



SOCIAL OPPRESSION IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

Wirayana Sipayung¹, Rosa Maria Simamomora²

^{1,2}Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas

Email : rosa_simamora@ust.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This is a study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* as the representation of social oppression. The novel shows that social oppression is felt as the impacts of poverty and stigmatization. This is library research and applies mimetic theory proposed by M.H. Abrams. Mimetic approach looks literary work as the imitation of natural aspects and replication of world life. The oppression which is represented by outcast characters feel oppressed because they do not have access to public facilities, education, health service, and job. They are not allowed to use public facilities such as well, temple, road, and get good job because they are poor, considered virus and cursed. They become the victims of stigmatization, prejudice, exile, and hatred.

Keywords: oppression, touchable, stigmatize, acces, public facilities

I. INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand is a prolific writer whose career spanned more than 75 years, during which he was widely identified with the quest for a just, equitable, and forward-looking India. He wrote extensively in areas as diverse as art and sculpture, politics, Indian literature and the history of ideas, was a staunch Marxist and Gandhian. His literary career was launched by a family tragedy, instigated by the rigid caste system that continues to be the scourge of Indian society even today. (Kumar and Pandya 3). He had always befriended and played with the children of sweepers and as a child he had been shocked and disgusted by the suicide of a relative who had been disowned by his family for daring to share her food with a Muslim, for this too was regarded as pollution. He had always been disgusted with and opposed religious sectarianism, communalism and caste society (Talat 7). He was an English-language Indian writer of immense distinction, translated into over 40 languages and was "Uncle Mulk" to generations of influential Indians, among them Indira Gandhi (Alastair 3).

Earning his PhD in 1929 in England, he actively became involved in left wing politics and he became a writer in English language as English language publishers were more open to publish the kind of

themes he wrote on (Editors 1). For him literature should be an interpretation of the truth of people's lives, should be written from felt experience and not books and so it was for this reason that he returned to India briefly in 1929. Being influenced by Gandhi, he came to his ashram in Ahmedabad, where he showed Gandhi drafts of his novel. Gandhi was extremely critical because he claimed there was too much of the 'Bloomsbury' feel to it, on which he was probably right. While in Ahmedabad, Anand lived like a disciple and did his share of cleaning the toilets – an act seen as defilement for a caste Hindu. In this period Anand revised his book considerably and when Forster read it his retort to those who complained about the 'dirt' in the novel, was that "the book seems to me indescribably clean ... it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it." (Talat 8).

His work includes poetry and essays on a wide range of subjects, as well as autobiographies, novels and short stories. His best known work was the novel *Untouchable* which plot revolves around what happens when he meet an upper caste man and encounters atrocities (Editors 4). The novel was seen as a poignant reminder of the atrocities of the caste system in India (Editors 3).



II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Untouchable is indeed a pathetic cry of the sufferings of the low class people under the British rule and also under the pressure of outdated Hindu/Brahmin customs and oppressive traditions. The Indian society had been suffering under the burden of slavery for the past two hundred years. Age old practices of discrimination on the basis of caste and class continued to crush the free spirit of man and also continued to separate man from man. The society suffered at different levels but could not think of uniting, regardless of any bias, under one banner of humanity. They remained disintegrated under different flags. To a sensitive heart like his, this discrimination was digging at the roots and was eating away the vitality of the country. Anand could see and understand that discrimination rampant in society was weakening the nation. Thus novel is a pathetic but also a heart rending cry of the author against the cruelty and prejudice of the higher caste people towards the lower castes, the dalits and the subalterns. It is his ruthless attack against the hitherto rigid, gradually crumbling caste-system in India (Sharma 2)

Untouchables were considered so impure that any contact with them by a cast member would contaminate the member and the caste-person would have to bathe and wash his or her clothing immediately. The Untouchables did work that no-one else would do, like scavenging animal carcasses, leather-work, or killing rats and other pests. Untouchables could not even eat in the same room as caste members and could not be cremated when they died (KallieSzczipanski 7).

In cases of social oppression, of the dominant and subordinate groups are involved, regardless of individual attitudes or behavior, and the outcome of social oppression is that groups in society are sorted into different positions within the social hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Those in the controlling, or dominant group, benefit

from the oppression of other groups through heightened privileges relative to others, greater access to rights and resources, a better quality of life, and overall greater life chances. Those who experience the brunt of oppression have fewer rights, less access to resources, less political power, lower economic potential, worse health and higher mortality rates, and lower overall life chances (Crossman 1).

Oppression is the systemic and institutional abuse of power by one group at the expense of others and the use of force to maintain this dynamic. An oppressive system is built around the ideology of superiority of some groups and inferiority of others. It also refers to a less overtly malicious pattern of subjugation, although in many ways this social oppression represents a particularly insidious and ruthlessly effective form of manipulation and control. In this instance, the subordination and injustices do not afflict everyone-instead it targets specific groups of people for restrictions, ridicule, and marginalization. No universally accepted term has yet emerged to describe this variety of oppression, although some scholars will parse the multiplicity of factors into a handful of categories, e.g., social (or sociocultural) oppression; institutional (or legal) oppression; and economic oppression (Wikipedia).

Social oppression is when a single group in society takes advantage of, and exercises power over, another group using dominance and subordination. This results in the socially supported mistreatment and exploitation of a group of individuals by those with relative power. In a social group setting, oppression may be based on many ideas, such as poverty, gender, class, race, or other categories. Oppression by institution, or systematic oppression, is when the laws of a place create unequal treatment of a specific social identity group or groups. Another example of social oppression is when a specific social group is denied access to education that may hinder their lives in later life. Economic



oppression is to divide between two classes of society. These were once determined by factors such as slavery, property rights, disenfranchisement, and forced displacement of livelihood. Each divide yielded various treatments and attitudes towards each group (Wikipedia).

Social oppression derives from power dynamics and imbalances related to the social location of a group or individual. Social location, as defined by Lynn Weber, is "an individual's or a group's social 'place' in the race, class, gender and sexuality hierarchies, as well as in other critical social hierarchies such as age, ethnicity, and nation". An individual's social location often determines how they will be perceived and treated by others in society. Three elements shape whether a group or individual can exercise power: the power to design or manipulate the rules and regulations, the capacity to win competitions through the exercise of political or economic force, and the ability to write and document social and political history. There are four predominant social hierarchies, race, class, gender and sexuality, that contribute to social oppression (Wikipedia). For example, Indonesian people of ex-leprocy, ex-PKI (Comunist Indonesian Party) can still be considered as threatment, disturbance, garbage in the society (Piliang 5). They are stigmatized and live alienated from people around.

This research applies mimetic theory proposed by Abrams. Mimetic approach looks literary work as imitation of natural aspects and replication of world life. He also adds that an art imitates the social state and the state of man, so it cannot be separated from question of truth, suspen and virtue. The mimetic concept is the reference of a work to as subject matter which it imitates. The character as an imitation of human actions what defines the art in general and the kind of action imitated serves as one important differentiation of an artistic species in mimetic orientation that imitation is always of one thing and the

form of the work is devided from the object is imitated (Abrams 8).

This is a library research where the materials are collected from libraries and interenet browsing. The novel itself is treated as the primary source. The supporting source is attained through extensive reading on various books as well as literary criticism, information collected from internet and several books, and essays that relevant to the research.

III ANALYSIS

Untouchable, a novel which consists of 157 pages describes daily life of young man who gets oppressed because of his poor and untouchable family. He and his family have to do menial works such as cleaning toilets, latrines, septic tanks, and yards of temples, as the result, they are considered polluted and stigmatized as deadly virus. They are not allowed to draw water from wells, go to school, get good job, and health service. They cannot touch and be touched for everyone believe that their touches will make anything impure and curse. He works hard and do all the caste people want him to do but he is just exploited that makes him more oppressed in his whole life.

Social Oppression because of Poverty

Poverty is the state of being poor, having little money or being in need of a specific quality people living in poverty do not have enough money for basic necessities such as food and shelter. In this novel, the author creates Bakha as the potrait of the people who undergoes social oppression because of poverty. What is interesting here is why he is poor. This question is clearly answered, because he is an out-caste. Bakha's social status makes him less or even has no access to get job, education, and health service. The author shows us how poor Bakha's family is through their place to live. It is described through setting:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both



of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washerman, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcasts from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and fifth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows, and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in (Anand 9).

This setting creates image of oppressed feeling through our five senses. This condition obviously makes those who live in that ugly and uncongenial place feel more oppressed. His poorness as an outcaste gives no space for him to find job he needs, even though he is an intelligent man. It is narrated:

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. It was perhaps his absorption in his task that gave him the look of distinction, or his exotic dress however loose and ill-fitting, that removed him above his odorous world (Anand 16).

The condition of such people can also be found in our country where they have no access to government's care and interest. The author clearly stresses on such condition through Bakha. He is absolutely a young hard worker who always does and finishes his jobs without complaining. However, what kind of job is ready and

given to him is just menial jobs: cleaning latrines, septic tanks, temples, and yards. He does not have any choices to change his life except to accept it. What makes him oppressed more is the payment really does not worth with, while at the same time he is always exploited and abused by his masters. He is forced to be satisfied with very small payment of money or he is just given leftovers after waiting too long: 'Bread for the sweeper, mother. Bread for the sweeper,' he called, standing at the door of the first house' (Anand 73).

No one wants to be born poor and it is not his fault to be poor but why then people still consider him not having dignity as if Bakha is a sub-human. This condition is shown when a lady humiliated him by throwing the bread from her attic house. It is narrated:

'vay Bakhya, take this. Here's your bread coming down.' And she flung it at him. Bakha laid aside the broom and tried hard to be the good cricketer he usually was, but the thin, paper-like pancake floated in the air and fell like a kite on the brick pavement of the gully. He picked it up quietly and wrapped it in a duster with the other bread he had received (Anand 73-74).

The author then creates Bakha and his friends as the portrait of the poor who have no access to get education. Bakha, in the beginning, has been introduced as a young man who has dignity and for him, getting education will get dignity. What makes him oppressed is he does not have enough money to go to school, besides, no school will accept him because he is already well-known for his untouchability. His eagerness to get education is expressed in his simple but important goal by just knowing how to read and write. It is narrated:

Bakha noticed the ardent, enthusiastic look that lighted up the little one's face. The anxiety of going to school! How beautiful it felt! How nice it must be to be able to read and write! One could read the papers after



having been to school. One could talk to the sahibs. (Anand 38).

His obsession to be able to read and write is shown through how he has to sacrifice all his money to pay for the Babu's son to teach him privately. What makes Bakha more oppressed is the babu asks for more money to teach Bakha although the plan to be able to study is not fulfilled. Then the author creates his sister Sohini and his brother Rakha who also have no access to education because they have no money to pay it. The same thing is undergone by Bakha's friends, Ram Cha Ran and Chota. They are all oppressed young people who can do nothing except doing menial jobs.

Poverty which makes people oppressed is shown through Bakha's family who have no access to get health service. The author creates Lakha, Bakha's father who feels oppressed because he could not get medicine when Bakha was sick in his childhood. People know that Lakha could not pay for a doctor to cure his son Bakha, and he could not buy medicine. He begged and begged the hospital official to be made appointment with the doctor, but he is not allowed to do because he is poor. Lakha felt oppressed because he knows there is a doctor in that hospital, but he had no chance to get the doctor or his service even though he had waited for an hour, indeed he was told to come home. He knows that hospital and the doctor have bottles of medicine and he is sure that he just needed a little for Bakha to cure, but poorness makes it is impossible to get.

It is not difficult to find such a condition in our own surrounding. We can see in the television and social media. Poverty is just the reasons why people are not served especially health service. For example, in the cases of Social Insurance Administration Organization (BPJS), they sometimes cannot blame anybody except the poor. The government, the hospitals, the doctors, the officials seem to have no responsibilities. They are busy to say that

and this to defend themselves, while the sick poor are left behind without caring.

Social Oppression because of Stigmatization

Stigmatization is the act of treating someone or something unfairly by publicly disapproving of them. The author creates Bakha and his family to be the representation of the people who feel oppressed because of stigmatization. This is clearly shown through setting in the novel which creates the image of feeling oppressed. The author invites us to understand the stigmatization the characters undergone through the things that we can see, feel, think, and smell: The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town. The place itself where they live is already alienated and exiled as if they were deadly virus. They are conditioned in such a way purposely to be exploited to do menial jobs for the caste or influential people. What makes the poor or the outcaste feel more oppressed is they are human being who have dignity, just like Bakha who is stigmatized as sub-human:

Here is a man' And it seemed to give him a nobility, strangely in contrast with his filthy profession and with the sub-human status to which he was condemned from birth' (Anand 20).

This condition is also can be seen in our daily life, for example people who suffer from certain diseases or people who belong to the old forbidden organization PKI.

The oppression seems to have no end in the whole life of the people who have been stigmatized. This condition is really shown through representation of Bakha who cannot get access to public facilities such as entering temple, going to school, taking water from well, even walking in the street. It is ridiculous and impossible for people to forbid to walk in the street because it is intended for public freely uses.



However Bakha has no right to walk in that street because people are fear of his touches. A touch means a curse for the caste people but humiliation and disaster for Bakha:

Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin!...

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. This dirty dog bumped right into me! So unmindfully do these sons of bitches walk in the street! He was walking along without the slightest effort at announcing his approach, the swine! (Anand 47).

The untouchable Bakha is metaphorized with swine, dog, scorpion, and seems to be very dangerous disease to which they were condemned from birth like leprosy which frighten people, or deadly COVID 19. People whose parents suffer from leprosy are considered to be serious dangerous for others. They are stigmatized although they are human being who have been declared cure of such disease. Bakha as the potrait of these people feel oppressed for the stigmatization. He is obviously hopeless and only fear gripped his soul, fear, humility, and servility. How strange for him to have to shout and worn people in the street to sign his approach:

‘you swine, you dog, why didn’t you shout and wran me of your approach!’

he shouted as he met Bakha’s eyes.

‘Don’t you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!’ (Anand 47).

Forgiveness will not enough for them to let him go until a man who accidently has touched Bakha strike Bakha the blow. So in order to avoid his touch, he has to announce his coming to the street by shouting: ‘*posh* keep away, *posh* sweeper coming, *posh*, *posh*, sweeper coming, *posh*, *posh* sweeper coming!’. Ironically the author creates a huge, big-humped, small horned, spotted old brahmine bull which the stink from in mouth is ruminating lovingly touched with their forefingers. It means that animal is

more valuable than human being like Bakha who is just from the outcaste. It is contrasted:

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 (Anand 53).

The author, furthermore, clearly shows how people feel oppressed because they are not allowed to go school just because they are outcaste. They are not allowed because people are fear of touching their children as a consequence the parents can suit the school to have spread the disease (touch) to their children. Later still he realised that there was no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man’s sons.

The author then shows how the outcaste’s touch is really dangerous. Although the touch is really needed to save people, but then he is humiliated. It is shown:

And she abused me. I only get abuse and derision wherever I go. Pollution, pollution, I do nothing else but pollute people. They all say that: “Polluted, polluted!” (Anand 116).

Besides, Bakha is always considered a disease that cannot be touched and it is clearly shown when he buys cigarette. The seller throws it like throwing bones at a dog because he doesn’t want to be touched. Bakha has to put his money to a spot on the board near him and the money has to wash by the seller.

People who have been stigmatized must feel hopeless to get better future because he will not get chance to get better job. This is undeniable because we can see the facts in our real life. How people of abolished and burried Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) organization feel oppressed in finding job, even they have nothing to do or touch with this



organization. How the children and grandchildren can be, of seven generations, are falsely accused of this organization. It is ridiculous of finding the reason why people stigmatize them, while the answer is just to abuse or to exploit them. Bakha, in this novel, represents this condition by how he has no access to the job field except cleaning the latrines, toilet and temple for the caste people although he is 'a dexterous workman! ... 'A bit superior to his job' they always said, 'not the kind of man who ought to be doing this (Anand 16).

The worst is he is not allowed to pray to his god by entering temple. Temple is a way for everybody to meet his god to pray but not for Bakha. For him, temple is simlized with a monster: 'The temple seemed to advance towards him like a monster, and to envelop him' (Anand 59). When he is absorbed to enter it, he is nearly killed by people in the temple by saying:

'Polluted, polluted, polluted,' a shout rang through the air. He was completely unnerved. His eyes were covered with darkness. He couldn't see anything. His tongue and throat were parched. He wanted to utter a cry, a cry of fear, but his voice failed him (Anand 60).

They are stigmatized as maglinant curse. The word malignant derives from the Latin combination of "mal" meaning "bad" and "nascorto say magic words that are intended to bring bad luck to someone. Curse means to say magic words that are intended to bring bad luck to someone. Bakha and other outcaste are localized and marginalized as if they were people whose touches give others curse and get bad luck in their whole life while they are healthy human beings who oppressed, poor and exploited.

IV. CONCLUSION

Untouchable potrays social oppression as the result of poverty and stigmatization when people become the victims of system and prejudice. People are

conditioned in such a way to be exploited, sometimes, in the name of religion.

Bakha potrays people who oppressed because of poverty who do not have money or earthly positions to support life. The poorness makes them have no accesses to goverment's and interest. Some of them are intilgent men, hard workers, but the poorness make them difficult to find jobs except doing menial jobs. Besides, they also have no access to get good education to improve better life. Unfortunately, the oppressors, in this case, the goverment and religious institution, and certain people, have conditioned them in such a way, so they become more and more oppressed and hopeless in life.

People of stigmatization are also portraited by Bakha. People who are stigmatized feel hopless and oppressed becace whatever they do and whenever they go, they will be humiliated, shunned, and hostiled although they have nothing to do with that accussions. They are conditioned scary and horrible people to be better extinguished, so it is impossible for them to be socialized with other people. As the impact, they will not get good education, and job to make them opressed and hopeless.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H, 1953. *The Mirror and the Lamp*. New york: Oxford University Press.
- Ahmed, Talat. 2005. *Muk Raj Anand novelist and fighter*<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=60issue=105>.
- Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Pengiun books. England: 1935.
- Crossman, Ashley, Jan. 28. 2010 "What is Social Oppression?" *ThoughtCo*, thoughtco.com/social-oppression/3026593.
- Editors, *The Famous People*. November, 2017. *MulkRajAnand Biograph* <<https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/mulk->



rajanand5317.php>.Ltd. Gilbaldi,
Joseph, 1985.
Niven, Alastair. Mulk Raj Anand. Father
figure of the modern Indian novel.
<[www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/mulk-
rajanand6160781.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/mulk-rajanand6160781.html)>2004

Pilliang, Zahrin. Sep 13, 2018. Ketua
Badan Pengurus Yayasan Pusaka
Indonesia.<https://pusakaindonesia.id>
Raja, Sharma.
<https://www.goodreaders.com>