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Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and the Philosophy of Aesthetic Realism

This universal ethical question needs to be discussed honestly and deeply by everyone, regardless of culture, for social justice and personal kindness to prevail: "What does a person deserve by being alive?" Asked by Eli Siegel, founder of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism, this question provides us with an indispensable means for opposing the contempt that is the fundamental cause of injustice. Contempt Mr. Siegel defined as "the disposition in every person to think we will be for ourselves by making less of the outside world." And its pervasive effects cannot be underestimated. Every person has a fight between *the desire for contempt and the desire to respect people and the world*. Contempt is very ordinary, it is present in everyday life. For instance when one person doesn't listen to another; or when we see someone in the street and think, "I wouldn't be caught dead wearing shoes like that." But when it predominates on a national scale, the results of *making less* are disastrous.

In the caste system of India, contempt is institutionalized, as this article explains. It is related to caste-like institutions world-wide, including racism in my own country, the United States; and to the global horrors of economic injustice.

The novel *Untouchable*, by Mulk Raj Anand, illustrates, from beginning to end, the hurtful manifestation of contempt in the caste system. The time period of the novel is the 1930s, but its truth continues today; and Anand shows in a young man named Bakha the pain

«Неприкасаемый» Мулка Раджа Ананда и философия эстетического реализма

«Чего заслуживает человек, будучи живым существом?» Этот универсальный этический вопрос требует честного и всестороннего обсуждения, независимо от степени воспитания, ради торжества социальной справедливости и гуманности. Ответ на вопрос Эли Сигеля, основоположника философии эстетического реализма, вооружает нас незаменимым средством противостояния презрению, которое является главной причиной несправедливости. Презрение, по мнению Сигеля, «это особенность человеческого характера — полагать, что масштаб нашей личности гораздо шире, а значение окружающего мира практически ничтожно». И не следует недооценивать последствия этого противопоставления. В каждом человеке происходит внутренняя борьба между *склонностью к высокомерию и желанием уважать людей и мир*. Высокомерие очень распространено, оно присуще каждой повседневной жизни. Например, когда один человек не слушает другого; или когда мы видим кого-то на улице и думаем: «Меня бы даже в гробу не заставили надеть такие туфли». Но когда подобное отношение культивируется на государственном уровне, результаты *умаления* катастрофичны.

Как явствует из этой статьи, в кастовой системе Индии презрение регламентировано. И связано оно с межкастовым мироустройством, в том числе с расизмом в моей собственной

of the Untouchable: unjustly despised and unjustly impoverished.

The author of this article learned through his study of Aesthetic Realism that making himself “superior” by disparaging other people, including women and people of other ethnicities, made him despise himself and hurt every relationship he wanted to have. And this is representative of what contempt does to persons having it, everywhere. He changed, as he studied in Aesthetic Realism classes *what a person deserves from me* and how to have good will, the one opposition to contempt. He learned good will is not flimsy or weak, it has a scientific basis and definition: it is “the desire to have something else stronger and more beautiful, for this desire makes oneself stronger and more beautiful.”

People need, and want, good will in place of endemic contempt in Europe, Asia, America. There is a powerful, international desire in people today for a just world. Aesthetic Realism is the education that meets that desire and can make for a world that is fair to all people. That is why it is urgently necessary for persons to study its principles.

Keywords:

Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, Dalit, Aesthetic Realism, Eli Siegel, good will, contempt, caste, racism.

стране, Соединённых Штатах, и с глобальными кошмарами экономической несправедливости.

«Неприкасаемый» Мулка Раджа Ананда с первой и до последней страницы наглядно иллюстрирует болезненное проявление неравноправия в кастовой системе. Роман описывает эпоху 1930-х годов, но затронутые в нём проблемы актуальны и по сей день; и Ананд показывает читателю душевные муки юноши по имени Баха — неприкасаемого, незаслуженно презираемого и несправедливо нищего.

Автор статьи сквозь призму изучения эстетического реализма выяснил, что стремление к превосходству за счёт пренебрежительного отношения к другим, включая женщин и людей других национальностей, заставляет человека, в конечном итоге, презирать и самого себя и портить отношения с другими. Это пример того, что делает высокомерие с людьми, где бы они ни находились. Ананд и сам менялся по мере того, как на уроках эстетического реализма изучал тему «Чего человек заслуживает от меня?» и как обладать доброй волей — главным оппонентом высокомерия. Он выяснил, что добрая воля не является хлипкой или слабой, у неё есть научное обоснование и определение: это «желание иметь что-то ещё более сильное и красивое, поскольку благодаря такому желанию сам становишься сильнее и красивее».

Людям необходима добрая воля вместо высокомерия, присущего Европе, Азии и Америке. В современном обществе существует мощный запрос на справедливое мироустройство. А эстетический реализм отвечает на этот вызов времени, помогает строить мир всеобщего благоденствия. Вот почему людям необходимо изучать его принципы.

Ключевые слова:

Мулк Радж Ананд, «Неприкасаемый», далит, эстетический реализм, Эли Сигель, добрая воля, высокомерие, каста, расизм.

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Aesthetic Realism is the philosophy founded by the great American poet and educator Eli Siegel, who has provided explanation for the injustice, the inhumanity, we see today and through history — and that explanation provides the means for a kind world to be. To show this I write here about injustice in the caste system of India; comment on what it has in common with injustice everywhere, including my own; and how fairness can and does replace it.

In my study of this important philosophy, I learned this tremendous fact: every unjust way of seeing people, including the horror of racism and economic injustice, arises from the same cause. That cause is the desire in every human being *to have contempt: “the false importance or glory from the lessening of things not oneself.”* Contempt is as common as a child spitting at another child and as heinous as WWII death camps. There is an ongoing battle in every person between *contempt* and *respect* [6, p. 11]. And for respect to win in the present world, it is necessary for persons to ask, and answer truly, this vital question asked by Eli Siegel in behalf of justice: “*What does a person deserve by being a person?*”

In this paper I will give evidence for this. I’ll use passages from an important novel of India: Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (see fig. 1). And I’ll talk about myself and the evidence I have seen personally.

In the novel, Anand tells the story of a young man of India named Bakha, who was born an *Untouchable*. In the caste system even today one’s general occupation and social importance is determined largely by one’s birth. The Untouchables, who are now called by the kinder term Dalit (see fig. 2), were born to be below everyone else, and to sweep dirt from streets, dispose of corpses, skin the bodies of dead animals, and do all the most defiling work, including cleaning latrines.

The contempt for Untouchables was so intense that a high caste person would be polluted by an Untouchable if his *shadow*

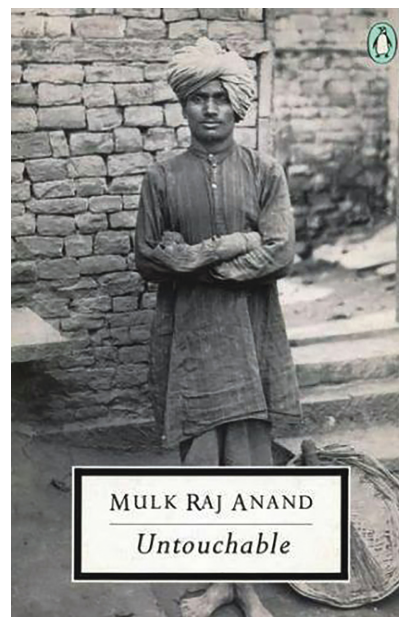


Fig. 1. The Novel “*Untouchable*” by Mulk Raj Anand, published in 1935



Fig. 2. Dalit Children (“*Untouchables*”) in India Today¹

fell on the high caste person, who was considered defiled and had to go home to “purify” himself by bathing to clean off the pollution.

This was the undesirable work Untouchables were born into and the contempt for them, despite their usefulness, and it pervaded all Indian society. It made young Bakha and his family, and all Dalit people, unjustly despised and unjustly impoverished. Even to receive bread in

payment for one's services to a higher caste person was an effort. It wasn't given to Bakha by the hands of the rich person but thrown onto the ground for him to pick up.

The pain, the anger, the anguish, the despair caused nationwide by this attitude of contempt, which the caste system is based on, is well described by Mulk Raj Anand. And it shows how urgent it is to understand and defeat contempt on a national scale.

The justification for this superiority of the highest divisions in the caste system, and for the servile inferiority of the lowest rungs on the caste ladder, is as follows: it is believed that persons are born into a high caste as a reward for superior ethics *in their previous lives*. And it is believed persons are born into the poverty-stricken bottom of Indian society to punish them *for being grievously sinful in previous lives*.

Therefore all this oppression, insult, and poverty is "correct" and "proper" even though it is not based on exact knowledge of who a person born "Untouchable" really is — and what he or she may truly deserve as a human being. And this conception of caste and the falsity it is based on, goes back nearly 2000 years.

With this background in mind, we go to the novel.

"What Does a Person Deserve by Being Alive?"

As the novel begins, Anand describes the Untouchables' colony and the brook that ran near it, "soiled with the dirt and filth of the public latrines... the hides and skins of dead carcasses... the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up... the biting, choking, pungent fumes... the most offensive stink," which Bakha saw as an "uncongenial' place to live." But it was his home.

Our question: Does he deserve, simply because he is a person, to live in a clean place? Does anyone deserve to live in this filth, which they did not create themselves? We feel Anand does not think a person

should have to live this way, and we don't think he should either. Right away Anand has us see that Bakha has an inner life like ones' own. Later we see Bakha enjoying the sights in town. The world is pleasing him:

He looked steadily from the multi-colored, jostling crowd to the beautifully arranged shops. There was the inquisitiveness of a child in his stare, absorbed here in the skill of a woodcutter and there in the manipulation of a sewing machine by a tailor. 'Wonderful! Wonderful!' his instinct seemed to say, in response to the sights familiar to him and yet new [1, p. 44].

Bakha is embodying, in his own way, that deepest desire of all people: to like the world we were born into. After an inner debate he allows himself a rare treat and spends a small amount of money on sweet pastries — jalebis sold by a street vendor (see fig. 3). And the next moment Anand lets us see inside the mind of the sweets seller who has contempt for our hero:

The confectioner smiled faintly at the crudeness of the sweeper's taste, for jalebis are rather coarse stuff and no one save a greedy low-caste man would ever buy four annas' worth of jalebis [1, p. 45].



Fig. 3. Jalebis, a South Asian Pastry Treat²

This juxtaposition of who the sweeper really is, and how this high caste person sees him, is very effective.

But Bakha is enjoying himself so much he doesn't realize how close he has gotten to higher caste people thronging the street. He accidentally bumps against a businessman on his way to work.

"Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin!" he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. "Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me... Now I will have to go and take a bath and purify myself... Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig!" he shouted... "I... I was going to business and now... now, on account of you, I'll be late." [1, pp. 46–47].

A crowd gathers as Bakha stands there taking the abuse — hands joined, head bent, eyes lowered, perspiring, begging forgiveness. And the crowd begins to get dangerous.

We become aware that perhaps a person can be killed for crossing caste boundaries. The growing contempt of the crowd is faithfully depicted: "Jeering and leering, [it] was without a shadow of pity for his remorse... taking a sort of sadistic delight in watching him cower under the abuses and curses." In the onlookers there is an "awakening lust for power," writes Anand.

He presents us with a depiction in frightening detail of the principle of contempt working in people: the "addition to self through the lessening of something else," which we are discussing today. As Bakha is disparaged and tormented, the people doing so — and permitting it to be done — feel they are *more*. It is a false way of being powerful and none of them — though Anand doesn't say this — none of them will like themselves for what they are doing, just as I didn't like myself for the unjust contempt I had, as I slapped my littlest brother, age three, and made him cry, and felt I was big stuff because I could get away with it.

At last Bakha is saved by a Moslem driving a big, heavy cart drawn by an old horse down

the dusty street. The Moslem shouts for the crowd to disperse — "to prevent an accident." The Moslem doesn't have caste prejudice. He sees the Untouchable as more like himself than the higher caste people do, for there is no caste in Islam. He and that big cart show fellow-feeling can be more powerful than contempt: and Bakha is rescued.

I learned from Aesthetic Realism that to see a person fairly, respectfully, we need to see that person's feelings are as real as our own — something I had never thought about before. And to get to this seeing, we should write, as Ellen Reiss, the Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education, suggests, a 500-word soliloquy of that person, speaking from within, describing as if we WERE that person, what he or she hopes for, is afraid of; and how that person sees. Every time I have done this, it has changed for the better how I saw someone.

In keeping with this important matter it is right to ask two questions about the ethics of the high caste people who attack Bakha: the people who see themselves as superior to Bakha — do they see Bakha's feelings as real as their own? *The answer is, no.* Are they making less of him, a representative of humanity, in order to build up a false importance for themselves? *The answer is, yes, they are.* Anand as artist has made us feel Bakha's own feelings as our own. He has made us feel the attackers' feelings as our own. From what he wrote, we know the attackers *did not see him truly*. We would know this no matter what culture we were born into: Nigerian, Haitian, Chinese, European, Mexican. The reason is: these questions represent ethics everywhere.

This short novel about one day in the life of one man in India is written in such a way that it is not only India that is being pointed to. The ethical failure of humanity in every country is being represented, including my own country and myself. As Anand describes instance after instance of the cruelty of contempt as some people are believed to be "superior" while others are "inferior" he is describing a form of contempt that has



justified throughout history, and in nation after nation, including my own, both poverty and prejudice.

We see the thing that has to change for the world to be kind is the way of seeing people. And how that change began in me, I now describe with some details.

I Learn about Contempt and Respect in Myself

We all start early to get importance by lessening other people, not seeing they have feelings like our own and causing them pain without seeming to care ourselves. You can see it in every playground. When a child sticks out their tongue and sings “Nya, nya, nya, nya, nya, I got bread and jelly and you don’t,” the child is having contempt. In school when a child does a problem multiplying fractions and says to himself (as I did), “I did it fast, I’m the best!”; or when a bully pushes a smaller person so they fall, and he or she feels big, that is contempt.

By the time I was in high school I was dedicated to arguing very minor points. When I won an argument, I delighted in feeling superior and looking down on the friend who lost. As a student I sought victories in proving to my professors that I was impressive, and other students were less so. With a woman, I took for granted my mind was better and I had to explain things to her. With people of other ethnicities than my own, I felt I was born into a superior family, the son of a pharmacist, and had a superior skin tone and hair texture. In all of these instances which are so common and cross all national borders, and are so unjust, I felt I would be more important by making other people less important. That is contempt. It is a falsification. And I was to learn *it is the most dangerous and hurtful state of mind* for the contemptuous “superior” one.

With all my studies of psychological anthropology — and they were extensive, including with Margaret Mead, Rhoda Metraux, and colleagues, I never heard

anyone describe contempt, define it, and also lay out its consequences, until the first Aesthetic Realism class I attended taught by Eli Siegel. It was an Ethical Study Conference and I was a new student, hoping very much to learn about myself. By then I was in graduate school. And Mr. Siegel asked me this ethical question which I had never been asked before: “Mr. Perey, what do you have most against yourself?”

I answered, “My self-consciousness,” because I was shy and was painfully conscious of other people looking at me, even when they weren’t. As the dialogue developed, he asked: “Mr. Perey, are you more interested in being as good as you can be or better than other people?” I wanted to answer honestly and told him I was more interested in being better than other people. He began to show me that my desire to be better than other people was not only unfair to them, but to myself. I was seriously hurting myself in the way I saw people. I wanted, most deeply, to have a good effect on people, be a just person; but because I wasn’t, I suffered agonies of guilt from it and never had known their source.

As I learned this, I began to change. I made decisions in behalf of respect, not contempt, that I’d never made before. I had been desperate to change things in me that I thought would be with me all my life, including a cold way of seeing women. And these did change as I was learning that *my deepest desire was to like the world* — and how to do so [6, p. 1].

This has a tremendous cross-cultural, or universal, meaning — because the concepts of Aesthetic Realism that I have been describing are true for everyone.

Returning to the Novel *Untouchable*

Bakha has been saved from mob violence. And at the moment we left him earlier, he was outwardly frozen in humility, while inwardly something else was happening. Anand writes:

He stood aghast. Then his whole countenance lit with fire and his hands were no more joined. Tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. The strength, the power of his giant body glistened with the desire for revenge in his eyes, while horror, rage, indignation swept over his frame. In a moment he had lost all his humility, and he would have lost his temper too, but the man who had struck him the blow had slipped beyond reach into the street... He picked up his [basket and broom] and started walking [1, p. 50].

Someone reminds him that he, an untouchable sweeper, is required to shout out loud as he walks, warning all his superiors they are in danger of defiling contact with him as he walks in the street. The contempt of this man is blatant.

“You be sure to shout now, you illegally begotten!” said a shopkeeper from a side... A little later he [Bakha] slowed down, and quite automatically he began to shout: “*Posh* keep away, *posh*, sweeper coming, *posh*, *posh*, sweeper coming!”

But there was a smoldering rage in his soul. His feeling would rise like spurts of smoke from a half-smothered fire, in fitful, unbalanced jerks when the recollection of some abuse, or rebuke he had suffered kindled a spark in the ashes of remorse inside him... Why are we always abused? [1, p. 51].

And later Bakha asks: “What have I done to deserve this?”

This emotion in response to grave injustice has great meaning. Even though Bakha has been seen in a false and horrible way every day of his life, his objection to being seen with contempt is still alive and burning inside of him: it isn’t dead.

Meanwhile, he doesn’t only object to injustice, he participates in the same injustice he suffers from. Seeing people even poorer than himself, he has contempt for *them*:

The pavements were crowded with beggars. A woman wailed for food outside one of the many cook-shops... Bakha felt a queer sadistic delight staring at the beggars moaning for alms but not receiving any. They seemed to him despicable [1, pp. 134–135].

Contempt has its allure. The allure can successfully be opposed only by critical knowledge. Persons can have that contempt in any part of the world, where someone less fortunate than oneself makes one feel the glory of one’s superior luck. It is the one thing, thought Periyar, that could make a low-caste person NOT want to abolish the caste system: there are people lower than oneself to whom one can feel superior.

How Bakha Is Affected by Gandhi

In the last scene we look at from the novel, Mahatma Gandhi appears. Gandhi read the novel *Untouchable* before it was published and made recommendations, so I think this scene can be taken as really representing his viewpoint. A huge crowd gathers to hear him, and Bakha is eager to see and hear.

Gandhi says that to see another person, created by God, as polluted and untouchable is a sin. What he says next shows that, in keeping with what Aesthetic Realism says *we all need to do in order to have good will*, Gandhi wants to see, from within, the feelings of another person. He tells the gathering:

“If I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, suffering and the affronts leveled at them...” [1, p. 147].

And to become an Untouchable is what, as a writer, Mulk Raj Anand does for Bakha, the sweeper. He goes within Bakha and we see what the young sweeper feels. We, the readers, learn (whatever our ethnic background) that we would feel this way if we were Bakha.



Fig. 4. Indian policemen beat a lower caste Dalit protestor during a nationwide strike in Ahmadabad, India (3 April 2018)³

Bakha's emotion in response to kindness also has great meaning. Earlier, he was grateful, with tears, to the Muslim who protected and befriended him. And after he hears Gandhi speak with good will, he wants to have good will in return:

Bakha felt thrilled to the very marrow of his bones. That the Mahatma should want to be born as an outcaste! That he should love scavenging! He loved the man... [1, pp. 148–149].

As Anand describes the ugly way people in the “Untouchable” category were seen by persons of higher caste, and the unkindness of it — he is seeing what is ugly in an exact way, and justice comes of it. Through this bold novel, published in 1935, saying in print what needed to be said, people became more widely aware of how unjust the caste way of seeing people is. They saw this *not only* through activists like Gandhi, and B.R. Ambedkar, and Periyar — but also through Anand's power to describe how it FELT to be untouchable. I believe it will be seen that he awakened an ethical indignation in people which helped to make for progress.

After India achieved independence in 1947, laws were passed which mitigated some of the abuses of caste prejudice. Laws improving education of lower caste and Dalit people were passed and laws giving them more access to land and to government positions, formerly dominated by Brahmins (see fig. 4 and 5). But even today there is violent opposition to equality. (See, for example, [4] and [8].)



Fig. 5. #DalitWomenFight Brings Fight Against Caste-Based Violence to U.S. (6 November 2015)⁴

What is needed for full-scale good will is explained by Aesthetic Realism. The last passages I quoted from *Untouchable* imply that Bakha will want to retaliate, will resent, until he feels there is good will for him. In this feeling he represents humanity. It was in being seen with critical good will myself, as I earlier described, that I wanted, gratefully to respond with good will to other people.

Aesthetic Realism has made me sure, as a social scientist, that there can be no real, solid peace in the world until people are convinced there is good will toward them and not ill will. But people worldwide are not convinced of this. And so, hate seems unending because contempt is being repaid

by contempt. But it can, and will, end when there is a new way of seeing, which is mutual good will, between “enemy” or disputing parties.

I learned good will is not flimsy or weak, it has a scientific basis and definition: it is “the desire to have something else stronger and more beautiful, for this desire makes oneself stronger and more beautiful.” People need, and want, good will, in place of endemic contempt, in Europe, Asia, America. There is a powerful, international desire in people today for a just world. Aesthetic Realism is the education that meets that desire. That is why it is urgently necessary for persons to study its principles.

NOTES

¹ Photo taken from open sources.

URL: <https://www.supportingdalitchildren.com/wp-content/uploads/dalits2.jpg>

² Photo taken from open sources.

URL: <https://i.pining.com/originals/fb/22/c3/fb22c30c9d37b151d9d1234eb35d85ce.jpg>

³ Photo taken from open sources.

URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south->

[asia/article/2140055/seven-killed-indias-lowest-caste-dalits-lead-street-protests](https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/2140055/seven-killed-indias-lowest-caste-dalits-lead-street-protests)

⁴ Photo Courtesy of Thenmozhi

Soundararajan and #DalitWomenFight.

URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/dalitwomenfight-brings-fight-against-caste-based-violence-u-s-n454056>

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