



ISSN Print: 2664-8717  
ISSN Online: 2664-8725  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00  
IJRE 2024; 6(1): 131-134  
[www.englishjournal.net](http://www.englishjournal.net)  
Received: 05-12-2023  
Accepted: 09-01-2024

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# International Journal of Research in English

## Delineation of scavengers in the fictional work of non-dalit writers

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1c.173>

### Abstract

The plight of the Untouchables and the daily atrocities they endure have been the subject of much scholarly discussion; nonetheless, we wonder if these living conditions are exclusive to one caste type. Another possibility is that this applies to a certain type of employment rather than a person's caste. While we're on the subject of India, it's important to remember that there are many instances where people are forced to live a life beyond their wildest dreams because they were born into a strange caste known as the "Untouchables." This is exemplified in Gopinath Mohanty's novel "Harijan," which depicts the daily struggles of this particular group of people, including the 'Mehentars' and their forced labour cleaning public restrooms with their bare hands, picking up human waste, and bearing the horrors perpetrated by the higher caste. There is a "caste system" in this civilization, and the story says so.

The 'Varna' system, which is passed down through generations, forces a specific group to stay in the same profession. 'Mohanty' aims to illustrate the situation of a scavenger who lost the ability to respond to any sensitive, nuanced experience; the story helps us grasp the characters' psyche as they grow inhuman towards themselves due to their improper treatment. This research investigates the similarities between scavengers from diverse origins in a new environment to shed light on the predicament of two distinct kinds of scavengers. As a whole, we plan to study how other fictional works depict the same group of people - the "Mehentars" or "Scavengers" and the similarities and differences among them.

**Keywords:** Harijan, Gopinath Mohanty, Untouchables, Scavenger, Mulk Raj Anand

### Introduction

#### Reformation vs. Annihilation

When examining our history, especially in relation to our country's exploration and understanding of the current social and political changes that are shaping the present situation, caste plays a crucial role in determining and establishing one's identity. This has been the case since the time of Manu, or the existence of Manusmriti. However, in the modern world, discussions about caste often lead to debates among various political figures, each of whom defines caste based on their own knowledge and ideas.

When it comes to the leaders and their ideologies for the Untouchables, it was noticed that the country was then divided into two groups: *Dalits* and non-*Dalits*, which further resulted in a slew of debates and protests. Gandhi Ji, being the role model for the entire nation, donned a variety of caps, but some of his harshest opponents were people who worked closely with him. At the top of this list was Ambedkar, who disagreed with the caste system because he believed it segregated people based on their birth and their parent's occupation. The caste system is unparalleled globally, and it has resulted in the economic dominance, political authoritarianism, and social oppression of the Brahmins in Indian society.

He holds a divergent viewpoint of the caste system in Hinduism, which is based on hereditary status and societal influence, akin to a rigid steel framework. He held the belief that the caste system in India predated the Vedas and surpassed any other institution in terms of its intricacy, exploitation, discrimination, and inflexibility. Although Gandhi Ji began the movement in 1933, he considered untouchability to be a more pressing issue and deemed it essential to dismantle the caste system before addressing other concerns (Nauriya1). Subsequently, his struggle became confined to the caste system. Nevertheless, he did not dismiss the possibility of confronting the Varna order in the future, as he was currently preoccupied with other pressing matters.

He strongly opposed Hindu society's practice of untouchability and took the initiative to launch an anti-untouchability campaign to bring attention to the suffering of the Harijan community. Additionally, he provided education to the Harijans regarding their legal and political rights. Gandhi's approach to addressing caste-based issues was more political than social, whereas Ambedkar had the belief that the approach advocated by Gandhi towards addressing the problem of untouchability had the potential to bolster the social status of caste Hindus while simultaneously diminishing the power and influence of the Untouchables.

### Gandhian Wave

Prior to independence, caste-abolitionist social reform initiatives in India gave way to a wild cultural movement that produced a profusion of literary works. Furthermore, in 1936, Gandhi authored an article titled "The Ideal Bhangi" to endorse the campaign of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. The juxtaposition of a Bhangi with a Brahmin caught the interest of numerous intellectuals and writers of that era. Unsurprisingly, Gandhi's ideas served as a source of inspiration for the literary style, encompassing theme selection, characterization, story development, and language usage. There is a profound correlation between Gandhian ideology and the writers of that time. Regardless of how they depicted India's social realities, embracing Gandhian doctrine transformed or expanded their global perspective according to their personal preferences.

### Literary Works

We can see that the entire nineteenth century, especially the second half of it, was a period of cultural and religious ferment in India under the influence of Western culture and missions, thanks to the literature of pre-independence India and the help of various social reforms and new policies that aided the struggle for the individual's identity in terms of caste. The colonisers believe that the Western epistemic framework - culture, political ideology and philosophy, forms of government, educational and social infrastructure - is required to civilise their colonies, which they believe are populated by humanist subclasses.

Movements and regional literary work have impacted the public to react and grasp the issue at every level; prominent writers and film-makers have aided in the emergence of this issue; among these, Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* and Franz Osten's classic movie *Acchut Kanya* are well known. However, the plethora of regional novels that arose during this time is as impressive yet under. Among them is Gopinath Mohanty's classic novel, *Harijan*. Both Mulk Raj Anand and Gopinath Mohanty explore the theme of scavenging in their works, drawing inspiration from the struggle for freedom and the assertion of individuality as a form of superiority. These authors share many common elements in their fiction. They are both motivated to expose the mistreatment of the Untouchables by the Hindu community. As individuals who do not belong to the Dalit caste, they possess a deep understanding of the plight of the underprivileged and have actively advocated for their rights. Additionally, they have worked towards creating a distinct cultural identity for these marginalised groups by dismantling their colonial identity.

They have addressed a variety of problems, including bonded labour, economic exploitation, socio-political

marginalisation, land displacement, and sexual harassment, which were prevalent among Dalits in both colonial and post-colonial India. Despite their feelings of hopelessness, they manage to retain their hope. They strive to find a new existence, one devoid of any form of exploitation (Ray 1), they have employed characters from the lower caste to expose the profound introspection experienced by these individuals as scavengers. In the social structure, each caste was assigned a particular occupation or profession. Therefore, if one was born into the Untouchable caste, they would remain a member of that caste for their entire life and would struggle relentlessly for social rejuvenation.

### Scavengers, who are they?

According to the *Hindu* tradition, the Brahmins are seen to be the inheritors of divine wisdom, whereas the Kshatriyas are individuals who work in governing or administrative roles, such as kings, soldiers, and warriors. The Vaishyas are those who work in commerce and trade. *Sudras* are the lowest caste in this caste-based structure, and their job is to serve individuals from the three higher castes. Further to define Shudras or Dalits / Harijan / Untouchables / Scavengers:

"Persons belonging to a discrete set of lowest castes in Indian village caste hierarchies, these persons are considered very low and impure because of their caste-defined occupational association with polluting substances or death (Moffatt 4)".

"Sudras, who were given the name Harijan by Mahatma Gandhi, constitute the lowest strata of this caste-based hierarchy their task is to serve those people who belong to the three upper castes (Lyngdoh)".

That is why characters from the lower caste whether it was 'Bakha' from Untouchable or 'Puni' from *Harijan*, both are dealing with the consequences of being a sweeper, as E.M Foster also mentions, that the sweeper has it worse than a slave since the slave can change masters and chores and even become free, whereas the sweeper is enslaved for life, born into a situation from which he cannot escape and from which he is deprived of social interaction and religious consolation.

### Gopinath's *Harijan*

*Harijan* by Gopinath Mohanty is a story of the hardships and challenges faced by the Untouchables, as it depicts the dismal life of scavengers, who are the society's poorest sufferers. It was first published in 1948 and can be seen as a subtle creation that showcases the subalterns' progressivism. Puni, Jema's 14-year-old protected daughter, is the novel's protagonist, and she represents the exploitation and oppression that has been the fate of society's Untouchables. Puni is a free, unprincipled sufferer of the locality, both mother and daughter from the *Mehentars* slum and surviving by cleaning latrines. The locality and the locals are much aware of their fortune, and it seems they have made a pact with it, as all of them are living a casual life without any hope or ambition, but one can sense their exertion while struggling for the emancipation.

Mohanty is unafraid to go into considerable depth about *Mehentars'* suffering. He never uses transgressive exposure to try to dull the reader. Instead, he emphasises the *Mehentars'* struggle with daily living activities,

"The next morning Puni wakes up early, bathes, puts on a clean sari, and dabs some cheap perfume on her skin.

Stepping out of the hut excitedly, she picks up basket and broom. When she arrives at the first latrine, the stink hits her with force of a hammer blow. She drops her basket and broom, turns around, and is trying to run away, when her friends stop her, This is what you will have to do every day for the rest of your life! It is your fate!"(Mohanty), when 'Puni' dresses up in her nicest clothing and believes her first day at work to be a wonderful occasion before getting admonished by her friends; further, it has been observed how she was cursed by the shopkeeper, as she has no money and the shopkeeper scolds and refuses her to give any goods, and it resulted into social humiliation as he felt that the girl would have polluted him by touching.

In the novel, not all the characters are dull or negative in their life, as we can see a character like 'Dhani Buddha' reciting various 'Bhajans' and 'Bhagavat Tungis'; moreover, we have observed the celebrations before an individual step into 'scavenging', 'sweeping', or going to 'work', for the first time; Mohanty, on the other hand, examines the disparity between the lives of the destitute Mehentars and the upper-class residents who live adjacent to the slum.

There was a time we saw 'Jema', in conversation with the 'Aghore Baba', where he mentions the new status of the Untouchables in the society; he says *untouchability* has been abolished and that the Harijans now have equal privileges, including the ability to enter temples, sit, and dine with the upper caste, to which Jema replied "Don't people have better things to do? Why would anyone want to touch me? And what if he does? Will it fill my belly or rebuild my broken hut? Who will provide the rice for people of high and low caste to eat together? I have no time to spare from cleaning latrines, when will I go to temple? All this talk comes from the heads of rich people like you, babu" (Mohanty), this shows the clear picture between reality and imagination, where a commoner has no time to think of social emancipation or to be a part of the movement to eradicate caste, as they are super tired with their common chores, which do not allow them to think beyond their routine life. Towards the end, we see how a scavenger got money through stealing, and suddenly the world opens up to him; he is now able to shop, can watch the bioscope, and most important, he can have food at the same shops as the upper caste.

The upper caste's corporate interests are ultimately what led to the slum's removal. Throughout the story, Mohanty's narrative alternates between the lives of slum dwellers and the privileged upper caste 'Avinash Babu's family, the city and the slum are as important to the story as the people who live there; the text stays relevant to our contemporary society today as it was in 1948. The oppressed's silent wrath is expressed in Mohanty's story, which is more than a protest against injustice; further, the investigation of the junction of 'caste' and 'class' distinguishes Mohanty's work from many previous novels on the subject. To fully appreciate Mohanty's radicalism, one must first understand the milieu in which it was written.

### Mulk Raj's Untouchable

Untouchable, Anand's internationally praised masterwork, was published in 1935, under the impact of numerous political and social movements, and is a viable testament to the prevalence and difficulty caused by the caste system in India.

Like 'Puni' in *Harijan*, we have 'Bakha' here, lives in the fictional town of Bulashah with his family in the extreme of the village in a specially designated land for the Untouchables. The text deals with the one-day life journey of Bakha, where he has encountered and experienced everything, causing him to drastically change and turn towards self-examination and introspection.

Bakha's existence as a scavenger is very different from Puni's, yet there is still a lot more in common to look at. When describing Bakha, the narrative begins with his first work of cleaning the 'Tommies' latrines and then moves on to meet 'Charat Singh' and other personalities of his like and hatred. Bakha is depicted by Anand as someone who began his struggle for emancipation within himself, since he confronts himself and others at all times, whether it is to wear neat and tidy clothes, smoke in public, eat jalebis, enter a temple, play with upper caste lads, or study and speak English; to which Bakha's pure intellect is irritated by the aggressive and demeaning attitude of Brahmins, temple priests, and all other upper caste people.

### Conclusion

To comprehend the psychology of the characters utilised by both Non-Dalit writers while explaining caste in the twentieth century, they are against drawing the themes like "social strife" or "protest," and that is why both the works conclude with no feasible solution. The Untouchable characters in Mohanty's work are the victims of society, and their fate is decided before they are even born or by inheritance. They have a difficult life journey ahead of them. They are up against immense and scary proportions of deception, cruelty, cynicism, and hypocrisy imposed by social mores.

Mohanty, being the messiah of the 'oppressed', 'undesired', and 'unloved', supports the downtrodden to live a life of dignity. As he feels that because of the rich or higher caste people, the outcastes have suffered and they been denied the way of life, similarly, Anand not only discusses the injustices perpetrated against the Untouchables but also offers three alternatives to help end the curse of untouchability. Accepting 'Christianity', considering 'Gandhi's approach', or fully 'denying the caste system's existence' were the three options, each with its own set of benefits and drawbacks. Anand highlighted social issues, upper-caste hypocrisies, and other topics in his story.

Both Gopinath Mohanty and Mulk Raj Anand have conceptualised the marginalized's mentality from the shadows of anonymity and obscurity to the centre of society's attention. They have focused on the protagonist's plight as a social outcast, their perilous trip down the path of life, and their fight for survival, among other things; they have picked Untouchables, coolies, farmers, industrial labourers, working women's class, socially disadvantaged, and other subaltern castes and groups to be their character to justify the reality, with a strong sense of social commitment, both show the horrors and sorrows of their lives. Caste and class oppression are mobilised by the characters achieving a sense of individuality.

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