Caste and the Indian Nationalist Novel:

Contesting the Dalit Question in *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable*

Ng Qi Siang , Yale-NUS College '19

This paper discusses the treatment of untouchables in Kanthapura and Untouchable, two of India's most renowned nationalist novels. Probing a comparison between these texts at once establishes a dialogue between rival conceptions of untouchable citizenship – those espoused by the Indian National Congress establishment (i.e. Gandhi) and others by more critical untouchable activists such as B.R. Ambedkar during India's struggle for independence. While the Gandhian view of untouchables espoused in Raja Rao's Kanthapura (1938) purports to improve the social condition of this subaltern community, it does so in a paternalistic manner that denies untouchables agency, self-determination and real improvements in their marginal social position. The only solution to Dalit social exclusion, argues Mulk Raj Anand in Untouchable (1935), is to recognize the systemic structural discrimination that untouchables confront within the caste system and consequently, to allow this subaltern community to work towards the abolition of caste through a distinct movement that better caters to their specific concerns. Through this comparison, this paper not only disrupts the notion of Indian nationalism as an unproblematic and homogenous force behind the leadership of Gandhi and the Congress, but also highlights contestation between different groups of English-educated nationalist leaders and intellectuals regarding the sensitive politics of caste.

Introduction

'My nationalism, fierce though it is, is not exclusive,' proclaimed Mahatma Gandhi, whose spiritual leadership would come to define Congress' struggle for *Swaraj (Indian Self-Rule)*.[1] Under his guidance, Congress attempted to mobilize and emancipate marginalized groups such as the untouchables – people outside of the Hindu caste system deemed "ritually impure" – to participate in the anti-colonial struggle.[2] Yet, the paternalistic nature of Gandhian nationalism and the privileged positionality from which Congress activists viewed the condition of the untouchables arguably alienated many of these subalterns due to the high-caste gaze through which they understood these issues.[3] This prompted untouchable leaders such as B.R. Ambedkar to break with Congress to form separate movements that better met *Dalit* aspirations.[4] Despite good intentions, Gandhian nationalism was arguably poorly grounded in the reality of untouchable experiences and thus encountered difficulty catering to their specific needs and ambitions.[5]

Nowhere are the contradictions between the theory and reality of Gandhian nationalism more apparent than in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938). A middle-class brahmin from Hyderabad, Rao was strongly influenced by Gandhian ideas and actively participated in the Quit India Movement (1942).[6] While the novel reflects the apparently inclusive aims of Gandhian nationalism, it also highlights the problematic understanding that Congress had of untouchable issues. Studying *Kanthapura* gives scholars a space to explore and question such attitudes; reading it comparatively with more critical texts such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) sheds light on how Gandhian assumptions deviate from subaltern realities while contesting the disempowering discourses therein.

This paper argues that Rao expresses excessive optimism regarding nationalist unity between untouchables and caste Hindus under Gandhi, potentially silencing historical injustices and structural barriers that alienated subalterns from the mainstream *Swaraj* movement. The paper will first examine Rao's idea of nationalism and his portrayal of subalterns before comparing it with *Untouchable* to expose his silences regarding the untouchable community,

---

[1] Gandhi and Anthony Parel, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, Centenary ed, Cambridge Texts in Modern Politics (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.
[2] Teresa Hubel, *Whose India? The Independence Struggle in British and Indian Fiction and History* (London: Leicester Univ. Press, 1996), 151; Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1999), 131–33.
[3] Ramachandran Guha, "Introduction," in *Untouchable*, by Mulk Raj Anand, New edition, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2014), ix–xiv.
[4] Hubel, *Whose India?* 153–58.
[5] B. R. Ambedkar and Valerian Rodrigues, "Gandhism: The Doom of the Untouchables," in *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 150–58, 161–69.
[6] R. Parathasarathy, "Introduction," in *Kanthapura*, by Raja Rao, 2014, vii.

giving them a voice to resist problematic Gandhian representations of their community and paternalistic attitudes towards the liberation of the untouchables.

The Silencing of Untouchables in *Kanthapura*

Kanthapura recounts the story of how a group of South Indian villagers came to embrace Gandhian nationalist ideas and participate in the *Swaraj* movement against British colonial rule. The protagonist, Moorthy, comes into contact with Gandhian ideas while studying in the city and eventually returns to his home village to mobilize his fellow villagers to resist British rule. He initially faces ostracization from his fellow villagers for breaking caste boundaries to spread *Swaraj* among the untouchable pariah caste, consequently suffering excommunication from the Brahmin caste for his efforts. Despite the efforts of conservative forces such as Bhatta, the village priest and Waterfall Venkamma, a gossiping Brahmin woman, to discredit *Swaraj*, the young activist successfully instigates pariah coolies and Brahmin clerks on the Skeffington Coffee Estate to rise up against the British proprietors while winning over most of the village to the Gandhian cause. While eventually arrested by the British authorities for allegedly inciting violence among the locals, the village women take leadership of the local *Swaraj* movement in his absence and continue to resist British rule with support of villagers from the surrounding villages. After several confrontations with the brutal colonial police, the village land is auctioned off to wealthy Europeans. Displaced from their land, the villagers burn down their village and disperse to neighboring settlements. The novel's conclusion is ambivalent: while the villagers remain hopeful that Gandhi will deliver *Swaraj*, their hard-won gains are reversed by a truce between the Mahatma and the British. Disillusioned, Moorthy foreswears Gandhism and switches his support to the Socialist Nehru instead.

Kanthapura, the South-Indian village from which Rao's novel takes its name, is highly fragmented on caste lines. The spatial layout of the village itself is segregated based on 'a traditional village community hierarchically within an orthodox organization of castes' into a 'Brahmin quarter…a Pariah quarter…a Potter's quarter, a Weaver's quarter and a Sudra quarter', resulting in the creation of homogenous and exclusive social spaces that limit interactions between people of different castes.[7] While the female Brahmin narrator Achakka initially describes the village as containing 'four-and-twenty houses', she speaks 'only of the Brahmin quarter', for she did not know how many houses existed outside of her exclusive environment, especially since she dared not enter 'polluting' spaces such as the "Pariah quarter" but merely observed it from 'the street corner Beadle Timmayya's hut'.[8] This geographical segregation

[7] Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, 90; Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (Guragon: Penguin Books, 2014), 6.
[8] Rao, *Kanthapura*, 6.

reflects the social segregation of the village community: villagers are influenced by the politics of pollution embedded within the caste system and are haunted by an abiding fear of losing caste. The 'confusion of castes' is compared with the 'Kaliyuga floods'[9] during the depraved apocalyptic age in Hindu mythology, suggesting the existential threat to the social order presented by the breaking of caste boundaries. This anxiety eventually prompts the Brahmins to excommunicate Moorthy – the local Congress leader – 'his family and all the generations to come'[10] for visiting the "Pariah quarter".

So traumatic is losing caste, in fact, that Moorthy's mother dies of despair on hearing of her excommunication. Her angst is conveyed through the metaphor of 'winds of the *night* and the shadows of the *night* and the jackals of the *night*…," with the repetition of the word 'night' and the imagery of shadows and jackals demonstrating the psychological trauma of her relegation from the sacred space of Brahmanical purity by juxtaposing it to the wild, dark and profane space of 'ghosts… spirits and the evil ones' supposedly inhabited by outcastes.[11] The sheer force of this trauma metaphorically (and literally) destroying her sense of self-identity associated with her Brahmin caste by 'pierc[ing] her breast' like a dagger', highlighting the centrality of this institution to one's existence and self-definition, especially since key social institutions (e.g. religion, marriage and funerals) are organized on caste lines.[12] To be deprived of caste is, therefore, likened to being cast out of human civilization into the dangerous wilderness of social exclusion, severing one's links with one's community and one's personal identity, thus exposing the daily psychological violence faced by those deprived of caste.

The catalyst for change is the introduction of Gandhian ideas into the community, which rapidly heals caste divisions within the village. Gandhi is portrayed with religious overtones, creating a myth to bind Kanthapura's identity with that of the Indian nation-state and to symbolize its growing national consciousness, a mystique heightened by the fact that Gandhi himself does not appear in the novel and can thus be shaped by his interlocutors into a charismatic figure around which the villagers could rally. In a Harikatha[13] recounted by the storyteller Jayaramcha at the Ganesh-Jayanti festival, the Mahatma is portrayed as an avatar of Shiva. He is sent by Brahma at the behest of the Sage Valmiki to 'fight the enemies of the country', lending the divine authority of Hindu traditions to his ideas.[14] Parallels are drawn with Krishna, who fought 'against demons and…killed the serpent Kali', portraying the anti-colonial movement as

[9] Rao, 31.
[10] Rao, 49.
[11] Rao, 49.
[12] Rao, 49–50.
[13] A Tamil Hindu religious discourse that often recounts the life of a saint.
[14] Rao, *Kanthapura*, 12–13.

a battle between a binary of good and evil, defining the Indian nation against the British 'other' while elevating Gandhian nationalism to the level of objective and divine-inspired 'Truth'.[15] Moorthy's conversion to Gandhian nationalism is moreover portrayed as divine revelation, where 'he had seen a vision, a vision of the Mahatma, mighty and God-beaming', providing a form of divine sanction to his later activism by investing him with Gandhi's ostensible supernatural authority.[16] Gandhian ideas are furthermore ascribed 'something of the silent communion of ancient books', ascribing infallible, divine truth to his teachings by placing it on the level of the great Hindu epics – the *Ramayana* through the reference to Valmiki, its author, and the *Mahabharata* through the comparison to Krishna, its protagonist.[17] Admittedly, such myths do promote nationalist unity among the villagers. Common village initiatives led by Moorthy (e.g. temple-construction, Congress Panchayat) – who, as an outcaste, represents all yet none of them – allows villagers to transcend narrow caste loyalties to participate in the national anti-colonial struggle as theoretically equal citizens, weakening caste consciousness and allowing Untouchables to contribute towards *Swaraj*.[18]

The unrealistic speed with which deeply entrenched institutions such as caste are swiftly eroded by Gandhian influence, however, implies that Rao may perhaps have fetishized Gandhism as a supernatural power that acts as a panacea for Untouchable difficulties: the villagers abruptly 'forgot about [caste]' despite the powerful influence it once held over their lives.[19] Yet, the scene where Rachanna's wife begs Moorthy to touch a tumbler of milk 'as though it were offered to the gods' so that her family may be sanctified of their impurity as pariahs, exposes the fact that the lingering specter of caste persists in spite of the *Swaraj* movement's claim to empower untouchables.[20] In referring to herself in servile terms such as 'poor hussy', the text highlights the persistence of untouchable servility towards caste Hindus – a form of psychological colonization from which it is difficult to escape.[21] Even Moorthy, the representative of the nationalist movement in Kanthapura, cannot help but feel repulsed by the impurity of the offering. While he does eventually drink the milk, he does so fearfully with 'many a trembling prayer' and is only able to take one sip before setting it aside.[22]

---

[15] Rao, 13; Anna Triandafyllidou, "National Identity and the 'Other,'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4 (January 1998): 593–94, accessed 24 April 2018, https://doi.org/10.1080/014198798329784; Gandhi and Parel, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, chap. 17.
[16] Rao, *Kanthapura*, 13.
[17] Rao, 38.
[18] Rao, 7–11, 79–88, 151–52.
[19] Rao, 133.
[20] Rao, 83.
[21] Rao, 83.
[22] Rao, 85.

Even the memory of this seemingly trivial act was terrifying enough to make Moorthy's 'hair stand[s] on end', necessitating a dose of Ganges Water and a bath with new clothes to get over the trauma of drinking in a pariah home, suggesting that even the best-trained Gandhians find it difficult to fully exorcise the influence of caste over their lives.[23] Despite their desire to liberate the untouchables from oppression, it seems that many Congress members remain trapped within hierarchical discourses of caste, resulting in them continuing to perpetuate caste structures in their habits and behavior. The existence of these entrenched discourses contradicts the portrayal of the changes brought about by Gandhian nationalism as swift and efficacious, perhaps arising from the high-caste gaze of the narrator, who is perhaps less aware of lingering pariah oppression. Juxtaposing the high-caste idealization of the efficacy of Gandhian *Swaraj* and the continued marginalization of untouchable castes highlights how mainstream nationalism may have trivialized the challenges still faced by subalterns seeking emancipation from persistent structural discrimination.[24]

Problematic silences also exist in the Congress's attitude towards untouchables within the text. Though caste boundaries were indeed relaxed to unite the village, caste is not completely eliminated as an institution. True to Gandhi's practice of 'let[ting] the castes [and] separate eating exist' by retaining the traditional idea of caste and not requiring satyagrahis to 'break caste taboos, go on strike, fast, or participate in any other form of protest against untouchability', no real change in status exists for the pariahs in the novel, who meekly take an oath 'not to break the law' in the courtyard of the sacred temple rather than inside it.[25] This exposes the still exclusionary nature of Gandhian nationalism and the lack of awareness untouchables possess of their subjugation.[26] The high-caste gaze of Achakka, a subjective narrator removed from the pariah community, is ambivalent towards their lived experience, marginalizing their experience of the struggle for *Swaraj* (Indian self-rule) and the role that they play within the independence movement. They are instead 'othered' and fetishized as passive objects in a state of quasi-religious awe of caste Hindus, fully accepting their destined inferiority with no independent aspirations, thus discounting the urgency of their liberation and inadequately capturing the reality of their lived experiences.[27] Despite a sensation of liberation from British colonialism and a greater degree of community acceptance, untouchables remain subjugated by the institution of caste under Gandhism.

---

[23] Rao, 85.
[24] Rao, 85.
[25] Rao, *Kanthapura*, 31,87.
[26] Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, 93; Hubel, *Whose India?*, 153.
[27] Rao, *Kanthapura*, 83.

The religious cult of personality in the text surrounding Gandhi and his self-appointed prophet, Moorthy, who is venerated as Kanthapura's local Mahatma, also carries paternalistic and authoritarian undertones that prevent untouchables from challenging these problematic attitudes towards caste. The novel's portrayal of 'Gandhi without flaws' suggests that conformity to Gandhian tenets is the only legitimate path to nationalism.[28] Due to his greater proximity to the Mahatma through his membership of the Congress Party, this deification rubs off on Moorthy as well, allowing him to vicariously enjoy the adoration and hero-worship that the villagers display towards Gandhi. Indeed, as the novel progresses, Moorthy becomes aloof and dictatorial in directing the anti-colonial struggle. Having undergone the 'glorious' sacrifice of incarceration, he increasingly uses grandiose language such as 'ye' and 'hath' while addressing speeches to the entire community rather than interacting with specific individuals in vernacular speech, suggesting an increasingly ambivalent attitude towards his fellow villagers, who seemingly follow his commands without question.[29] Dissenters such as conservative caste Hindus Bhatta and Waterfall Venkamma – vindictive and reactionary as they may be – gradually fade away. The claims to possess an objective 'Truth' and the god-like cult of personality surrounding nationalist leaders appear to suggest an authoritarian streak within the nationalist movement to the preclusion of other imaginations of nationhood.

No room, therefore exists for the untouchable pariahs to influence the Gandhian program in the text – they exist only to be led by the caste Hindu *Swaraj* activists – reflecting how the Gandhian movement's exclusive claim to representing the untouchables causes him to unwittingly impose his agenda upon them in a paternalistic manner, ironically delegitimizing organic forms of untouchable resistance even as he advocates for their liberation and social inclusion.[30] Despite the good intentions of Congress activists, untouchables remain twice colonized, first by the Raj, and subsequently by caste Hindus, who mobilize their political support to advance a *Swaraj* where untouchables remain marginalized.[31] Despite a fleeting sense of liberation, in *Kanthapura*, 'the subaltern cannot speak'.[32]

The Centrality of Subaltern Lived Experience in *Untouchable*

Untouchable recounts a day in the life of Bhaka, an untouchable boy who cleans latrines in a British army barracks for a living. Through his eyes, Anand richly described the daily life of the

[28] Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, 100.
[29] Rao, *Kanthapura*, 137.
[30] Hubel, *Whose India?*, 151–52.
[31] Gyatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 2013, 66–111, 90–104, accessed 26 April 2018, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1052363.
[32] Spivak, 104.

untouchables and the numerous indignities they face on a daily basis. Despite his low-born status, Bhaka aspires to the higher standard of living enjoyed by the White man, regularly dressing up in British Army uniforms and attempting to learn English. Nevertheless, he is unable to escape the contempt of Hindu society on account of his low caste , exemplified by a dramatic slap he receives from a caste Hindu for touching him in the street by accident. Troubled by these indignities, Bhaka indignantly questions his maltreatment by Indian society and enters a state despair at his inability to escape untouchable oppression. Stumbling upon a Congress Rally, Bhaka listens to Gandhi (who is an actual character in the novel) articulate his vision for the untouchables and several intellectuals discussing the Untouchable question. While puzzled and slightly doubtful at their words, Bhaka returns home to share Gandhi's words with his family in the hopes that these ideas would one day lead to their emancipation.

Like Rao, Mulk Raj Anand came from a middle-class high-caste background, born into a lower-middle class Kshatriya family in Peshawar. Despite playing with untouchable children as a child, his perspective on *Dalits* may nevertheless have been filtered through a privileged gaze.[33] In reading *Untouchable*, one questions the extent to which the feelings ascribed to Anand's untouchable protagonist, Bakha, truly represent subaltern sentiments rather than merely being a mouthpiece for his elite (and possibly flawed) understanding of the conditions of the untouchables .[34] Yet, in contrast to their peripheral role in *Kanthapura*, *Untouchable's* realist description of the life of Bakha at least places the lived experiences of untouchables at its core.[35] It acknowledges untouchable agency while highlighting more starkly their persecution by an oppressive social order.

Rather than representing untouchables as a supine and pliant constituency, Anand portrays young untouchables as having dreams and aspirations towards a better standard of living. Bakha, the young protagonist, symbolizes the idealism and optimism of youth in aspiring beyond his station. Enjoying life in the liminal space of British military barracks where caste has a weaker hold, Bakha learns a sense of self-respect from being treated 'as a human being' by British tommies, thus 'think[ing] of himself as superior to his fellow-outcastes' who were 'content with their lot' of stagnation and oppression – a sentiment shared by his friends Chota and Ram Charan, as they imitate British practices such as wearing British military uniform and

[33] Rosemary Marangoly George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 94; E.M. Forster, "Afterword," in *Untouchable*, by Mulk Raj Anand, New edition, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 143.
[34] George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, 114.
[35] Nisha Rani Tank, "Social Realism: Reflection and Identity in Mulk Raj Anand's Works with Special Reference to Untouchable and Coolie," *International Journal of Advanced Research and Development* 3, no. 2 (March 1, 2018): 1.

smoking tobacco.[36] Despite the problematic nature of the psychological imperialism inflicted upon these youths in their desire to '*copy* [the British] in everything…to *copy* them as well as [they] could', this attitude does imply a growing aspirational attitude among the young untouchables in the text. They believed that 'look[ing] like a sahib… And walk[ing] like a sahib' would invest them with a sahib's privileges too, suggesting a desire for a higher social status and an improved quality of life.[37]

Such behavior recalls how Ambedkar used to appear in public dressed in a Western suit in contrast to Gandhi's khadi to express untouchable aspirations to the power and opportunity of the West'.[38] For untouchables, Western dress was not so much slavish cultural imperialism as a 'storming of the upper-class citadel' to escape oppressive indigenous hierarchies.[39] In fact, Bakha solicits access to the education required to climb the social ladder, buying a 'first primer of English' and paying a babu's son to teach him English to get around the taboo against educating Dalits: he desires access to public life and the wider world through 'read[ing] the papers' and literature and writing letters.'[40] Born a sweeper but unable to 'consciously accept that fact', Bhaka's dream of becoming a sahib suggests that young untouchables, like caste Hindus, hope for a life of success and prosperity, humanizing them beyond the role of a servile 'other'.[41] Anand gives these subaltern characters the agency to strive towards these aspirations in contrast to their peripheral position in *Kanthapura*.

Nevertheless, untouchable aspirations are continually impeded by the oppressive discourses of caste, trapping young untouchables in an oppressive cycle of immanence. Despite Rao giving the impression that caste can be efficaciously eradicated through the introduction of Gandhian ideas, the reality of caste discourses is that they are rarely as ineffectual as the protests of conservative caste Hindus like Bhatta and Waterfall Venkamma in *Kanthapura*. Instead, these discourses operate as a collectively-enforced technology of power designed to keep untouchables within their subjugated state. The dramatic slap that Bakha receives for touching a caste Hindu exemplifies this. Surrounded by a large crowd of caste Hindu onlookers, Bakha symbolizes the central role of the untouchables as the base of the caste superstructure, serving as an impure 'other' relative to which caste Hindus can maintain their relative 'hygiene'.[42] This results in the presence of an intangible 'moral barrier' between him, the 'dirty' untouchable, and the clean

[36] Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, New edition, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 3–5.
[37] Anand, 5.
[38] George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, 114.
[39] Guha, "Introduction," xiv.
[40] Anand, *Untouchable*, 30–31.
[41] Anand, 31.
[42] Alex Law, *Key Concepts in Classical Social Theory* (United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), 19, accessed 27 April 2018, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446251485; Anand, *Untouchable*, 38.

caste Hindus, a psychological product of the caste system's politics of purity.[43] So powerful is this discourse that Bakha is compelled to adhere to this barrier, resentfully complying with the demand that he announce his presence with 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming' even though 'one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the Hindu[s]' in defiance of this humiliating injunction.[44]

Instinctively triggered by Bakha's transgression of touching one of their number, the caste Hindus insult and even physically assault him to maintain this barrier, a tangible manifestation of the psychological violence the caste system inflicts to keep untouchables in their place.[45] The knocking off of Bakha's turban is especially humiliating, as the turban symbolizes one's dignity and honor, exposing the power of the high-caste to deprive untouchables of the human dignity that Bakha is taught to demand.[46] Following this violent humiliation, Bakha must accept society's definition of his identity, as seen from the persistent yet resentful mental repetition of '*Untouchable*! That's the word! *Untouchable*! I am an *Untouchable*![47]' Denied empowerment and social inclusion, Bakha is trapped within the unwanted identity of a reviled untouchable by oppressive caste structures. Contrary to *Kanthapura's* idealized view of social change through Gandhism, this entrenched edifice does not simply fade away.

Gandhi's solution to the untouchable Question unraveled, therefore, is unrealistic at best and patronizing at worst when juxtaposed against the violence that caste inflicts upon the untouchables. The Mahatma articulates a patronizing vision for his '*harijans*', demanding that they be treated *kindly*, provided with 'good, sound grain…courteously offered' and that they '*purify* themselves' and ritually 'rid themselves of evil habits'.[48] In describing Havildar Charat Singh, an apparently kind caste Hindu soldier who personifies kindness to untouchables, and Colonel Hutchinson, a British churchman, who symbolizes religion, Anand argues that neither is sufficient to emancipate untouchables from the oppressive institutions of the caste system.

The Havildar shows kindness to Bakha by not only speaking nicely to him and even giving him a new hockey stick, but also allowing Bakha to bring him coal for his *hookah*, a 'polluting' act that untouchables were normally forbidden from performing. The Havildar even pours him tea, earning his love and admiration.[49] Yet, such 'kindness' is neither empowering nor

[43] Anand, *Untouchable*, 38–39.
[44] Anand, 38–43.
[45] Anand, 39.
[46] Anand, 40; George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, 119.
[47] Anand, *Untouchable*, 42–43.
[48] Anand, 131.
[49] Anand, 91–95.

dignifying, since it is laden with a condescension that 'symbolized six thousand years of racial and caste superiority', suggesting that Bakha is being patronized by a privileged caste Hindu who craves the pleasure of being a do-gooder since he can 'afford to be kind' without loss to himself, more out of pity than genuine good will.[50] Indeed, Bakha notices that his kindness has 'a slight suspicion of forgetfulness about it': in fact, the Havildar regularly mispronounces Bakha's name as 'Bakhya', 'Bakhe' and 'Bakhia', suggesting a lack of any real care for the youth except to indulge his smug self-perception of generosity – thus reducing Bakha to the status of a pet, a child or a servant.[51]

Moreover, this kindness incites Bakha's servility and disarms his outrage at the oppression he suffers as an outcaste. He is 'a slave overjoyed at the condescension of his master' at the Havildar's casual promise of a hockey stick, fooling him into a sense of pride and contentment despite the unequal power dynamics tainting the relationship.[52] Bakha's father is similarly left utterly convinced of the 'kindness' of a high-caste doctor, who personally visits their dwelling to deliver a dying infant Bakha's fever medicine, forgetting that the child had almost died in the first place because said doctor had refused to see an untouchable patient all day.[53] These isolated acts of kindness symbolize piecemeal concessions and reforms reminiscent of Gandhi's call for better treatment for untouchables, trapping them within a state of false consciousness by encouraging them to support *Swaraj* with the caste system intact in spite of there being no substantive improvement to their subjugated social position.

Religion, while giving temporary solace to the untouchables, does not provide concrete solutions to their oppression either. When Bakha confides his problems in Colonel Hutchinson, the latter is unable to provide any practical or relevant solutions, merely 'babbling, babbling, all vague in a cloud' about the goodness and redemptive power of Christ and singing didactic hymns that do not address the real needs of the untouchable community.[54] Indeed, Anand implies that religion is in fact self-indulgent, as the padre is too obsessed with self-edification to give relevant answers to Bakha's repeated questions about the alien faith which he is unable to comprehend – a sentiment he also feels when listening to Gandhi's articulate his idealism with 'a quixotic smile on his thin lips.'[55]

In fact, Gandhi's glorifying of Untouchability and wishing to be reincarnated as an untouchable to clean Hindu society exhibits similar self-indulgence, convincing himself that he

[50] Anand, 10; Hubel, *Whose India?*, 170.
[51] Anand, *Untouchable*, 10,91; Hubel, *Whose India?*, 171.
[52] Anand, *Untouchable*, 10.
[53] Anand, 69.
[54] Anand, 109–16.
[55] Anand, 125–28.

is standing in solidarity with the untouchables and convincing the untouchables that their oppression is a privilege while effecting little tangible change, a criticism that the economist Ambedkar regularly levelled against the real-life Mahatma.[56] It is because of this that Moorthy eventually distances himself from Gandhism in favor of materialist Nehruvian Socialism at the conclusion of *Kanthapura*, realizing that Gandhism's spirituality hindered meaningful action.[57] Religion is thus portrayed as a mask for hidden agendas: just like the padre's kindness is but a smokescreen for his imperialist Christian evangelism, Gandhi's performance as a 'beautiful and saintly' holy man in the novel may similarly belie an ulterior motive, perhaps to co-opt subaltern support for his exclusionary *Swaraj* through empty platitudes, indicated by 'something Mephistophelian in the determined little chin immediately under his mouth'.[58] If the pillars of kindness and religion upon which Gandhism rests yield little benefit for untouchables, its claim to bring about the 'emancipation of the untouchables' is debatable.[59]

If Gandhism cannot liberate the untouchables, what is to be done? Anand does not say. Indeed, as a kshatriya removed from the untouchable community, his silence may imply that it is not his place to define the untouchables' future course. While Bhaka repeatedly seeks new sources of authority from the Havildar, Gandhi and finally the poet Iqbal Sarshar, Anand rejects the 'valorization of revolutionary leadership' in *Kanthapura*.[60] He suggests that no superior authority truly offers a satisfying solution to the unique problems faced by untouchables: Bhaka is always left disappointed by his 'idols' or unable to understand their prescriptions in full, disqualifying them from directing untouchable activism. The implication is that the untouchables must themselves work out their own salvation through an organic form of resistance that best suits their interests. The over-intellectualized and petty debate at the novel's conclusion between the Anglophile Bashir and the poet Sarshar is perhaps Anand providing a metafictional self-critique of his own conflicted identity as an English-educated writer, too confused and removed from the untouchable experiences to decide their future course for them. He implies that untouchables have become a distinct subjectivity unto themselves, othering the higher castes by referring to them separately as 'the Hindus', meaning that *Dalits* ought, as Ambedkar encouraged them to, to reject 'any structures of authority' and instead embrace authority for themselves separate from mainstream nationalism to better advance their own concerns as a distinct social group within the wider nationalist movement.[61] Anand's refusal to prescribe the way forward for

[56] Anand, 130; Ambedkar and Rodrigues, "Gandhism: The Doom of the Untouchables," 167–69.
[57] Rao, *Kanthapura*, 211.
[58] Anand, *Untouchable*, 125.
[59] Anand, 131.
[60] Hubel, *Whose India?* 175.
[61] Hubel, 175.

untouchables paves the way for a more pluralistic and democratic solution to caste oppression, encouraging the untouchables to seize their own destiny in 'figur[ing] out the elements of possible new worlds'.[62]

Conclusion

An important difference between *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable* is whether nationalism can co-exist with caste. On the one hand, the former implies that there is nothing mutually exclusive about caste and nationalism, even suggesting that the latter ought to be subordinated to the former in the interests of nationalist unity. On the other hand, the latter highlights that the depth of oppression faced by Untouchables renders Indian independence futile as they remain alienated from the freedom and prosperity it promises, perhaps necessitating a separate movement to achieve subaltern liberation. The privileged gaze of the Brahmin narrator in *Kanthapura* may lead to an idealistic underestimation of the difficulty of resolving the untouchable Question, while the centering of the subaltern in *Untouchable* exposes the evils of the caste system, leading to contrasting understandings of its role in an independent India.

These contrasting attitudes arguably influence the narrative style used by both authors. Approaching the untouchable Question from the position of a 'clean' Brahmin, Rao adopts a 'dirty' or 'messy' narrative style by attempting an 'ordinary style of storytelling' easily accessible to readers. He writes in a manner that he believes to embody the literary style of South India, respecting neither punctuation nor conjunction to "tell one interminable tale in a stream of consciousness with…a meandering narrative structure' to accurately represent 'the tempo of Indian life'.[63] This enables Rao to mask the hierarchical exaltation of the Brahmin caste and create a unifying national narrative that speaks to the entire Indian nation irrespective of caste, ironically marginalizing the unique struggles of the untouchables in the process.

In contrast, *Untouchable* has been described as being 'indescribably clean'.[64] It uses a realist style to go 'straight to the heart of its subject' to amplify the subaltern voice above structural silences. Anand illustrates Bhaka's life down to the most minute detail: even a task as mundane as cleaning latrines is described down to level of the movement of muscle as 'a marvel of movement [and] dancing', allowing readers to easily imagine the world inhabited by this invisible community.[65] Anand also describes Bhaka's thoughts and emotions, highlighting the 'smoldering rage…like spurts from a half-smothered fire' he feels towards his oppression by

[62] George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, 123.
[63] Rao, *Kanthapura*, xxxi–xxxii.
[64] Forster, "Afterword," 141.
[65] Anand, *Untouchable*, 9–11.

caste Hindus, enabling readers to empathize with the daily psychological violence untouchables face as a result of their subaltern position.[66] Anand thus purifies the 'dirty' untouchable by humanizing their experiences and placing them at the center of public discourse, though this style occasionally results in an ambivalent narrative voice due to his use of the 'language and voice of the privileged classes' to expose subaltern suffering. [67] To appeal to a wider audience, the clean must be made dirty and the dirty made clean.

Since both novels examine caste through the subjectivity of high-caste Hindu authors, it might be worth comparing them to *Dalit*[68] literature to examine continuities and differences between untouchable self-perception and upper-caste representation. Unlike the third-person novels of Rao and Anand, untouchable writers write in an autobiographical mode to 'express their experiences of the oppression', prizing self-perception vis-à-vis elitist 'sympathy literature' exemplified by the 'bourgeois' novel.[69] Comparing such texts could help us re-examine the belief that only *Dalits* can produce '*Dalit* literature' while testing the limits of empathy that caste Hindu authors can have for untouchable oppression.[70]

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the valuable input of Professor Javed Majeed, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at King's College London, and Dr. Tom Langley, Teaching Fellow of Comparative Literature at King's College London, both of whom served as module conveners for the Socialism and Literature in India in the Twentieth Century module for which this paper was written. All errors are, however, my own.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. New edition. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, (1935) 2014.

Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Guragon: Penguin Books, (1938) 2014.

Secondary Sources

Ambedkar, B. R., and Valerian Rodrigues. "Gandhism: The Doom of the Untouchables." In *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Forster, E.M. "Afterword." In *Untouchable*, by Mulk Raj Anand, 141–44, New edition. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2014.

[66] Forster, "Afterword," 141; Tank, "Social Realism," 303.

[67] Oindrila Ghosh, "Caught In-between Two Worlds: Ambivalance in Mulk Raj Anand," in *Culture and Identity: Re-Reading Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand*, ed. Aninda Basu Roy, Arindam Das, and Sarbojit Biswas, 2014, chap. 9.

[68] Refers to Militant untouchables, though the use of the term remains highly contested.

[69] Graham Good, "Lukács' Theory of the Novel," ed. György Lukács and Anna Bostock, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 6, no. 2 (1973): 181, accessed 30 April 2018, https://doi.org/10.2307/1345432.

[70] George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, 123–24.

Gandhi, and Anthony Parel. *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*. Centenary ed. Cambridge Texts in Modern Politics. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
George, Rosemary Marangoly. *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
Ghosh, Oindrila. "Caught In-between Two Worlds: Ambivalance in Mulk Raj Anand." In *Culture and Identity: Re-Reading Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand*, edited by Aninda Basu Roy, Arindam Das, and Sarbojit Biswas, 2014.
Good, Graham. "Lukács' Theory of the Novel." Edited by György Lukács and Anna Bostock. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 6, no. 2 (1973): 175–85. Accessed 30 April 2018. https://doi.org/10.2307/1345432.
Guha, Ramachandran. "Introduction." In *Untouchable*, by Mulk Raj Anand, New edition. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 2014.
Hubel, Teresa. *Whose India? The Independence Struggle in British and Indian Fiction and History*. London: Leicester Univ. Press, 1996.
Law, Alex. *Key Concepts in Classical Social Theory*. United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011. Accessed 27 April 2018. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446251485.
Parathasarathy, R. "Introduction." In *Kanthapura*, by Raja Rao, 2014.
Sethi, Rumina. *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*. Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1999.
Spivak, Gyatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak." In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 66–111, 2013. Accessed 26 April 2018. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1052363.
Tank, Nisha Rani. "Social Realism: Reflection and Identity in Mulk Raj Anand's Works with Special Reference to Untouchable and Coolie." *International Journal of Advanced Research and Development* 3, no. 2 (March 1, 2018): 303–8.
Triandafyllidou, Anna. "National Identity and the 'Other.'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4 (January 1998): 593–612. Accessed 24 April 2018. https://doi.org/10.1080/014198798329784.