

Anand's *Untouchable*

Objectives

1. Distinguish between caste, ethnicity, race, and religion.
2. Describe class/caste conflict using theories of decolonization.
3. Situate Anand's *Untouchable* in its specific historical context.
4. Distinguish between Anand's critique of colonialism and that of Orwell and Durrell.

Reading Assignment

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Penguin, 1990.

Morgensen, Scott Lauria. "Destabilizing the Settler Academy." *American Quarterly*, v. 64, no. 4, 2012, pp. 805–808.

Commentary

Please read the assigned readings first and then come to the Study Guide, reading the section "Consciousness" once you reach the mid-point of the novel and the section "Fashun" & Material History once you have finished the novel. If you find Anand challenging, then read across the Study Guide first and return to the primary text. Please read the materials first and then turn to the "lectures," but again, if you need to, use the lectures to help you read across the primary texts. This would not be unusual.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004)

[Anand](#) was born in Peshawar during the British Raj in what is Pakistan today. He attended Khalsa College in Amritsar where he became involved in non-violent resistance against British rule. Based on his academic performance when he graduated from the Punjab University in 1924, he was given a scholarship to study in Britain at University College London and then completed his PhD at Cambridge University in Philosophy in 1929. For our context, his doctoral dissertation was on the British philosophers John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, and

[Bertrand Russell](#) in relation to the British Miners' Strike. Of these philosophers, only Russell was alive at the time, and Anand moved in the same social circle as Russell, which we call "[Bloomsbury](#)" after the London neighborhood in which many of the "Bloomsbury set" lived. As a brief example, for literary culture, the Bloomsbury set includes [E.M. Forster](#) (who wrote a Preface for *Untouchable*), [Virginia Woolf](#), and [T.S. Eliot](#). Their social life (in particular Woolf's) would include close friendships with the likes of Russell, [John Maynard Keynes](#) (the economist and a director of the Bank of England whose theories became Keynesian Economics), and Lady Ottoline Morrell. This means that Anand moved among the intellectual elite of British society, while during his returns to India he would meet with Jawaharlal Nehru, who would become the first Prime Minister of India, and [Mahatma Gandhi](#). However, he was also somewhat outside of these circles and frequented the Fitzroy Tavern in Fitzrovia, a less "posh" neighborhood. This was the same tavern frequented by both [Durrell](#) and [Orwell](#), both of whom Anand knew well. Anand's *Untouchable* and Durrell's *Pied Piper of Lovers* were both published in 1935, both books being about India and their author's first novel.

The context of Anand's doctoral dissertation is important. He wrote on labor strikes using the philosophical work of Russell, which carried a socially progressive perspective. He also relied on the same materialist paradigms that inspired Albert Memmi's critical work thirty years later. We see the caste system in India depicted and understood, therefore, in a way that makes particular sense through social class. Just as Memmi understood racism in relation to class conflict and economic forces, Anand was predisposed from his studies to think about caste (hierarchical status, called "varna," as well as tribe tied to employment, called "jati") through social class and class conflict. That is, Anand used the same conflict-based theory of history as Memmi did.

Anand also met the English actress Kathleen Gelder in 1932. They did not marry until 1939, but her [Communism](#) and activism influenced his thoughts while writing *Untouchable*. This means that the struggle of the Dalit caste (the titular Untouchables who are born into a hereditary role as "sweepers," meaning latrine or toilet emptiers and cleaners) is presented in the novel in a manner much akin to a Marxist understanding of class conflict. The novel was also written during the conflicts between Gandhi (Bania caste, or merchants) and B. R. Ambedkar ([Dalit](#), or untouchable) leading to the "Poona Pact" in 1932, which also influences the novel's work.

Untouchable was followed the next year by his novel *Coolie* (1936), which carried similar themes. He also participated in the end of the [Spanish Civil War](#) in 1939, volunteering for the Republicans (leftists) but

primarily doing journalistic work as the Nationalists (monarchists and fascists) won the war. He and Gelder had a daughter in 1942 in London, during World War II. Anand travelled between Britain and India until 1946, at which point he returned to India and made it his primary residence, just prior to Indian Independence in 1947. He and Gelder divorced in 1948, and his major literary works after this point revolved around his five-volume autobiography.

Consciousness

Notice how elements of self-consciousness are based on the material conditions in which a character or figure finds himself or herself. For example, in *Memmi*, the colonizer comes to think of himself *as* colonizer because of the material experience of living as a European in a colony. That is, the mental habits of thought are not intrinsic to the person or self but rather are manifestations of the economic position he inhabits in his society. We see the same issue for Bakha's experience as a Dalit or Untouchable in Anand's novel. This is not an intrinsic part of his consciousness. It is a product of his social position, yet it determines how his mind and thoughts work.

This is based on a key element of Karl Marx's social theory. We find it implicit in his early activist writings like *The Communist Manifesto* as well as his more theoretical analyses of social conflict such as *Capital*. For example, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx asks

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? (Marx, *Communist* 21)

The clearest articulation, however, is in his Preface to his more practical work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. For Marx,

The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, became the guiding principle of my studies can be summarised as follows. In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which

correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx, "Preface" 107)

In context, "superstructure" here refers to the material composition of society, such as its economic resources, the "means of production" (anything from tools through to roadways or seaports, etc.). This is distinct for Marx from "infrastructure," which is ideological, such as courts, universities, and the belief systems of the people living in the society. The crux, in this statement, is that those material and economic conditions *determine* all ideology and consciousness.

This the moment of class consciousness, or the moment in which a person recognizes the material conditions that have given rise to a form of thought or that determine thought. Naturally, this is an uncomfortable moment, and the urge (according to Marx) is for a person who benefits from this structure to prefer returning to a condition of unconsciousness. When there is no direct economic or material pressure to change, the consciousness itself reverts to its "determined" form. In contrast, for the colonized or for the exploited classes, this moment of self-recognition is driven by the experience of exploitation and hence the experience of class-consciousness may drive an attempt at social change, such as revolution or decolonization.

As you read through Anand, notice these moments of (and the language of) consciousness and unconsciousness. Also recognize that in Anand's Bloomsbury set, the works of [Sigmund Freud](#) were widely discussed: [Lytton Strachey](#)'s brother was translating Freud's work and Virginia and [Leonard Woolf](#) were publishing them. Anand is *very* close to people who would have used this language in a *very* specific way. We see Bakha daydreaming and unconscious as well as in moments of self-recognition. These would have signaled a very specific interpretive paradigm for Anand's readers in Bloomsbury.

For example, we see in Bakha the same patterns of consciousness as Memmi describes in the colonized. After his experiences of inclusion, even an exploitative sense of recognition creates in him not a resentment at being exploited but rather loyalty:

Charat Sing's generous promise had called forth that trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers, the weakness of the down-trodden, the helplessness of the poor and indigent, suddenly receiving help....

A soft smile lingered on his lips, the smile of a slave overjoyed at the condescension of his master, more akin to pride than to happiness. (Anand 17)

Likewise, the language of the “unconscious” appears around his religious experiences (60) and words such as “yawn” and “unconsciously” occur around his experiences of being a sweeper who does not recognize his position as debilitating and exploitative (66). This is in contrast to Bakha’s occasional recognition that the tools of his oppression are primarily ideological or psychological, such as groups that are “defiled” by touching him but that bully him by not allowing him to pass (48) – the reality that Bakha recognizes, momentarily, is that he is bigger and stronger, and that they would suffer the consequences of touching him, not the other way around (48). Of course, he immediately forgets this.

This leads to a culminating moment of self-consciousness for Bakha in which the conflict created by his oppression coincides with his consciousness of being oppressed. Unlike the colonizer, this moment has a radical potential to drive to revolutionary change. Amidst his dreaming of “becoming a sahib” in conflict with his “hereditary life” as a sweeper (52), Bakha has his recognition:

Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that had happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer.... It was all explicable now.... ‘I am an Untouchable!’ he said to himself, ‘an Untouchable!’... Then, aware of his position, he began to shout... (Anand 52)

This shout does not actually lead Bakha into a revolutionary struggle for freedom, but it is an indication for the reader of how to approach this conflict. It also suggests how we approach the closing of the novel following on Bakha’s discovery of Gandhi’s non-violent resistance in the satyagraha movement.

“Fashun” & Material History

A complication in Anand’s novel comes from the relationship between the caste system and British imperialism. As we see in Bakha, the primary oppressors in his direct experience are his fellow Indians. While we, the readers, may have a very different perspective, Bakha experiences the British “Tommies” as a part of the community that is outside

of the caste system and that therefore does not see him as untouchable. This is deeply problematic since the struggle for Dalit rights was negotiated during the writing of the novel between the British, Ambedkar, and Gandhi, so British colonialism was directly a part of Bakha's experiences, even if it appears distant from his perspective in the novel. Again, in a Marxist context, we could refer to this loosely as "false consciousness." As with the preceding discussion of consciousness in Anand and Memmi, this concept relates to material conditions of oppression and the forms of thought these conditions give rise to. Specifically, it is the forms of thought that are amenable or helpful to a system of oppression – for Bakha this is his feeling of inferiority and his admiration for those who oppress him. As with Memmi, we might look to examples in colonialism, such as how a colonized people might feel inferior or might look to the colonizer with admiration and desire.

An example of the importance of British colonialism comes in Bakha's admiration for British "fashun" or clothing. This is a politicized example in the novel, when we put it in its historical context. Textiles (fabrics) have long been a classic case study for theories of colonialism and exploitation. Marx and Rosa Luxemburg both rely on textile industries to give examples of colonial exploitation. Where this appears in *Untouchable* is the production of cotton and indigo (an important fabric dye) in India, which was then shipped to Britain (in particular Lancashire) for textile production. Britain banned the import of fabric from India, so India was only able to export raw materials for production in British factories. The machinery for the industrial production of textiles was also kept in Britain rather than in the colonies. Unsurprisingly, indigo was the origin of one of the first decolonization revolutions in India, and Gandhi used Indian-produced fabric as a key point of non-violent resistance against British rule. In the paradigm of false consciousness, "good fabric" would mean British fabric, and good fashion would be British rather than Indian, connoting higher social rank or station. In this way, British rule was economically reinforced by the economic consumption of British products by the colonized themselves.

For Bakha, this means that by aligning himself to British values and fashions, he symbolically feels as if he has greater freedom, even though we as readers see this as cementing his role as the colonized. It also does nothing to actually resist the conditions of the caste system. It is purely symbolic with regard to his benefits, but it is economically real with regard to his condition as a colonized person. Notice, for example, how we as readers briefly inhabit Bakha's consciousness (even though we are supposed to understand things that he cannot yet understand):

He felt amused as an Englishman might be amused, to see a Hindu loosen his dhoti to pour some water first over his navel and then down his back in a flurry of ecstatic hymn-singing. And he watched with contemptuous displeasure the indecent behaviour of a Mohammedan walking about with his hands buried deep in his trousers. (19)

While Bakha is socially inferior to both of these people, by virtue of his English “fashun,” he feels himself to be momentarily superior to them. It is as if by consuming British goods and adopting British habits (while abandoning his own culture), he hopes to become British himself, and thereby the colonizer looking down on those within his own society who dominate him. This is, of course, not going to happen for Bakha, but by elevating British culture and consuming British products, he solidifies British colonial rule. We should also note the inappropriate slur “Mohammedan,” which the British might use but that Bakha himself would not normally adopt.

Another simple example of this cultural transformation appears in the tea ritual. Britain adopted tea from India and China, but we see Bakha abandoning his own indigenous habits of tea drinking in order to adopt those of the British.

His tongue was slightly burnt with the small sips because he did not, as his father did, blow on the tea to cool it. This was another of the things he had learnt at the British barracks from the Tommies. His uncle had said that the goras didn't enjoy the full flavour of the tea because they did not blow on it. But Bakha considered that both his uncle's and his father's spattering spits were natu habits. (32)

In this very short scene, Bakha not only replaces his own authentic tea drinking with the habits of a colonizer who had borrowed the ritual of drinking tea, he also enjoys his tea less by doing so. Bakha burns his tongue by attempting to emulate the British habits, so his elevation of all things British leads directly to his diminished pleasure. His uncle, by criticizing the British way of drinking tea as incorrect or less enjoyable, is then criticized by Bakha in a way that makes him feel superior but leaves him with a burnt tongue and small, less flavorful sips of tea. This scene symbolically stands in for Indian consumption of British culture and products in general, and most specifically textiles.

Gandhi's Swaraj movement included the Swadeshi policy to boycott British fabrics and rely on the Khadi movement that would have decentralized, charkha (hand-held spindle) woven fabrics produced

locally in India. This was a key element of the non-violent resistance against British rule. Indian and British readers alike would recognize the importance of textiles to this struggle, so the role of “fashun” and clothing in the novel would have been immediately obvious to them when the book was first published – the relationship between the British Raj and fabrics would be as obvious and natural to them as the relationship between the Iraq War and oil is to people today. However, by relying on British habits and products in order to feel good about himself (this being a direct consequence of his subjugation in the caste system), Bakha directly subverts Gandhi’s independence movement. Anand cannot say this explicitly in the novel, lest it become a lecture rather than a story, but it is a clear point.

We as readers, if we adopt this historical context, then notice how closely Bakha’s mistreatment by his fellow Indians relates to his abject glorification of all things British, and likewise how closely this is connected to the problems of consciousness:

[Bakha] drifted in his unconscious happiness towards the cloth shop where a big-bellied lalla (Hindu gentleman), clad in an immaculately white loose muslin shirt, and loin-cloth was busy writing in curious hieroglyphics on a scroll book bound in ochre-coloured canvas, which his assistants unrolled bundles of Manchester cloth one after another.... That was the kind of cloth of which the sahibs’ suits were made; the other cloth that he had seen before the yokels he could imagine turning soon into tunics... All that was beneath his notice. But the woollen cloth, so glossy and nice! so expensive looking!... He remembered that he had promised to pay the babu’s son for the English lesson. (44–45)

In this scene, we would do well to notice how the Hindu shopkeeper is dressed in locally produced and locally styled clothing, even though he sells British goods to other (his economic interests lead him to subvert Indian independence), while at the same time Bakha can feel superior to his Indian oppressor by admiring the British wool cloth. Of course, wearing wool in Bakha’s climate would be challenging, but by admiring the British fabric he looks on those who shun him as “yokels” and immediately is reminded of his English lessons. That Bakha invests his scant income on English lessons, shows how his pursuit of Englishness is actually part of what keeps him subjugated. Likewise, this passage opens with the keyword “unconscious.” The unthinking happiness brought on by his unawareness of his domination is precisely what leads Bakha to the textiles shop and his direct support for British rule

and subversion of Indian independence, both of which are contrary to his own best interests.

Morgensen & the Settler University

Morgensen's argument take a similar approach to discussion of indigenous identities within settler-colonial academies (universities). The problem in this is knowledge itself, how we come to know things, and just as importantly what things we come to *not* know. The styles of knowledge and the operations of power (with knowledge as one of power's principle products) is the key to Morgensen's argument in this article. While it is somewhat distinct from Anand's approach in *Untouchable*, you may also ask how Anand's imposition of Marxist (Eurocentric) critical ideas on an essentially Indian caste problem can itself be seen as a product of his educational background at English institutions, both in India and in England. Said slightly differently, is Anand's Marxist approach to his own Indian culture itself an instance of Orientalism? Morgensen will ask us to question the nature of our own studies in settler-colonial universities of North America, including our potential reluctance to identify as settler-colonials.

Questions for Self-Review

1. Why would Anand's novel, written during colonial rule, be important to postcolonial literature?
2. In what ways do you engage in thoughts or consumerism today that could be comparable to Bakha's "fashun"?
3. What example can you think of today that works like consciousness in Anand's novel?
4. How might Edward Said read Anand differently than we have in the Study Guide?

Works Cited & Supplemental Reading

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