



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue.1. 2025 (Jan-March)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Gendered Subjugation within the Dalit Community: A Study of
Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

Aman¹, Dr. Manoj Kumar Yadav²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Singhania University
Email:amanmudgil00@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Singhania University

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.1.11](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.1.11)



Article information

Article Received:20/12/2024
Article Accepted:29/01/2025
Published online:05/02/2025

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of caste and gender oppression in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, emphasising the portrayal of Dalit women in Bakha's world. While most scholarly discussions focus on Bakha as the central figure of caste-based subjugation, this study shifts attention to the doubly marginalised experiences of Dalit women, with a particular focus on Sohini, Bakha's sister. Using an intersectional framework, the paper argues that Anand's depiction of Sohini reveals the compounded layers of discrimination that Dalit women face, stemming not only from their caste status but also from patriarchal norms within their community. The analysis examines pivotal moments in the narrative, such as Sohini's harassment by the temple priest, to illustrate the unique vulnerabilities of Dalit women to caste-based and gender-based exploitation. It also delves into how cultural and familial expectations enforce silence and submission, erasing their agency and voice. Anand's critique of these oppressive systems is contextualised within Dalit feminist theory, offering a fresh perspective on the novel that foregrounds the struggles of its female characters. By addressing the limited attention given to Dalit women in *Untouchable*, this paper broadens the scope of literary analysis to encompass the intersectional dimensions of caste and gender oppression. The findings highlight Anand's narrative as a critique of caste inequality and a call to recognise the unique plight of Dalit women, whose struggles remain marginalised in both literature and society. This study underscores the importance of intersectional approaches in understanding and addressing systems of oppression in Indian literature.

Keywords: Dalit, exploitation, margins, untouchable, women.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* offers a profound critique of the caste system, meticulously delineating the social, cultural, and economic marginalisation faced by Dalits in colonial India. While the narrative predominantly centres on Bakha, a young sweeper subjected to relentless caste-based discrimination, Anand simultaneously unveils the compounded layers of subjugation experienced by Dalit women, exemplified through the character of Sohini. Her depiction illuminates the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression, illuminating how Dalit women are doubly marginalized: first by the inflexible hierarchy of the caste system that transfers them to an inferior status, and second by the inescapable patriarchy that defines their social ambiance. Through Sohini's encounters with systemic injustice and sexual exploitation, Anand foregrounds the unique vulnerabilities of Dalit women, who endure caste-based indignities alongside the dehumanizing effects of patriarchal domination. This intersectional framework underscores the necessity of analysing caste oppression in tandem with gendered subjugation, as these axes of discrimination do not operate in isolation but rather reinforce each other, creating a multifaceted structure of marginalization. Accordingly, Sohini's experiences become representative of a broader critique that not only confronts the caste system but also catechises the patriarchal structures rooted within it, condensing her narrative an essential lens through which the compounded susceptibilities of Dalit women can be critically assessed.

Sharmila Rege, a Dalit feminist scholar, emphasizes the urgent need to address the dual oppression that Dalit women experience, claiming that their stories are potent evidence of how the caste system not only upholds deeply ingrained patriarchal structures but also sustains social inequality. As Rege articulates in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, "Dalit women's narratives are a testimony to the fact that the caste system not only deprives them of social equality but also reinforces the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures" (23). Mulk Raj Anand's portrayal of Sohini in *Untouchable*, where she is vulnerable due to her location at the intersection of caste and gender identities, eloquently reflects this twofold marginalization. She is easily targeted for violence and humiliation based on her caste because of her caste identity, which places her at the bottom of an oppressive social order. At the same time, her gender makes her marginalization worse by making her voice unheard and her exploitative experiences invisible in the patriarchal system and the larger conversation about caste oppression. Through Sohini's predicament, Anand supports Rege's critical assessment by offering a story that challenges the institutional silence of Dalit women's experiences within prevailing socio-cultural paradigms while simultaneously highlighting the compounded oppression they confront.

Gopal Guru, in his seminal work "Dalit Women Talk Differently," asserts that Dalit women endure a unique burden of untouchability, characterized by a systematic devaluation of their humanity that is qualitatively distinct from the male experience of caste oppression. He argues, "Dalit women bear a unique burden of untouchability—they are subjected to a systematic devaluation of their humanity, which is distinct from the male experience of caste" (2548). The intricate dynamics of oppression are compellingly depicted in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, particularly through Sohini's distressing interaction with the temple priest, where her status as an untouchable serve as a justification for sexual harassment masquerading as a defence of ritual purity. Anand utilises this episode to rigorously analyse the role of religion in sustaining and perpetuating the interconnected systems of caste and gender violence, uncovering how revered institutions frequently obscure and validate exploitative practices. Moreover, Ravikumar, in *Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture, and Politics*, underscores the imposed silence on Dalit women, contending that their apparent passivity in the face of violence is not indicative of a lack of resistance but rather a forced submission influenced by the intertwining dynamics of fear and systemic powerlessness. He notes, "The silence of Dalit women in the face of violence is not an absence of resistance but a forced submission shaped by fear and powerlessness" (45). Sohini's silence after her assault illustrates a multifaceted dynamic, where the entrenched sense of futility in resisting a society that consistently undermines her voice and strips her of agency leads her to internalise her oppression. the compounded discrimination encountered by Dalit

women, while simultaneously addressing the systemic erasure of their experiences within prevailing socio-cultural frameworks. Anand's portrayal thus becomes a poignant critique of the structural mechanisms that silence Dalit women, exposing the profound injustices embedded in both caste hierarchies and patriarchal frameworks.

Baby Kamble's autobiographical work *The Prisons We Broke* provides a significant parallel perspective on the compounded marginalisation of Dalit women, articulating their dual subjugation within caste and patriarchal structures. Kamble astutely notes, "A Dalit woman is crushed between caste and patriarchy, living as a slave not only to society but also to her own family" (89). This observation aligns with Mulk Raj Anand's depiction of Sohini in *Untouchable*, where her constrained agency within her family connects with the widespread societal oppression she faces, illustrating the dual weight of caste and gender-based marginalisation. Sohini's existence is characterised by a continual negotiation of environments where her identity as a Dalit woman exposes her to institutional exploitation and dehumanisation. Anand's portrayal of the challenges Dalit women face corresponds with Urmila Pawar's statement in *The Weave of My Life*, in which she asserts, "We are not just oppressed because we are Dalits, but because we are Dalit women. Our fight is not just against caste but against the double yoke of caste and patriarchy" (27). This intersectional perspective offers a vital framework for examining Sohini's experiences, highlighting how her caste identity intensifies her susceptibility to abuse, while her gender further contributes to her marginalization in familial and societal spheres. Anand's narrative critiques the rigid hierarchies of the caste system and interrogates the patriarchal structures that sustain the compounded oppression of Dalit women, providing a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences and the broader implications of systemic inequities.

Sohini's harassment by the temple priest is a powerful illustration of the dehumanization inflicted upon Dalits, particularly Dalit women, through the intersection of caste and gender oppression. The priest's actions reveal a deep hypocrisy inherent within the social and religious structures that uphold caste hierarchies. Initially, he exploits Sohini's vulnerable position by sexually harassing her, only to subsequently accuse her of polluting his sacred space, demonstrating the perverse logic of caste-based discrimination. The moment is vividly captured in his hysterical outburst: "Get up, ohe, get up! You have defiled my house! Go! Go!" he shouted hysterically, beside himself with rage, while a strange tremor shook his body" (Anand 47). Anand aids this scene to critique the moral and ethical contradictions contained by the caste system, wherein the so-called janitors of purity and virtue are complicit in maintaining violence and exploitation. Sohini, as a Dalit woman, becomes doubly marginalized—her untouchable status makes her an easy target for caste-based humiliation, while her gender ensures that her voice and agency remain suppressed. The priest's reaction underscores the entrenched dehumanization of Dalits, where their very presence is seen as defiling, even as they are subjected to egregious violations.

Bakha's response to Sohini's assault further amplifies the narrative's exploration of systemic injustice, highlighting the constraints imposed by caste-based oppression on even the most basic forms of resistance. Anand portrays Bakha's internal conflict through his visceral reaction: "Bakha wanted to kill the man. He clenched his fists in a fury of helpless rage" (Anand 48). This moment encapsulates Bakha's profound sense of powerlessness in the face of an oppressive social structure that not only devalues his sister's humanity but also denies him the agency to seek justice. Bakha's clenched fists symbolize suppressed anger and frustration, reflective of the broader condition of Dalits under a system that normalizes violence against them while silencing their dissent. Anand critiques this systemic power imbalance, showing how caste hierarchies are maintained through the intersection of fear, violence, and enforced subservience. Through Bakha's inability to act and Sohini's enforced silence, the narrative underscores the pervasive helplessness experienced by Dalits, illustrating how the structures of caste and patriarchy collude to sustain the dehumanization of an entire community.

Sohini's silence following the assault by the temple priest serves as a poignant representation of the forced submission and lack of agency imposed on Dalit women by the intersecting forces of caste and patriarchy. Anand apprehends this moment of vulnerability with a simple but powerful description: "Sohini wept silently. She could say nothing. Her sobs were smothered in the folds of her orhni" (Anand 49). Her powerlessness to articulate her suffering reflects the societal norms that systematically suppress the voices of Dalit women, even in the face of grave injustice. This silence is not a passive acceptance of her condition but rather an exhibition of the deeply embedded fear and powerlessness twisted by a society that devalues her humanity and denies her access to justice. Anand uses this moment to critique the pervasive structures of caste and patriarchy that oblige this enforced silence, rendering Dalit women concealed and their inaudible struggles. Sohini's muted grief becomes emblematic of the broader silencing of Dalit women, highlighting the emotional toll of navigating a world that relentlessly marginalizes their existence.

Sohini's role in domestic labour further illuminates the systemic invisibility of her contributions and the exploitative nature of her existence within both familial and societal contexts. Anand distressingly communes her unacknowledged toil: "The house was dirty, and Sohini had begun sweeping it in the morning. She had done her duty without grumbling" (Anand 25). This illustration underscores how Dalit women, despite their relentless labour, are denied acknowledgement and dignity, their work taken for granted by both their families and the larger social structure. Sohini's role as a domestic labourer is not only a reflection of the physical burden imposed on Dalit women but also an indication of the emotional and psychological exhaustion stemming from her dual subjugation. Anand critiques the normalization of this exploitation, illustrating how caste and gender operate in tandem to relegate Dalit women to positions of servitude while erasing the value of their labour. Through these narratives, Anand sheds light on the compounded marginalization faced by Dalit women, emphasizing the need to acknowledge and address the systemic inequities that perpetuate their subjugation.

Sohini's physical and moral purity, as described by Anand, stands in stark contrast to the dehumanizing treatment she endures at the hands of society. Anand scripts, "She was very beautiful. Her supple body, well-rounded arms, and clear-cut features gave her the image of an Indian village belle" (Anand 22). This vivid portrayal not only underscores Sohini's inherent grace and dignity but also emphasizes the injustices of her societal status as a Dalit woman. Her beauty and purity – qualities that could afford privilege in a more equitable social framework – lose their significance within the strict confines of caste and gender hierarchies. Consequently, these attributes transform into sources of vulnerability, rendering her susceptible to exploitation and violence. Anand's juxtaposition of Sohini's inner and outer virtues with her marginalized position critiques the social systems that distort the perception of individual worth, reducing her to a mere symbol of impurity in the eyes of an oppressive society. This disparity underscores the moral corruption of a social order that disregards personal merit in favor of rigid and dehumanizing hierarchies.

Bakha's contemplation of his sister's predicament highlights the widespread injustice inherent in the societal systems that dictate their existence. Anand conveys Bakha's emotions of powerlessness and moral indignation through his painful inquiry, "Why was it that he could not save his sister? Why was it that the world was so cruel to those who were weak?" (Anand 50). This internal turmoil not only reflects Bakha's anguish but also serves as a broader critique of the systemic oppression that renders both him and Sohini powerless. His inability to protect Sohini from the cruelty of the caste system highlights the interconnectedness of caste and gender oppression, as both siblings navigate a world that devalues their humanity. Bakha's frustration with his impotence in the face of injustice mirrors the struggles of countless individuals within marginalized communities, whose attempts at resistance are thwarted by deeply entrenched social inequities. Anand uses Bakha's reflections to illuminate the

psychological and emotional toll of living under such a system, emphasizing the urgent need for societal transformation.

Conclusion

In *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand crafts a compelling narrative that explores the compounded oppression faced by Dalits, with a particular focus on the unique vulnerabilities of Dalit women. Through the character of Sohini, Anand exposes the intersection of caste and gender, revealing the pervasive dehumanization perpetuated by social, religious, and familial structures. Sohini's silence, her relentless labor, and her victimization by the temple priest become poignant symbols of the systemic forces that suppress Dalit women, rendering their contributions invisible and their voices unheard. The hypocrisy of the priest, who simultaneously exploits and vilifies her, coupled with the complicity of societal norms in perpetuating such violence, highlights the moral and ethical bankruptcy of caste-based hierarchies. Anand, through these depictions, illustrates how gendered subjugation within the Dalit community operates not only as an extension of caste discrimination but also as an additional layer of oppression that compounds the vulnerabilities of women.

Bakha's reflections on Sohini's plight further emphasize the interconnectedness of their struggles, illustrating how caste oppression targets Dalit women while leaving Dalit men equally powerless to challenge the injustices inflicted upon their loved ones. Anand's portrayal of these dynamics resonates with the observations of Dalit feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, who articulate the dual burden borne by Dalit women at the intersection of caste and patriarchy. By contrasting Sohini's purity and dignity with her societal degradation, Anand critiques the deep-rooted biases that distort perceptions of individual worth, perpetuating systemic inequality. Ultimately, *Untouchable* serves as a searing prosecution of a social order that prioritizes hierarchical structures over human dignity, calling for a reimagining of justice that recognizes and dismantles the twin oppressions of caste and gender subjugation within the Dalit community.

Works Cited

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. 1935. Penguin Modern Classics, 2001.

Guru, Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 41/42, 1995, pp. 2548-2550.

Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient BlackSwan, 2008.

Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Columbia University Press, 2009.

Ravikumar. *Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture and Politics*. Navayana, 2011.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan, 2006.