in truth, grotesque.

The author forcefully argues that such a rigidly imposed caste system on the marginalized must be dismantled. The attitude of high caste people toward the outcastes is the very reason for the breakdown of human relationships. For instance, when Bakha carries Babu's injured son home, his kind act is met not with gratitude but with verbal abuse from the boy's mother. He narrates:

> Bakha handed over the child, and, afraid, humble, silent as a ghost, withdrew. Of course, I polluted the child. I couldn't help doing so. I knew my touch would pollute him. But it was impossible not to pick him up. He was dazed, the poor little thing. And she abused me. I only get abused and derision whenever I go. (106 -7)

Outcasts are deprived of education in the caste system. Ilaiah rightly states, "Hinduism, with its Brahmin, holds prohibited education to us, change in times, and the spread of modern education, and also due to the reservation system that came due to Dr. Ambedkar's efforts. Until then, there was no educated class in these castes" (qtd. in Sastry, 16). High caste people believe themselves to be clean and pure in comparison to the outcastes. They consistently harbor hatred toward them.

Anand, in Untouchable, portrays how upper caste people insult and humiliate the lower castes. He vividly sketches the scene when Bakha accidentally touches a caste Hindu in the marketplace. The author exposes:

> 'Keep to the side of the road. You, low-caste vermin!' he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. 'Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!' 'You swine, you dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach!' He shouted as he met Bakha's eyes. 'Don't you know, you brute, trial: you must not touch me!' (89)

This is the Brahmnical notion. Caste Hindus neglect the vast number of untouchables. Nichols reminds the injustice of Hindu society and says, "You must believe that you are polluted if you eat certain foods . . . damned if you drink with certain people" (68). The caste Hindus promote the belief that eating, sitting, and behaving with the lower caste people leads to people to damnation.

Anand exposes the dirty thinking and beliefs of the upper caste people that they think the lower caste people must clean the dirt, and so they are impure. The high caste people themselves are innocent about their respect for 'touching' the dirty bull. The narrator further describes:

> A huge, big-humped, small-horned, spotted old Brahmin bull was ruminating with half-closed eyes near him. The stink from its mouth as it belched, strangely unlike any odor that had assaulted Bakha's nostrils that day, was nauseating. And the liquid dung which the bull had excreted and which Bakha knew it was his duty to sweep off sickened him. But presently, he saw a well-dressed wrinkled old Hindu, wearing, like a rich man, a Muslim scarf over his left shoulder, advance to the place where the bull was enjoying its siesta and touch the animal with his forefingers. That was a Hindu custom, Bakha knew. (44-5)

The grotesque reality of the society in Ananad is similar to Bakhtin's notion of orifices and excrement's Vice, in Introducing Bakhtin, claims excrements in Bakhtinian grotesque realism possess "life-giving qualities" (167).

Bhaka works with excrements because he is an untouchable. However, the excrements have fertilizing and life-generating qualities. Therefore, the so-called grotesque or ugly is quite beautiful.

In the novel, the consideration of caste Hindus as superiors is further questioned through the contrast of a Brahmin lad doing a scavenger's work to teach Gandhi's *ashram scavenger cleanliness. Gandhi, in his speech, says:*

> I love scavenging. In my ashram, an eighteen-year-old Brahmin lad is doing scavenger's work, in order to teach the ashram scavengers cleanliness. The lad is no reformer. He was born and bred in orthodoxy. He is a regular reader of the Gita and faithfully says his prayers. (138)

The narrator emphasizes that the conflict between the untouchables and caste Hindus stems from the latter's belief in their superiority. Writers and critics argue for subverting the hierarchical language that reinforces caste divisions. Ajit K. Chaudhury notes, "the possibility of rupture depends on the overall state of general contradictions and particular contradictions" (244), aligning with Bakhtin's subversion of beauty and ugliness.

Anand's mission is to dismantle caste-based hierarchies and assert equality. Poet Iqbal Nath Sarahar echoes this idea: "All men are equal. 'Take a ploughman from the plough, wash off his dirt, and he is fit to rule a kingdom'" (145). Anand selects the plight of the lower castes as his subject to challenge the dominance of the upper castes and expose the exploitation and control imposed on them.

He proposes a solution: "And … introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone having to handle it, the flush system. Then, the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status ……casteless and classless society" (302). This symbolizes liberation from caste-based labor and social stigma.

G. S. Balram Gupta (1974) rightly analyzes Anand as a social protester: "A strong believer in the dignity of man and equality of all men, Anand is naturally shocked by the inhuman way the untouchables are treated by those who belong to the superior caste…He suggested that they can be freed from the shackles of killing orthodoxy and tradition" (24).

Bakha becomes the embodiment of protest throughout the novel. Anand portrays his rebellious spirit as a challenge to the oppressive caste system.

> He resolved to tighten himself. He gnashed his teeth. A warmth rose to his ears. He felt a quickening in his blood. Then came the sweep of his ever-recurring emotions. He boiled with rage. 'Horrible, horrible,' his soul seemed to cry out within him. He felt the most excruciating mental pain he had ever felt in his body. He shivered. His broad, impassive face was pale with hostility. (89)

Bakha happens to break the laws of the ancient Indian caste system by touching a caste Hindu named Lalla ji and is promptly punished for the sin he has unknowingly committed. Bakha feels a smoldering rage in his soul. Anand, like Bakhtin, endeavors to redefine the concept of beauty, casting the ugliness through Bhaka's gestures and postures and thereby subverting the caste-based hierarchy in the field of aesthetics. The narrator in the novel speaks:

> His feelings would rise like spurts of smoke of a half-smothered Fire, in fitful, unbalanced jerks when the recollection of some abuse or rebuke he had suffered kindled a spark in the ashes of remorse inside him. And in the smoky atmosphere of his mind arose dim ghosts of forms peopling the scene he had been through. 'Why was all this?' He asked himself in the soundless speech of cells receiving and transmitting emotions, which was his usual way of communicating with himself. 'Why was all this fuss? Why was I so humble? I could have struck him.' (42)

When Pundit Kalinath sexually molests Sohini, Bakha shows hatred toward him. The narrator describes Bakha's reaction: "His fist was clenched. His eyes flared wild and red, and his teeth ground between them the challenge: 'I could show you what that Brahmin dog has done!' He felt he could kill them all. He looked ruthless, a deadly pale and livid with anger and rage" (54). Bakha's ugly form here challenges the hypocrisy and duplicity of upper-caste people like Pundit Kalinath. This ugliness is not truly ugly; it becomes beautiful as it stands for truth, justice, equality, and humanity.

Anand challenges standardizing literary traditions by presenting the untouchable as a rebellious hero. This aligns with Raymond Williams' idea: "Williams thus challenges all idealizing notions of literature" (Leitch, 1566). Bakha's inclination toward Gandhi's philosophy adds to this beauty. He listens to Gandhi's speech in Golbagh, where Gandhi proposes a solution to untouchability. Bakha is drawn to this solution. He utters:

> They should now cease to accept leavings from the plates of high-caste Hindus, however clean they may be represented to be. They should receive grain only—good, sound grain, not rotten grain—and that too, only if it is courteously offered. If they can do all that I have asked them to do, they will secure their emancipation. (139)

Gandhi's solution to caste hierarchy reveals the problem of its subversion. The Brahmins created the concept of God to control and enforce caste laws, while the low-caste people suffered greatly. For them, if there is a God, He must be a symbol of equality, not one who imposes evils like untouchability. The protagonist's emotional reactions to the domination and humiliation by caste Hindus reflect this sentiment. Broadly, Bakha longs for the untouchables to shake off their slavery and achieve emancipation.

Untouchable casts the ugliness of the upper castes through a caste Hindu woman. Bakha is shocked when the mother of a child injured in a match curses him, rather than thanking him for carrying her son home: "What have you done? You have killed my son!" she wailed, flying her hands across her breasts and turning blue and red with fear. "Give me my Child! You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son" (122). By displaying the inhuman qualities of such a figure, Anand portrays the upper castes as ugly, while projecting the lower castes as human and moral.

A caste-ridden society shows no empathy for the untouchables performing service tasks. Rich Hindu businessmen overfeed idle priests but grudgingly give dry bread to those who serve them. Temples remain closed to those who keep the ground clean. The Hindu notion of 'pollution by touch' and 'pollution from a distance,' and the hypocrisy of Hindu women who treat sweepers as pariahs but want to be called 'mother' by them, are mocked in the novel.

It is the upper caste that sees scavenging as filthy, not the untouchables who perform it. Bakha proves his commitment: "Work was a sort of intoxication which gave him a glowing health and plenty of easy sleep" (18). He performs his task with dedication and sincerity. Bakhtin's idea of grotesque excrement applies: "The image of rape, sewerage, dirty body and the excrements is related to death and birth at the same time" (Bakhtin, 338). Physically, Bakha embraces his work with dignity. His positive traits remain hidden, unrecognized by society. He writes:

> He worked away earnestly, quickly, without loss of effort. Each muscle of his body, hard as rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass… 'What a dexterous workman!' the onlooker would have said…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 have 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, by and large, uncouth and unclean. (98)

Anand projects Bhaka as the most honest, moral, devoted to work with work work-worshipping tendency, and dutiful, which makes him beautiful in the novel. It exposes Bakha's true nature; he seems rather clean, strong, and intelligent, and his physical structure and performances do not concur with his untouchable identity as stereotyped and marginalized by the caste system.

Anand's motive in writing the novel is to remove the caste tagged ugliness from the lower caste people and prove them to be really civilized, practical human beings. In the novel, Bhaka's body, involved in a filthy profession, has been presented as a healthy and beautiful body. Furthermore, the narrator mentions:

> Bhaka has a dark face, round and solid, and exquisitely well defined, lit with a queer sort of beauty. The toil of the body had built up for him a very fine physique. It seemed to suit him, to give him homogeneity, a wonderful wholeness to his body, so that you could turn round and say: Here is a man.' And it seemed to give him nobility, strangely in contrast with his filthy profession and with the sub-human status to which he was condemned from birth. (20)

Despite the untouchability imposed upon an individual, it does not erase his personality, human nature, or physical traits. Bakha's resistance defies the homogenous representation of untouchables and asserts that an untouchable individual can be beautiful, clean, attractive, and perfect. It affirms that individuals should not be essentialized or generalized based on group identity, as such assumptions obscure their true selves.

By portraying the scavengers' lack of drainage and the uncongenial environment, Anand casts ugliness to redefine beauty and subvert caste-based hierarchy. Bakha lives in an outcaste colony, separated from the upper-caste society. The colony's houses are "mud-walled, clustered together in two rows" (9), inhabited by "scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcasts" (9). The area stinks, as "the absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons… given out the most offensive stink" (9). This vividly illustrates the socio-cultural divisions that confine the outcaste community.

Anand depicts Bakha's humiliation when upper-caste women mistreat him while begging for food. His food is thrown to the ground: "paper-like pancake floated in the air and fell like a kite onto the brick pavement of the gully" (72–73). Despite his desperation, Bakha feels ashamed and regrets picking up the discarded food. His embarrassment expresses rebellion against the unjust fate imposed on him. In contrast, a sadhu, also begging, is treated with reverence: "the woman's tone had changed from kindness to the holy man to cruelty to him" (71).

The sadhu is offered "steaming hot vegetable curry and a potful of cooked rice," while Bakha receives a dried piece of bread and verbal abuse. The term "pariah" used against him highlights his low status and untouchability.

By the end of the novel, Bakha recognizes the flaws of the caste system, the hypocrisy of the upper castes, and the illusions of Western life. Although initially drawn to the West, he rethinks this attraction after hearing: "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" (155). This resonates with Ambedkar's assertion: "Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system" (227). The idea of equality gives Bakha hope and prompts him to resist Western admiration.

Bakha realizes the limitations of Western identity when Indian ideals promise dignity and equality. As someone denied rights due to his Indian identity, he initially sees the West as an escape. But upon hearing, "the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society" (155), he sheds his inferiority complex and embraces his Indian identity.

Findings

This analysis shows that Anand identifies the caste system as the chief culprit, one that deifies and dehumanizes individuals through hierarchy and inequality. Anand redefines beauty by casting ugliness, thereby subverting the Hindu caste system's constructed notions of beauty and ugliness. He aims to amplify the voice of the voiceless while undermining that of the powerful, in pursuit of a more harmonious human society.

Anand, through his novel, disrupts caste-based perceptions of beauty and ugliness in 1930s Indian society. By subverting these norms, he redefines beauty through the portrayal of both upper and lower caste characters such as Bhaka, Sohini, Pundit Kalinath, and others. Pundit Kalinath's hypocrisy is exposed, though he claims purity as an upper-caste priest, he sexually molests Sohini and then falsely accuses her of polluting his temple. The upper-caste community unquestioningly believes him, not Sohini, revealing their deep-rooted bias and duplicity.

Similarly, when Bhaka accidentally touches a caste Hindu on the street, he is scolded, called vermin, and accused of pollution. At the shop, the shopkeeper throws goods at him and washes the coins he touched. When Bhaka carries Biju's injured child home, Biju's wife accuses him of polluting the child. These episodes reveal the upper castes as inhuman, cruel, sinful, and immoral. Anand exposes them as ugly not for their physical appearance, but for their lack of human decency.

Conversely, lower caste characters like Bhaka, Lakha, and Sohini, though engaged in occupations deemed dirty, are portrayed as dutiful and sincere. Their moral strength and humanity render them beautiful in Anand's redefined aesthetic.

Conclusion

Thus, Anand's Untouchable stands as a deconstructive text of the 1930s caste- ridden Indian society. The text subverts the caste-created hierarchical concept of aesthetics, casting ugliness, and thereby redefining beauty-proving grotesque as beautiful and vice versa. The writer's main motive in the text is to change the society, authorizing the caste- tormented people and downsizing the caste-deified people, endeavoring to redefine beauty and aesthetic principles and values. This analysis reveals the hidden reality of a society in which the upper-caste people are depicted as pure, civilized, and beautiful, whereas the lower-class people are depicted as impure, dirty, and ugly. By doing so, the research highlights on actual reality of the society that the pure are dirty and the ugly are beautiful. Therefore, this study contributes as a source for future researchers in subversive aesthetics and a supportive tool for marginalized people of the world in general and the caste-stricken people in particular to fight any kind of hierarchization and dehumanization, establishing equality, morality, and humanity in society.

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