Untouchable

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MULK RAJ ANAND

Mulk Raj Anand was born into the high-status Kshatriya caste, in the northwestern corner of what was at the time British-ruled India. Despite growing up with a measure of wealth and social privilege, Anand experienced the consequences of the caste system first-hand after his aunt was ostracized by her family for sharing dinner with a Muslim woman; the isolation was so intense that his aunt ultimately died by suicide. After initially studying in India, Anand went to University College London and Cambridge University for further education. It was in England that Anand forged a series of lifelong literary connections, bonding both with other leftist South Asian writers and with members of the modernist Bloomsbury Group, including celebrated author E. M. Forster. After living for a few months at Mohandas K. Gandhi's residence in western India, Anand began drafting *Untouchable*, which would make him a literary star in both India and Great Britain. After the runaway success of this initial novel, lifelong socialist Anand continued to write protest fiction like *Coolie* (1936) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937). As with *Untouchable*, these books used fictional characters to explore the plight of India's poor and low-caste citizens. Anand was married twice, first to a British actress and later to Shirin Vajifdar, an Indian classical dancer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though certain ideas about caste had existed in Hindu texts prior to British colonization, the caste system became much more stringent in the 1860s, when the British Raj (era of direct colonial rule) forced Indian citizens to classify themselves by caste for a nationwide census. It is unsurprising, then, that after activist and political leader Mohandas K. Gandhi led his famous Salt March protest (1930), he linked his calls for decolonization to his insistence that the caste system must be abolished. Gandhi's movement would ultimately succeed in 1947, 12 years after the publication of *Untouchable*, when India gained its independence from the British. But while the novel to some extent valorizes Gandhi for this important work, it also acknowledges his limitations. Indeed, Gandhi was considered by many of his contemporaries to enforce caste prejudice even as he claimed to do away with it. For example, while Gandhi preached a return to traditional Hindu rivals, his chief political rival, B. R. Ambedkar, saw industrialization as the only fix for caste struggle. In devoting the final section of his novel to the invention of the flush-toilet, then, Anand pushes back against Gandhi's views almost as much as he celebrates them.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As the era of British imperialism in India drew to a close, Anand joined forces with other prominent Indian authors to form what was known as the Progressive Writers' Movement. Other members of the Writers' Movement included poets Syed Sajjad Zaheer (author of *Angarey*) and Muhammad Din Taseer (known for his modernist, free-verse poetry) and novelist Premchand (famous for social realist works like *Nirmala*). Like Anand, all of the members of the Progressive Writers' Movement shared leftist politics and an anti-imperialist bent; in addition to critiquing the British occupation of India, many of these London-based writers shared a Marxist view on the world. Indeed, it is likely that the fictional character of Iqbal Nath Sarshar, who appears in *Untouchable* to deliver a nuanced critique of Gandhi, is intended as an amalgam of and tribute to all these various figures.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Untouchable
- **When Written:** Early 1930s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1935
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Social Novel
- **Setting:** Bulashah, a fictional Indian village in the Himalayan foothills
- **Climax:** Mohandas K. Gandhi visits Bakha's prejudiced community and delivers a shocking speech that argues for the end of caste
- **Antagonist:** Pundit Kali Nath, Gulabo, and others
- **Point of View:** The third-person, omniscient narrator usually focuses most closely on Bakha's perspective.

EXTRA CREDIT

Facts and Fantasies. Though Anand is remembered primarily for his realistic depictions and critiques of class struggle, he devoted much of his life to writing more fanciful children's stories. After publishing several collections filled with some traditional folktales of India, Anand also crafted some of his own, complementing his serious works for adults with less heavy (but no less artful) picture books.

Forster's Forward. Anand was one of the first Indian-born writers to gain widespread readership across the United Kingdom. In addition to his striking prose, some of Anand's success can be attributed to his friendship with E. M. Forster,

the *Howards End* writer who wrote a foreword to Anand's first edition. Indeed, Forster's foreword is considered such a meaningful part of the book that *Untouchable* is almost never published without it (though it is usually now included at the end of the novel rather than at the beginning).

PLOT SUMMARY

In 1933, as India's independence movement gains new force, 18-year-old Bakha is just trying to get through the day. Like his father Lakha, his brother Rakha, and his little sister Sohini, Bakha is a sweeper, assigned to clean latrines and to sweep waste off the streets. Because Bakha's work forces him into such close proximity to excrement, he is an outcaste, forced to the bottom of India's hierarchical caste system. Like the other outcastes (including grass-cutters, barbers, and washer-men), Bakha lives in a cramped, dirty encampment outside the center of Bulashah, his town in the Himalayan foothills.

Bakha's day begins when he wakes up shivering. But though his British-style blanket is not warm enough, Bakha refuses to get another one, insisting—like his best friends Chota and Ram Charan—that anything the "Tommies" (English) like is inherently "fashun." Lakha scolds Bakha to get up and get to work, and Bakha reflects on happier times, when his mother was still alive and his father was less snippy.

After reflecting on all the **British clothing** and cigarettes that he would like to buy, Bakha goes to work, hurriedly and thoroughly clearing Bulashah's rows of latrines. Despite his natural strength and elegance, Bakha is frequently scolded for working too slowly. One of the people who scolds Bakha is Havildar Charat Singh, a well-respected local hockey player who is known to struggle with hemorrhoids. Thrillingly, Charat Singh promises to give Bakha one of his hockey sticks later that day.

Meanwhile, Sohini goes down to the village well to get water for her family. Because the outcastes are labeled as "polluted" by the members of other castes, they are not allowed to draw water directly from the well; instead, they must wait for higher-caste Hindus to give them water. While Sohini waits in line, she is shouted at by Gulabo, a washer-woman and Ram Charan's mother, who reminds Sohini that even among the outcastes, sweepers are still considered to be the lowest of the low.

Eventually, Pundit Kali Nath (a Brahmin priest) comes to the well, deciding to draw water for the outcastes because he hopes that the exercise might relieve his constipation. The Pundit takes a liking to Sohini, and he gives her water first, instructing her to come clean the village's temple later in the day.

Bakha goes home to eat breakfast and then enjoys a moment of relaxing in **the sun**. As he chats with Ram Charan and Chota, Bakha spots the two higher-caste brothers that he sometimes plays hockey with. In a moment of inspiration, Bakha convinces the elder brother and younger brother to teach him to read, even though outcastes are not traditionally allowed access to education.

Now, Bakha heads back to his work, sweeping the bazaar and streets of Bulashah. Without realizing, Bakha bumps into a higher-caste man, who panics that he has been "polluted" by touching a sweeper. The touched man begins to verbally abuse Bakha, and even a kind Muslim rickshaw driver cannot stop the torment. When the touched man knocks Bakha's turban off his head, Bakha finds himself craving revenge against the upper castes for the first time in his life.

Bakha arrives at the temple, and decides to peek inside, still in a frenzy from the events of this morning. Though no one spots Bakha, he hears Pundit Kali Nath crying out that he has been "polluted" by a sweeper—and Bakha realizes that the sweeper in question is Sohini. Sohini explains that the Pundit tried to sexually abuse her, and when she refused his advances, he cried out "polluted," causing the rest of the high-caste worshippers to panic that they had been similarly violated. Bakha comforts Sohini and sends her home, lamenting that as an outcaste he is not even allowed to worship the Hindu gods.

Bakha goes looking for food, hoping higher-caste Hindus will provide him with a meal for his family. But the day has exhausted Bakha, and he winds up taking a nap on the steps of a local woman's house. When the local woman spots Bakha, she shouts at him for polluting her house, telling Bakha she hopes he dies. The local woman throws bread on the ground, and Bakha reluctantly brings the scraps home for lunch.

Bakha returns home, but instead of finding sympathy from Lakha, Lakha only instructs his children to honor and defer to higher-caste Hindus. Feeling disgusted by the second-hand food and Lakha's inferiority complex, Bakha decides to leave. Without anything else to do, Bakha crashes Ram Charan's sister's wedding, much to Gulabo's dismay.

After the wedding, Bakha, Chota, and Ram Charan head to the hills, where Bakha gains strength and comfort from the natural beauty around him. After playing in the grass, Bakha returns to town, planning to get his hockey stick. Surprisingly, Charat Singh treats Bakha with more dignity than any other high-caste Hindu does: he allows Bakha to share his tea, and he gives Bakha a brand-new hockey stick.

With his new hockey stick in tow, Bakha, Chota, Ram Charan, and the elder brother play hockey together; impatiently, the little brother watches from the sidelines. A few minutes into the game, a fight breaks out between the two hockey teams, and they begin throwing rocks at each other. Unfortunately, the younger brother is hit by a rock and wounded (or possibly even killed). Somehow, Bakha gets blamed for this, too, even though he was not the one who threw the rock.

It is almost evening, and Bakha is filled with despair at the

amount of abuse this single day has brought. Colonel Hutchinson, a white evangelist, spies Bakha looking sad and tries to proselytize to him. At first, Bakha is compelled by Hutchinson's words—especially because the Colonel emphasizes that all people are equal in Christ's eyes—but Bakha loses interest when the Colonel refuses to translate his hymns. Eventually, the Colonel's wife spots them and starts spewing vitriol at Bakha.

Just when Bakha is about to go home, he hears the news that Mohandas K. Gandhi has arrived in Bulashah to give a speech. Bakha runs to the speech, brushing against members of all other castes in the frenzy. He is gratified that Gandhi's speech centers on putting an end to the caste system; though Gandhi is sometimes patronizing in the way he talks about sweepers, Bakha also finds his call to action profoundly moving.

After Gandhi finishes and the crowd disperses, Bakha hears two men (British-educated R. N. Bashir and poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar) discussing the speech. Bashir is critical of Gandhi for being anti-industrialization, whereas Sarshar thinks that Gandhi has some good ideas but that the most important step in abolishing the "Untouchable" category of the caste system is introducing the flush toilet to India (as it will eliminate the need for sweepers). As the sun sets, Bakha runs home to "tell father all that Gandhi said about us," wondering what this new flushing machine might look like.

CHARACTERS

Bakha – Bakha is an 18-year-old sweeper and the novel's protagonist. He is Lakha's son, Sohini and Rakha's older brother, and a good friend of both Chota and Ram Charan. Bakha is handsome and strong, a diligent worker with an innate grace, yet the constant abuse from higher-caste Hindus makes him feel "polluting" and "ashamed of feeling seen." Throughout *Untouchable*, Bakha struggles to balance the joys of young adulthood—hockey games, trying on fashionable **English clothes**, and outdoor adventures with friends—with responsibility for his siblings and aging father, though he often clings to youthful activities as an escape from the prejudices of adult life. Furthermore, as a proud "child of modern India," Bakha frequently finds himself torn between the traditions his late mother taught him and the glimpses he gets of British colonial life. But while Bakha begins the narrative with few aspirations, by the end of the story, his harmful interactions with the touched man, the Pundit Kali Nath, and the local woman cause Bakha to chafe against his outcaste status entirely. Bakha's questioning of this deep-seated hierarchy is accelerated when he hears Mohandas K. Gandhi give a speech arguing for the end untouchability, which empowers Bakha in a way his often-critical father and friends never have.

Lakha – Lakha is the father of Bakha, Sohini, and Rakha, and the Jemadar (head sweeper) of Bulashah. Though Lakha was once a patient and ebullient man, his wife's death has changed him, making him sharp, lazy, and critical; he often calls Bakha a "dog" or a "pig," parroting the language that higher-caste Hindus use against him. Indeed, as he approaches old age, Lakha internalizes many of the hierarchical, degrading beliefs that have caused him so much harm in his life as an outcaste. When Lakha talks about higher-caste Hindus, for example, Bakha reflects on his father's "deep-rooted sense of inferiority" and his "docile acceptance of the laws of fate." Ultimately, the tension between Bakha and Lakha escalates to the point that Lakha kicks his eldest son out of the house, a betrayal that brings home to Bakha just how damaging the caste system is, not only publicly but in family life, too.

Sohini – Sohini is Bakha's younger sister and Lakha's youngest child. She is very beautiful, lusted after by men across town and even by Bakha himself. Having lost her mother at a young age, Sohini feels overwhelmed by the need to balance domestic work with her daily tasks as a sweeper and scavenger. In many ways, Sohini is the most persecuted person in the entire story, as her gender and outcaste status intersect in vulnerable ways (as when Pundit Kali Nath tries to sexually abuse her, then claims she has "polluted" him after she refuses his advances). Sohini also seems to feel the humiliations of higher-caste cruelty even more acutely than either of her brothers do.

Rakha – Rakha is Bakha's younger brother and Lakha's middle child. Though Rakha also works as a sweeper, he is less motivated than Bakha either to complete his tasks or to escape the punishing caste system; unlike Bakha, Rakha is "a true child of the outcaste colony," appearing to be at home in the darkness and muck. Rakha and Bakha are friends, but Rakha is constantly tattling on Bakha to their father. As the narrative progresses, Bakha becomes increasingly frustrated by Rakha's willingness to accept soggy leftovers and poor working condition, as it seems to perpetuate the stereotypes higher-caste people have about sweepers.

Mahatma Gandhi/Mohandas K. Gandhi – Mohandas K. Gandhi, also known as the Mahatma (or "great-souled one"), was the historical figure most responsible for India's successful independence movement and the end of the British Raj. Gandhi was famous for his hunger strikes, his 1930 Salt March (and other forms of non-violent resistance), and his efforts to end the concept of untouchability. Though Gandhi was radical in many ways, he also resisted industrialization and clung to some Hindu norms, including norms that entrenched some of the harmful prejudices he claimed to fight against. In real life, Gandhi's ideas were often challenged from the left by B. R. Ambedkar, while in the novel, his critics are R. N. Bashir and Iqbal Nath Sarshar. The complexity of Gandhi's politics is reflected in Bakha's view of him: after he hears Gandhi give a speech in Bulashah, Bakha is torn between gratitude for Gandhi's anti-caste platform and frustration at some of

Gandhi's more patronizing ideas.

R. N. Bashir – R. N. Bashir is a British-educated, Muslim Indian man, who enters the narrative when Bakha overhears him loudly critiquing Gandhi's speech. Bashir, who has been heavily inspired by western theorists of democracy like Rousseau and Hobbes, believes that Gandhi must renounce Hinduism entirely in order to truly reform the caste system. But even as Bashir criticizes Gandhi for his hypocrisy, he treats Bakha with little respect, engaging in classist and colorist behavior as he orders Bakha to get him a drink. Unlike Bashir's friend Iqbal Nath Sarshar, Bakha is mostly annoyed by Bashir, faulting him for his arrogance and even failing to be impressed by his fancy **English clothes**.

Iqbal Nath Sarshar – Iqbal Nath Sarshar is a poet, likely serving as an amalgamated representation of the various writers in the leftist South Asian Progressive Writers' Movement (which Mulk Raj Anand was himself a part of). Sarshar agrees with his friend R. N. Bashir that Gandhi is not radical enough in his takedown of caste, but unlike Bashir, Sarshar thinks that Gandhi's activism will lead the way towards crucial changes. Sarshar is also the first person to connect increased mechanization with the end of untouchability, arguing that the advent of the flush toilet will eliminate the need for scavengers entirely. Bakha finds himself very moved by Sarshar's words and by his elegant presence.

Uka – Uka is the childhood friend that Gandhi cites in his speech about untouchability. Uka was a sweeper in Gandhi's hometown; because of Uka's work, Gandhi's mother prevented him from playing with his young friend, until (as Gandhi puts it) his relationship with Uka caused him to challenge the principle of caste entirely. Bakha finds Uka powerful as a rhetorical figure, and he strongly identifies with this other, much-discussed sweeper.

Charat Singh – Charat Singh is a Havildar, or Indian officer in the British army. He is also a well-respected hockey player, admired around town for his high-caste status and physical dexterity. More than the novel's other high-caste characters, Singh is a study in contradiction: though he scolds Bakha to clean the latrines more quickly, he is also open about his own struggle with "piles" (hemorrhoids), treating Bakha less as a "polluting" monster and more as a servant. Later in the day, Singh gifts Bakha a hockey stick and even shares his tea with Bakha, a rare gesture of high-caste kindness that touches Bakha deeply. Still, *Untouchable* implies that Singh's generosity serves a purpose. When Singh treats Bakha with a morsel of respect, it makes Bakha feel that he "wouldn't mind being a sweeper all [his] life," if people would only show him these brief moments of warmth—suggesting that Singh's kindness preserves the caste hierarchy even as it appears to disrupt it.

Chota – Chota, the leather-worker's son, is Bakha's best friend and a close friend of Ram Charan's. Chota shares Bakha's love of **English clothing** and outdoor adventures in the bright **sun**, though Chota lacks some of his friend's natural grace and strength. Unlike Ram Charan, who sometimes shies away from confronting the harsh realities of outcaste life, Chota provides crucial support to Bakha after the events with the touched man and the local woman. Like Bakha, Chota questions the brutal hierarchies of caste, even expressing a desire for revenge against the higher-caste Hindus who abuse them.

Ram Charan – Ram Charan, a washer-man, is Gulabo's son and one of Bakha and Chota's best friends. Though Ram Charan is an outcaste, he has more access to fine things than his friends do, as can be seen in his many items of coveted **English clothing** and in the sweet treats he devours at his sister's wedding. Ram Charan is much less prejudiced against Bakha and other sweepers than Gulabo is, but he often adds to Bakha's feelings of shame rather than mitigating them.

Gulabo – Gulabo is Ram Charan's mother and a washer-woman in Bulashah. Though she was very pretty in her youth, time and physical work have aged her, and now she resents Sohini both for her sweeper status and for her good looks; at one point, when both of them are waiting in line for water, Gulabo threatens to physically hit Sohini. Because she believes that washer-men and washer-women are the highest ranking among the outcastes, she often berates Ram Charan for spending any time with Bakha. Gulabo is depicted as greedy, calculating, and quick to anger, and she represents the way caste divisions destroy solidarity.

Colonel Hutchinson – Colonel Hutchinson is a middle-aged British settler in India, the leader of the Salvation Army in the Himalayan region. Though Hutchinson prides himself on his selflessness, comparing himself favorably with the local Tommies, *Untouchable* presents him as tacky and not very bright. In his eagerness to convert the Bulashah locals to Christianity, Hutchinson embraces Indian dress and learns to speak some broken Hindi. But even as his ideas about equality momentarily tempt Bakha, Hutchinson's refusal to explain Christian stories to the Indian villagers ultimately means he gains very few converts.

The Colonel's Wife – The Colonel's wife is one of the few white women ("mem-sahibs") in Bulashah. She is frustrated with Colonel Hutchinson for his willingness to spend so much time with the outcastes, and she resents her husband for his drooping mustache and sagging body. When she spies the Colonel with Bakha, she erupts, frightening Bakha; as he leaves the Colonel's home, dejected, Bakha wonders if "the anger of a white person mattered more."

Pundit Kali Nath – Pundit Kali Nath is a Brahmin and one of the most prominent priests (hence his title "Pundit") in Bulashah. Despite his high caste status, he is depicted as ungenerous, lecherous, and consumed with bodily feeling; he is constantly thinking about his own bowel movements or young girls'

bodies. After helping Sohini get water from the well, he demands that she come clean his temple, where he sexually assaults her. When Sohini protests, the Pundit cries out that he has been "polluted," exemplifying the abuse of power that comes so naturally to so many of Bulashah's higher-caste citizens.

The Touched Man – The touched man is a higher-caste Hindu in Bulashah. When Bakha accidentally runs into him, the touched man flies into a panic, insisting that he has been "polluted" and must wash himself. As the touched man continues to berate Bakha, he draws a crowd, eventually escalating from verbal abuse to a physical shove. For the rest of the day, Bakha cannot stop seeing the touched man's irrational anger, remembering his bulging eyes and almost disgustingly vicious expression.

The Rickshaw Driver – The rickshaw driver is a Muslim, meaning that he exists outside the hierarchies of Hindu caste. When he ends up driving through Bakha's confrontation with the touched man, the rickshaw driver is horrified by the touched man's abusive behavior. He provides much-needed comfort and encouragement to Bakha, urging him to stay calm and avoid taking revenge. Hours after the incident, Bakha continues to find himself cheered by the memory of the rickshaw driver's kindness and care.

The Local Woman – The local woman is a higher-caste mother in the town of Bulashah. Though she is eager to share her food with the holy man who passes by, she berates Bakha for sitting on her steps, telling him he has "polluted" her home and wishing death on him. The local woman's insistence on physical cleanliness even as she is morally contaminated epitomizes the higher-caste hypocrisy that shapes so much of Bakha's daily life.

The Elder Brother – The elder brother is one of the wealthier boys in town, the son of a babu and the older sibling to the younger brother. Perhaps because of his youth, the elder brother appears to question many of the caste stereotypes that dominate life in Bulashah, agreeing to teach Bakha English and defending Bakha against high-caste peoples' accusations. The elder brother also frequently plays hockey with Bakha, Chota, and Ram Charan, despite his mother's protestations.

The Younger Brother – The younger brother is one of the wealthier boys in town, the second son of a local babu (and the younger sibling of the elder brother). While the younger brother boasts about going to school and getting a nice hockey stick from Charat Singh, he is also friendly and eager to play hockey with the outcastes, ignoring his mother's prejudiced rhetoric. When the older boys' hockey game goes south, devolving into rock throwing, the younger brother is wounded and potentially killed.

The Hakim Sahib – A Hakim Sahib is a doctor. In *Untouchable*, the Hakim Sahib of Bulashah appears when Lakha recounts Bakha's potentially fatal illness as a young baby. At first, the Hakim Sahib denies Lakha medicine, screaming at him for "polluting" his shop even as Lakha begs for help. Later, however, the Hakim Sahib arrives at Lakha's house to help Bakha. While Lakha uses this story as proof that the higher castes are "really kind," Bakha is less forgiving, pointing out that the Hakim Sahib "could have killed" him because of his biases.

Lachman – Lachman is a young Brahmin who lives in the village of Bulashah. He is attracted to Sohini, and the two often engage in a mutual flirtation—but Pundit Kali Nath, wanting Sohini for himself, quickly puts a stop to this relationship. Lachman is another high-caste Hindu who demonstrates that caste status has nothing to do with spiritual or emotional purity.

TERMS

Babu – "Babu" is an honorific used to refer to Hindu gentlemen (generally those who come from higher castes). Babus were also often clerks, reading and writing in both English and Hindi, which perhaps explains why **Bakha** assumes that a babu's sons—the **elder brother** and the **younger brother**—would be able to teach him to read. In the novel, Bakha applies the word "babu" to any high-caste individual who seems well-educated.

Brahmin – In Hindu culture, the Brahmin caste is considered to be at the very top of the caste hierarchy. Brahmins are traditionally associated with priesthood and teaching, though in *Untouchable*, poet **Iqbal Nath Sarshar** asserts that manipulative Brahmins are also to blame for the entire problem of caste hierarchy. The narrative reflects this general critique of Brahminism, presenting its only Brahmin priest, **Pundit Kali Nath**, as lecherous, hypocritical, and more than willing to abuse his power.

Caste – The caste system organizes Indian culture into an unequal and often prohibitive hierarchy; though the different varnas, or social classes, have their origins in the ancient Hindu Vedic texts, the caste system was more formally codified and enforced by the British as a tool of colonial oppression. Crucially, many residents of India are excluded from the caste system, from Muslims and other non-Hindus to "outcastes" (also known in the novel as untouchables or harijans, and known today as "Dalits"). As **Bakha**'s narrative demonstrates, caste can prescribe employment, but it can also determine where people live, what kind of clothing they wear, how they are allowed to worship, and their access to material resources and education. During India's independence movement of the 1930s and 1940s, **Mohandas K. Gandhi** (alongside more radical leaders like B. R. Ambedkar) called for an end to caste, seeing it as oppressive and outdated. Though Gandhi's activism led to a monumental shift in Indian law and culture, caste and its controversies persist.

Havildar – A Havildar was a sergeant in the British Indian army,

an Indian officer with higher-rank than a sepoy. During the years of the British Raj, Havildars were often placed in charge of a given British fort or barracks. In the novel, **Charat Singh** earns **Bakha**'s respect in part because of his status as the only Havildar in the village of Bulashah.

Outcaste/Untouchable/Harijan – Outcastes are those who are shunned from the Indian caste system entirely, deemed "polluted" because of their jobs (which include scavenging, cutting grass, washing clothes, and working with leather). **Bakha** and his family, disparaged even by the other outcastes for their jobs as sweepers, demonstrate the perils of a life outside of caste: Bakha is denied the right to education or worship, while his sister **Sohini** is sexually preyed on by members of the Brahmin caste. Even food and water are denied to outcastes, who have to wait for higher-caste Hindus to draw water from the well for them or donate leftover food. Bakha's sense of shame and discomfort leads him to embrace the term "untouchable" to describe his outcaste status, especially after his run-in with **the touched man** leads him to internalize accusations that he is "polluted." Later in *Untouchable*, **Mohandas K. Gandhi** introduces the word harijan (which translates to "children of god") to describe outcastes, aiming to destigmatize this persecuted group. Today, outcastes are often referred to as "Dalits"—and despite massive reforms in Indian government, Dalits are frequently abused, ostracized, and denied their basic rights.

Sahib – "Sahib," which derives from the Urdu word for "master," was used as a term of respect for Europeans in colonial India. In the novel, **Bakha** often refers to the English clothing and past times he so admires as sahib "fashun," an exotic symbol of power that he and his friends **Chota** and **Ram Charan** aim to emulate.

Scavenger/Sweeper – Scavengers, more commonly referred as sweepers, are in charge of cleaning human and animal waste from latrines and streets. Because of this work, which is considered to be "polluting" by higher-caste Hindus, sweepers are deemed outcastes and denied basic human rights; they struggle to get access to education, to worship, and even to obtain food and water. In *Untouchable*, **Bakha**'s status as a sweeper also impacts his social relationships with other outcastes, as his friend **Ram Charan**—a washer-man—occasionally treats Bakha with disrespect, reminding Bakha that sweepers are considered lowly even by other outcastes. Though the advent of the automated toilet did help minimize the number of sweepers in India, there are still many who are forced to work as sweepers, despite a 1993 nationwide law that banned the occupation. Today, activists like Bezwada Wilson are organizing to eliminate the practice of manual sweeping—which can be deadly in some cases—entirely.

Sepoy – A sepoy was an Indian soldier fighting in the British army during the years of the British Raj (1858–1947). Though they were lower ranking than Havildars, sepoys usually came from higher castes; because of this status, and because of their proximity to British daily life, they are an object of fascination for **Bakha**, **Chota**, and **Ram Charan**.

Tommy – "Tommy," short for Tommy Atkins, was a slang term for a common soldier in the British army, originating in England during World War I. In the novel, **Bakha** and his friends frequently describe all British people as "Tommies"; they also use the word more broadly, relying on it as a shorthand for the English clothing and lifestyle they so admire.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

INEQUALITY, HARM, AND INTERNALIZATION

Every character, interaction, and circumstance in Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable* is shaped by the rigid hierarchies of the Indian caste system. For Bakha and his family, labeled outcastes for their work as latrine sweepers, this hierarchy makes itself felt in a host of tangible challenges: the sweepers are not allowed to draw water from their village's well, to attend temple services, to read, or even to walk down the street unannounced. And as the narrative progresses, the harm caused by this unequal system only grows—Bakha's sister, Sohini, is abused by a high-caste priest, while his father, Lakha, recounts a time when he was denied life-saving medicine for Bakha because of his sweeper status. *Untouchable* makes it clear that, at the bottom of such a strict social hierarchy, getting through each day can be not only difficult but dangerous.

But even as *Untouchable* explores the external challenges of caste, it also lingers on the painful way such biases can be internalized. After a lifetime spent being abused and bossed around by his higher-caste neighbors, Lakha feels a "deep-rooted sense of inferiority," a sadness that he telegraphs to his children until they feel it in their "deepest cells." And though Bakha acknowledges the inequity and absurdity of the caste system, he regularly faces so much vitriol—he is called a "dog" or a "pig" on nearly every page—that eventually, he, too, feels "ashamed to be seen." Even when Bakha receives basic acts of kindness from higher-caste people, he views these acts as impossible favors and feels himself "unequal" to such decency. By focusing both on the details of Bakha's daily activity and the nuanced workings of his emotional life, therefore, *Untouchable* demonstrates just how much the external harm of caste

hierarchy becomes internalized, perpetuating itself not only through taunts but through the feelings of shame caste instills.

COMING OF AGE AND INHERITED PREJUDICE

The 1935 novel *Untouchable*, written by Mulk Raj Anand, follows a day in the life of 18-year-old Bakha, a sweeper at the bottom of his Himalayan village's social hierarchy. Over the course of this single day, Bakha alternates between taking over his father Lakha's professional duties and playing hockey with much younger boys, or between defending his little sister Sohini with grown-up grace and chasing after donuts and sugarplums with childlike delight. But as Bakha transitions into the adult world, he also notices that maturity, in his community, is marked by prejudice and a hardline approach to the caste system. Two of the neighborhood's highest status young boys are eager to play with Bakha until their mother abuses them "for playing with the outcastes"; Bakha's best friend Ram Charan insists they are fellow outcastes, but his mother Gulabo insists that even the subtle distinctions between the outcaste classes should prevent the two boys' comradery. Even political activist Mohandas K. Gandhi, who gives a speech at the end of the novel, describes caste prejudice as something that is learned and passed down, as one generation "forbids" the next from challenging these sharp divides.

Bakha, too, is bombarded by such lessons at home. Motivated by fear and his own indoctrination, Lakha instructs his children never to question the idea that higher-caste people are their "superiors." But Bakha, buoyed by Gandhi's rallying cry and the changing tides of Indian politics, refuses to make submission to the caste hierarchy a part of his coming-of-age process. Instead, *Untouchable* suggest that Bakha's decision to cling to youthful pursuits is itself a subtle form of resistance, his way of challenging this history of prejudice instead of growing into it or handing it down.

NATURE VS. SOCIETY

Untouchable, Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel about a family of low-status sweepers in India's caste system, is set in the verdant hills of the Himalayas. As protagonist Bakha cleans his village's latrines or plays a game of hockey with his friends Chota and Ram Charan, Anand contrasts the beauty of these mountainous surroundings with the refuse and discomfort of Bakha's daily village life. And while the higher-caste townspeople accuse Bakha and his family of "polluting" them, the whole community is to blame for the fact that the village brook, once "crystal-clear," is "now soiled"; the foul-smelling animal dung that piles up along side-streets is, as Bakha points out, attributable not to sweepers but to the farmers and shopkeepers who fail to feed their livestock properly. Rather than being "polluted" by a single group or individual, then, the village is "soiled" by all of the people who live in it.

But while Bakha is worn down by the smells and textures of these cramped streets, he finds solace in the part of his environment not yet molded by human hands. In town, the outcastes are forbidden from using the communal well, but in the hills around the village, everyone has access to lush grass and beautiful flowers, and every person can quench "their thirst from the water that sprang from a natural spring." Similarly, Bakha frequently rejoices in the sky, untouched by anything but the **sun**—it gives him strength and a sense of the world beyond this town, allowing him to feel as though there is nothing but "the sun, the sun, the sun, everywhere, in him, on him, before him and behind." By contrasting the dirtiness and tension of the stratified village with this pristine, equalizing nature, *Untouchable* thus implies that hierarchy itself is polluting and that a shift toward a more egalitarian society is the only way to return to natural beauty.

BODIES AND CLEANLINESS

Over the course of the single day depicted in *Untouchable*, outcaste teenager Bakha is accused dozens of times of being a "polluter." Because Bakha is a sweeper who has been assigned to clean latrines and dispose of animal excrement, higher-caste villagers deny him access to their schools and sacred spaces, to their food, and even to their water. But while the townspeople try to outsource all of their own dirty work to Bakha and his family, the narrative makes clear that cleanliness and dirt can never be truly separated. Two of the highest-status characters in the entire novel, Pundit Kali Nath (a Brahmin priest) and Havildar Charat Singh, struggle with constipation and hemorrhoids; when the novel zooms in to focus on these men's bowel movements, the graphic level of detail illuminates that there is potential for a certain kind of visceral unpleasantness inherent in every human body, no matter what caste. Conversely, when Indian political hero Mohandas K. Gandhi arrives to Bakha's village to give a speech, he emphasizes that the sweepers are "cleaning Hindu society"—after all, no other group knows how to keep streets clean, how to so efficiently exterminate bugs and eradicate foul smells. Ultimately, then, *Untouchable* makes clear that all bodies are clean and unclean in different ways and at different times; to suggest otherwise, as the rigid caste hierarchy does, is an absurdity. And if everybody makes waste, the novel suggests, then everyone should have an equal part in cleaning it up.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ENGLISH CLOTHES

Throughout *Untouchable*, English clothing symbolizes the way Bakha and his friends have internalized their village's hierarchies of race and class. Sweeper Bakha, his brother Rakha, and his best friends Ram Charan and Chota are fascinated by English materials, hats, and cigarettes. Bakha spends almost all of his income on imported blankets and pants, even though they fail to keep him warm in the winter; Ram Charan wears a sunhat and shorts to his sister's wedding simply because he imagines that even casual British "fashun" is inherently more formal than traditional Indian dress. But while the boys all mock each other for their shared obsession with such "fashun," this focus on appearance flows naturally from the rigid caste delineations they have grown up with. To signal his low status, Bakha must wear khaki while the rest of his neighbors wear white and higher-caste villagers wear special robes to denote their position as leaders or upper-crust Brahmin priests. And, since the narrative takes place 10 years before India's independence movement succeeded, a British officer's uniform holds almost infinite sartorial power and prominence. It follows, then, that Bakha and his friends' desire to wear European sunhats (known as "topees") and smoke "Red Lamp" cigarettes is far more than an aesthetic longing. It is instead a natural response to caste and colonialism—though they are forced to the bottom of overlapping race and class hierarchies, dressing in starched pants and jackets allows Bakha and his friends to blur visually the categories they otherwise cannot change.

THE SUN

In Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*, the sun represents the restorative possibilities of the natural world. The village where Bakha and his family live is "polluted" both literally and metaphorically, filled with the bad smells of human waste and the degrading tensions of class and caste divide. But when Bakha goes outside and feels the sun on his skin, he gains new hope about his future. Rather than obsessing over the invented, artificial distinctions that consume most of his day, Bakha feels that standing in the sun is akin to a "new birth," marveling that when he stands in the fresh, warm air, there is "nothing but the sun, the sun, the sun, everywhere, in him, on him, before him and behind him." And in many of his worst moments throughout the narrative, whether he is being shouted at by the touched man or harangued by Pundit Kali Nath, Bakha can only collect himself by taking in the sun's rays. After all, though caste and colonization have their own harmful power, nothing can match the "magnificent force of the terrible brightness glowing on the margin of the sky." It is telling, therefore, that by the end of the novel, Bakha has linked his sense of personal strength directly to the sun's power; as the sun goes down, turning the sky a burnt red, Bakha feels that same "burning sensation" within him. And while Bakha's life as a sweeper is precarious and constantly under threat, the "glowing," energizing sun will glow on forever.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Untouchable* published in 2014.

Pages 3–43 Quotes

❝ [Bakha] had had glimpses, during his sojourn there, of the life the Tommies lived, sleeping on strange, low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets, eating eggs, drinking tea and wine in tin mugs, going to parade and then walking down to the bazaar with cigarettes in their mouths and small silver-mounted canes in their hands. And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. He had been told they were sahibs, superior people. He had felt that to put on their clothes made one a sahib too. So he tried to copy them in everything, to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances.

Related Characters: Bakha

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After a few months spent working in the British military barracks, Bakha changes every element of his life: he smokes cigarettes, wears sunhats, and sleeps under thin blankets—because these are things the English do. Bakha's obsession with the British soldiers (or "Tommies," as he calls them) to some extent reflects his youth—Bakha is optimistic and curious, "copy[ing]" other identities to see how they suit him. Alongside his friends, Bakha also uses this kind of dress-up game as a friendly competition, as the boys race to see how quickly they can accumulate British items.

But more than that, Bakha's "overwhelming desire" to mimic the Tommies reflects the way oppressed people can internalize external prejudice. Bakha has come to believe the message, grounded in racism and violent colonialism, that the British are "superior people." Now, rather than challenging that assertion, he merely tries to claim some of that superiority for himself. And since Bakha's own life as an

outcaste poses so many everyday "exigencies" and disappointments, it is only logical that he would want to "live their [English] life," to fantasize about having the power and privilege that currently oppresses him.

Lastly, it is important to note how important clothing and appearance is as a sign of "superior[ity]." The gradations of the caste system were often denoted by dress, with outcastes forced to wear khaki clothing while members of higher castes wore white. So, when Bakha covets the cigarettes and silver-mounted canes he sees the sahibs use, he is also coveting this other way of publicly marking one's place in society—dressing not like someone at the bottom of his village's hierarchy, but like someone at the top.

> The expectant outcastes were busy getting their pictures ready, but as that only meant shifting themselves into position so to be nearest to this most bountiful, most generous of men, all their attention was fixed on him [Pundit Kali Nath]. […] But the Brahmin, becoming interested in the stirrings of his stomach, and the changing phases of his belly, looked, for a moment, absent-minded. A subtle wave of warmth seemed to have descended slowly down from his arms to the pit of his abdomen, and he felt a strange stirring above his navel such as he had not experienced for months, so pleasing was it in its intimations of the relief it would bring him.

Related Characters: Sohini, Gulabo, Pundit Kali Nath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Outcastes are not allowed to draw water from the village well, as they are believed to "pollute" it given their close contact with human waste. But as this passage makes clear, the higher-caste Hindus who were permitted to draw water are anything but pure. As a Pundit (Brahmin priest), Kali Nath sits at the very top of Bulashah's caste hierarchy. He is, by sheer virtue of his birth, assumed to be "bountiful," "generous," and spiritually clean. But as Kali Nath draws water from the well, the novel illuminates the stark contrast between the way the outcastes view him and the reality of his inner life. There is nothing special about the Pundit, who is distracted and focused on his own bodily sensations. Even more crucially, though the upper castes demean Sohini and the other outcastes because of their proximity to excrement, Kali Nath is obsessed with his bowel movements. Rather than thinking about spiritual matters, or even about how he could help the people right in front of him, the Pundit loses himself in the digestive workings of his stomach (the "stirrings" and "changing phases" that signal imminent relief).

First of all, then, this passage illustrates how hypocritical the Hindu caste system is: everyone on earth makes waste, so everyone—not just the outcastes—thinks about and comes into contact with that waste. Second, there are sexual undertones to Kali Nath's thoughts, as he considers "relief" and the "warmth" in the "pit of his abdomen." This scene thus foreshadows the Pundit's sexual impurity, which will come to the fore when he attempts to assault Sohini later in the novel. And in more ways than one, *Untouchable* demonstrates, those labeled pure might be the dirtiest of all.

> Where the lane finished, the heat of the sun seemed to spread as from a bonfire out into the empty space of the grounds beyond the outcastes colony. [Bakha] sniffed at the clean, fresh air around the flat stretch of land before him and vaguely sensed a difference between the odorous, smoky world of refuse and the open, radiant world of the sun. He wanted to warm his flesh; we wanted the warmth to get behind the scales of the dry, powdery surface that had formed on his fingers; we wanted the blood in the blue veins that stood out on the back of his hand to melt. He lifted his face to the sun, open eyed for a moment, then with the pupils of his eyes half closed, half open. And he lifted his chin upright.

Related Characters: Bakha

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

From the very first page of the novel, *Untouchable* establishes a contrast between the man-made environs of Bulashah—which is cramped, stratified, and dirty—and the village's natural setting in the beautiful Himalayan foothills. Now, taking in the morning air, Bakha splits society and nature into two different universes. On the one hand, there is "the odorous, smoky world" of the outcaste colony, shaped by caste and division; on the other hand, there is the "open, radiant world" of the air and ground, not yet touched or ruined by hierarchy. Importantly, this natural world is symbolized by the "sun," a thing more powerful than any constructed social force could ever be.

Bakha's understanding of the split between the man-made world of trash ("refuse") and the natural world of bounty is at this moment "vague"—only as the narrative progresses will Bakha come to identify himself more fully with the force and brightness of natural sunlight. But even if Bakha cannot yet articulate the way that society itself is quite literally polluting, his connection with the sun immediately, almost instinctively, brings him confidence and hope. It is telling that this scene ends with Bakha "lift[ing] his chin upright," a newfound pride that comes from taking his cues from the wild world, unmarred by human bias. When Bakha "lift[s] his face to the sun," he also gets to lift himself.

> [Bakha] had wept and cried to be allowed to go to school. But then his father had told him that schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers. He hadn't quite understood the reason for that then. Later at the British barracks he realized why his father had not sent him to school. He was a sweeper's son and could never be a babu. Later still he realized that there was no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man's sons. How absurd, he thought, that was, since most of the Hindu children touched him willingly at hockey and wouldn't mind having him at school with them. [...] These old Hindus were cruel. He was a sweeper, he knew, but he could not consciously accept that fact.

Related Characters: Bakha, Lakha

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Though readers meet Bakha at age 18, by which point he has become familiar with the rules and nuances of life in the caste system, Bakha's reflection on his desire to go to school shows how long it took him to become indoctrinated into this system. When he was younger, Bakha could not comprehend that society might deny him the right to education that it granted his peers without a thought. But over time, Bakha learned prejudice as something both pervasive and permanent—he could "never be a babu" because he was born a sweeper, and there is "no school" in his vicinity that would overlook this fact.

In other words, growing up for Bakha means growing into the idea that he is "lowly" and "contaminat[ing]," that he will never be granted the opportunities that other children are.

Bakha's slow realization of this fact emphasizes how unintuitive the caste system is, further proof of its unnaturalness. But it also shows just how much caste is taught over time. The higher-caste "Hindu children" have not yet learned their parents' biases, and so they would be more than happy to go to school with the outcaste children, even as this would horrify the adults.

In Bulashah, then, growing up also means internalizing and perpetuating the "cruel" hierarchy of the "old" people. And Bakha's refusal to "accept" the fact of this hierarchy thus also explains his reluctance to come of age, as he clings to the childlike naivete—or, viewed differently, the sense of inherent equality—that defined his early days.

> "Why are we always abused? The santry inspictor and the sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That's why they don't touch us, the high castes. [...] For them I am a sweeper, sweeper - untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an untouchable!"

Related Characters: Bakha (speaker), The Touched Man, The Rickshaw Driver

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

After his humiliating, "abus[ive]" encounter with the touched man, Bakha's tenacity in the face of everyday torment breaks down. Though people like "the santry inspictor" (sanitary inspector) and the touched man rely on Bakha and his father to remove waste, they also chastise them for then coming into contact with waste—a vicious circle Bakha will never be able to escape. And while Bakha is guided by similar core impulses as the touched man who scorns him ("they hate dung," he acknowledges, but "I hate it too"), society does not afford him the same luxury to act on those impulses and distance himself from the foul smells and substances of human waste.

Fascinatingly, as Bakha breaks under the unfair logic, his language also breaks down. For the first time, the swirling prose of the narrative gives way to short, isolated sentences, as if Bakha cannot understand how one element of his reality connects to each other. And as Bakha tries to navigate his way through this illogic, all he is left with is this

sense of hopeless isolation, as epitomized by the word "untouchable," emphasized here and in the title of the novel. The form of this paragraph thus mirrors its content: there is no reason why Bakha should be exiled from other human contact, but he is. And he is forced to confront his "untouch[ability]" over and over again, just as he repeats the word here.

Pages 43–73 Quotes

❝ As a child, Bakha had often expressed a desire to wear rings on his fingers, and liked to look at his mother adorned with silver ornaments. Now that he had been to the British barracks and known that the English didn't like jewelry, he was full of disgust for the florid, minutely-studded designs of the native ornaments. So he walked along without noticing the big earrings and nose-rings and hair-flowers and other gold-plated ornaments which shone out from the background of green paper against which the smiths had ingeniously set them.

Related Characters: Bakha

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

As Bakha wanders through the local bazaar (or market), he begins to notice how his fascination with the British has changed his experience and interest in the various stalls. The Indian metalwork that Bakha once "desire[d]" now has lost its appeal, simply because the "English [don't] like" it and Bakha wants to be like the English. It is worth observing that here and elsewhere, Bakha displaces his memories of his dead mother—which are familial, intimate, and rooted in Indian tradition—with his feelings about the British, as he metabolizes his grief over his mother's death into a consumerist desire for colonial garb. By focusing on British wares, with their implications of power and modernity, Bakha does not have to face his own unhappiness.

For the most part, the omniscient narrator in *Untouchable* stays removed and objective. But every so often, the narrative voice is more present, editorializing to make the story's critiques of colonialism and caste more explicit. Here, the narrator does this by contrasting Bakha's "disgust" at the jewelry with loving descriptions of the actual pieces, which are "minutely-studded," "ingenious" and "shining out" in their beauty. Bakha and the British may ignore this jewelry, the narrator suggests, but readers should not for a second forget where the true source of beauty in this bazaar lies.

❝ [Bakha] lifted his head and looked round. The scales fell from his eyes. He could see the little man with a drooping mustache whom he knew to be a priest of the temple, racing up the courtyard, trembling, stumbling, tottering, falling, with his arms lifted in the air, and in his mouth the hushed cry 'polluted, polluted, polluted.'

'I have been seen, undone,' the sentence quickly flashed across Bakha's mind.

Related Characters: Bakha, Pundit Kali Nath (speaker), Sohini

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Bakha, desperate to understand more about the religion that he has been told justifies his low-caste status, sneaks into Bulashah's Hindu temple. But when he arrives, his mere presence—coupled with the Pundit Kali Nath's attempts to blame his own sexual misbehavior on Sohini—disrupts the religious awe and reverence that should dominate the moment. Instead, this insistence on the degrading hierarchies of caste now seems to degrade even religion itself: in his panic, the priest becomes just "a little man with a drooping mustache," not leading others in worship but "trembling, stumbling, tottering, falling," like a lost child might. Moreover, though the narrative makes clear that Bakha's actual presence does nothing to derail the religious service, the reaction to outcastes ('polluted, polluted, polluted') is what really gets in the way of prayer.

Finally, it is important to note Bakha's linkage of being "seen" to his sense of being "undone." Because Bakha is so often targeted merely for existing, as he was with the touched man, being "seen" or acknowledged by others amounts to a kind of collapse for him. This very hatred of his own existence thus points to the ways caste has harmed Bakha not just experientially but in his own self-conception; though Bakha loathes his isolation (his 'untouchability'), he fears the dangers of cruel connection even more.

> A superb specimen of humanity [Bakha] seemed whenever he made the high resolve to say something, to go and do something, his fine form rising like a tiger at bay. And yet […] he could not overstep the barriers which the conventions of his superiors had built up to protect their weakness against him. He could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody, especially by a low-caste man. So, in the highest moment of his strength, the slave in him asserted himself, and he lapsed back, wild with torture, biting his lips, ruminating his grievances […].
>
> He contemplated his experience now in the spirit of resignation which he had inherited through the long centuries down through his countless outcaste ancestors, fixed, yet flowing like a wave, confirmed at the beginning of each generation by the discipline of the caste ideal.

Related Characters: Bakha (speaker), Sohini, Pundit Kali Nath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Having sent Sohini home to recover from her traumatizing experience with the Pundit, Bakha storms around Bulashah, trying to calm himself down. Bakha is livid—just a few pages earlier, he has at last been able to articulate "the hypocrisy" of it all—but he also still feels "resign[ed]," unable to "overstep the barriers" that society has erected around even the most patently hypocritical high-caste folks. More than just passing down the specific rules and expectations of caste, then, "each generation" also redraws this "magic circle" of protection around the highest castes, teaching outcastes like Bakha to "inherit" their same sense of "resignation" and disappointment. The narrative thus once more points to caste as something taught and unnatural, strangling a "tiger at bay" like Bakha through rules each set of ancestors hands down to their children.

For the most part, Anand is passionately anti-caste, using his narrative to critique the politics that he and his colleagues in the Progressive Writers' Movement protested. But read more closely, this passage also suggests that Anand may have absorbed some of the very biases he tries to contest. Here and elsewhere, Anand describes Bakha as a "wild" "tiger at bay," animalistic language that demeans Bakha even as it praises him. And most tellingly, just seconds before Anand describes how caste is unnatural and forced, he references "the slave" in Bakha—a phrase that implies that Bakha's low status is somehow innate. It is therefore worth noting the places in which Anand, writing critically about a society he himself comes from, unwittingly reflects some of that society's worst prejudices.

> Men get used to a place, become familiar with it, and then comes a stage when the fascination of the unknown, the exotic, dominates them. It is the impulse which tries to create a new harmony, frowning upon the familiar which has grown stale and dreary with too much use. The mind which has once peeped into the wonderland of the new, contemplated various aspects of it with longing and desire, is shocked and disappointed when living reality pulls in the reins of the wild horse of fancy. But how pleasant men find it to look at the world with the open, hopeful, astonished eyes of the child! The vagaries of Bakha's naive taste can be both explained and excused. He didn't like his home, his street, his town, because he had been to work at the Tommies' barracks, and obtained glimpses of another world, strange and beautiful.

Related Characters: Bakha, Lakha

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

When Bakha and his family sit down to share a soggy midday meal, made up of leftovers from higher-caste Hindus' homes, both he and Lakha escape from their "reality" into "exotic […] fancy." Lakha recalls wedding celebrations in his past, when he could feast and dance late into the night; Bakha, as always, finds refuge in his idea of British society. In both cases, the harsh truth of life as an outcaste, as epitomized in this day-old bread, is too "stale and dreary" to stand. Only fantasy, an escape into the far-off worlds of the past or the Tommies' barracks, can allow Lakha and his son to make it through the moist mouthfuls of their lunch.

But if fantasy is a survival mechanism for Bakha and his fellow outcastes, it is also a crucial way of retaining a link to the "hopeful, astonished" characteristics of a "child." Over and over again, the narrative asserts that children, who are still "naïve" about caste's harsh divisions, are able to live with a freedom and generosity that the adults in Bulashah have lost. By holding onto this kind of "fancy," Bakha—and to a much lesser Lakha—are also able to keep their minds "open," imagining other worlds and so perhaps, one day, being able to advocate for these other possibilities.

❝ 'But, father, what is the use?' Bakha shouted. 'They would ill-treat us even if we shouted. They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt. That pundit in the temple tried to molest Sohini and then came shouting: "Polluted, polluted."'

Related Characters: Bakha (speaker), Lakha, Sohini, Pundit Kali Nath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in the story, Bakha predicted that Lakha would receive the tales of the touched man and the Pundit not with sympathy but with frustration at his children (he "always takes sides with the others," Bakha laments, "never with his own family"). That prediction now comes true, as Lakha has just berated Bakha for the cruelty of other, higher-caste individuals. But in this vital passage, Bakha challenges rather than accepts his father's self-loathing, pointing out that outcastes would be "ill-treated" no matter what they do. Challenging this generational belief in caste, both on a national scale and on a familial one, will be the central work of the novel.

Indeed, nowhere in the novel does Bakha critique the idea of outcastes as concisely and with as much force as he does here. Like all human bodies, higher-caste Hindus' bodies produce biological waste—a reality that Bakha implies with his use of the possessive pronoun "their" ("we clean their dirt"). Then, embarrassed by the realities of their own, human bodies, the high-caste people turn it around, trying to outsource (or out-caste) their "dirt"—their excrement—onto others. But after all this effort, the outcastes they have forced to "clean their dirt" still appear, showing up in the streets or in the temple. No wonder that the presence of an outcaste causes panic: it is proof to higher-caste Hindus that human waste will always be an inescapable part of humanity, no matter how hard they try to escape it.

Finally, this passage highlights the paradox of the oft-repeated high-caste cry, "polluted, polluted" Because of his privilege and power, it is easy for Pundit Kali Nath to demonize Sohini and turn the temple against her. But even as he torments Bakha and Sohini for their proximity to waste, it is Kali Nath—manipulative, sexually abusive, and dishonest—who is morally "polluted." High-caste folks cannot escape their physical dirt, the novel suggests, but they also cannot escape the metaphorical dirt that seems to exist in some of their souls.

❝ 'In a little while there was a knock at the door. And what do you think? Your uncle goes out and finds the Hakim *ji* himself, come to grace our house. He was a good man. He felt your pulse and saved your life.'

'He might have killed me,' Bakha commented.

'No, no,' said Lakha. 'They are really kind. We must realize that it is religion which prevents them from touching us.' He had never throughout his narrative renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of the laws of fate.

Related Characters: Bakha, Lakha (speaker), The Hakim Sahib

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

To convince his son of the rightness of caste, Lakha reflects on a memory from Bakha's infancy: when Bakha was on the verge of death, the Hakim Sahib (doctor) originally refused to help Lakha because of Lakha's outcaste status. Eventually, however, the doctor relented, coming to Lakha's house and
pulling Bakha back from the edge of death. Lakha tells this story with admiration, almost deifying the Hakim Sahib: "he was a good man," Lakha says, painting the doctor's belated arrival as him deigning to "grace" the family's house with his presence. Indeed, Lakha frames the entire story in terms of "religion," seeing caste as something "fate[d]," divine and therefore unalterable. This justification for caste reflects the high-caste narrative that such divides are written into ancient Vedic texts (Hindu scriptures), a claim that Anand and his cohort of progressive writers would often challenge.

Importantly, if this exchange demonstrates just how deeply Lakha has internalized the caste system, convincing himself of his own "interiority," it also suggests that Bakha will challenge this established order. Bakha's summary of the story—"he might have killed me"—is short, factual, and accusatory, seeing barbarity where Lakha sees generosity. And in pointing out the violence in the caste system, Bakha frames it not as "fate" or as a "law" to accept but as something to protest. In reframing caste in this way, Bakha sheds his father's "docile acceptance," starting to become more questioning— and therefore more enraged.

Pages 73–105 Quotes

❝ The hand of nature was stretching itself out towards [Bakha], for the tall grass on the slopes of Bulashah Hills was in sight, and he had opened his heart to it, lifted by the cool breeze that wafted him away from the crowds, the ugliness and the noise of the outcastes' street. He looked across at the swaying loveliness before him and the little hillocks over which it spread under a sunny sky, so transcendently blue and beautiful that he felt like standing dumb and motionless before it. He listened to the incoherent whistling of the shrubs. They were the voices he knew so well.

Related Characters: Bakha, Chota, Ram Charan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Though Bakha has longed to be in nature throughout the narrative, this excursion with Ram Charan and Chota marks the first time the boys actually make it outside the bounds of their cramped village. Right away, Bakha rejoices in getting some space from the "ugliness and noise" of the caste system. Interestingly, the prose itself then shifts, becoming more poetic and less literal (e.g., the breeze "wafted" Bakha away, into "swaying loveliness" and a "transcendently blue" sky). If most of the novel is written in the straightforward, anxious sentences that Bakha needs to use on the village streets in order to survive, this more poetic tone echoes the freedom and creativity that Bakha finally finds in nature.

Additionally, this passage suggests that nature provides a kind of community for Bakha, one the villagers deny him on the streets of Bulashah. Whereas the villagers ostracize Bakha, forcing him into physical distance and screaming that he is "untouchable," Bakha finds friends in these "little hillocks" and whistling shrubs. He reflects that these natural sounds are "the voices he knew so well," and even that the foothills seem to literally want to touch him ("the hand of nature was stretching itself out towards him," he thinks). *Untouchable* frequently makes clear that one of the most brutal consequences of Bakha's outcaste status is the intense loneliness he feels. But in nature, Bakha seems to feel at one with his surroundings rather than sequestered from them, finally in a place that accepts him as he is.

❝ It was a discord between person and circumstance by which a lion like [Bakha] lay enmeshed in a net while many a common criminal wore a rajah's crown. His wealth of unconscious experience, however, was extraordinary. It was a kind of crude sense of the world, in the round, such as the peasant has who can do the job while the laboratory agriculturalist is scratching his head, or like the Arab seamen who sails the seas in a small boat and casually determines his direction by the position of the sun, or like the beggar singer who recites an epic from door to door. […]

As he sauntered along a spark of some intuition suddenly set him ablaze. He was fired with a desire to burst out from the shadow of silence and obscurity in which he lay enshrouded.

Related Characters: Bakha

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

While Ram Charan and Chota chat with each other, Bakha continues trying to make sense of his exhausting morning. Again, the narrative emphasizes how arbitrary the distinctions of caste are—rather than equating "person and circumstance," as the high-caste leaders attempt to, *Untouchable* is always careful to emphasize that Bakha's inner self has little or nothing to do with the sweeper "circumstance" he was born into. And similarly, just because high-caste folks might wear "rajah's crown[s]" does not mean there is anything particularly princely in their temperaments.

Interestingly, this passage also calls back to earlier language in the narrative, when Sohini balanced a large round water jug effortlessly on her head; then, the omniscient narrator noted that "how a round base can be adjusted on a round top […] is a problem which may be of interest to Euclid," but "it never occurred to Sohini." In other words, here and earlier, the novel argues that theory—whether embodied by the ancient Greek mathematician or the "laboratory agriculturalist"—is irrelevant in the face of lived, experiential knowledge (Sohini balancing the jug, or Bakha cleaning the streets, or the seaman who determines his directions by instinct). This insistence on lived experience over inaccessible theory will recur in the novel as an implicit critique of caste and colonialism. After all, the British and the Brahmins might claim to rule this village, but it is the outcastes who know what it actually takes to keep Bulashah going.

Lastly, it is worth paying attention to the language Bakha uses around his own "intuition" and revelation. In just two short sentences, Bakha employs five phrases associated with light: he feels a "spark" that sets him "ablaze," allowing him to "burst," like "fire," beyond all "shadow." Being in nature and gaining new confidence thus allows Bakha to feel even closer to the sun, a recurring symbol of strength that he is gradually learning to identify himself with.

❝ There wasn't a child about the 38th Dogras who hadn't cast lingering eyes at this hat. The spirit of modernity had worked havoc among the youth of the regiment. The consciousness of every child was full of a desire to wear Western dress, and since most of the boys about the place were the sons of babus, bandsmen, sea poise, sweepers, washermen and shopkeepers, all too poor to afford the luxury of a complete European outfit, they eagerly stretched their hands to seize any particular article they could see anywhere, feeling that the possession of something European was better than the possession of nothing European.

Related Characters: Bakha

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After Bakha goes to look for Havildar Charat Singh, hoping to snag the hockey stick he promised to give Bakha earlier that morning, he comes across the topee (sunhat) that hangs in the British barracks. Bakha's longing for the hat, a longing "every child" in the community shares, once more signals the emotional and ideological impacts of colonialism. Bakha and his friends have internalized the ideas of British superiority that the English themselves promulgate, equating "European outfit[s]" with power and "modernity."

Fascinatingly, however, the language that shapes Bakha's thoughts about the topee is explicitly colonial. He dreams of "possession" and "seiz[ure]," words that undeniably echo the British process of claiming land. On the one hand, then, Bakha and the other young people's love of the English clothing is merely youthful fantasy, a way of imagining a world outside the stratified limits of Bulashah. But on the other hand, these fantasies of British power are also almost violent dreams of colonization in reverse—of being the one to "possess" instead of the one fighting possession.

❝ [Bakha] walked away without looking back, lest he should prove unequal to the unique honor that the Hindu had done him by entrusting him with so intimate a job as fetching coal in his clay basin. For a moment he doubted whether Charat Singh was conscious and in his senses when he entrusted him with the job. 'He might be forgetful and suddenly realize what he had done. Did he forget that I am a sweeper?' [...] He was grateful to God that such men as Charat Singh existed. He walked with a steady step, with a happy step, deliberately controlled [...]. It was with difficulty, however that he prevented himself from stumbling, for his soul was full of love and adoration and worship for the man who had thought it fit to entrust him, an unclean menial, with the job.

Related Characters: Bakha (speaker), Charat Singh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

When Charat Singh, a high-caste Hindu, entrusts Bakha with getting coal for his pipe, he is allowing Bakha to blur the rigid rules of what outcastes normally can and cannot touch. But rather than seeing the absurdity in the system, this small kindness forces Bakha to double down on his belief in the caste system. For example, instead of feeling frustrated, Bakha feels "grateful to God" that there are some higher-caste Hindus who are kinder than the touched man or the local woman—he feels not skepticism but "love and adoration and worship," simply because Charat Singh was not cruel to him. And worst of all, this one kindness causes Bakha to internalize the harmful stereotypes of his outcaste status perhaps more than he has done anywhere else in the novel—he feels "stumbling" and "menial" and "unequal" in the face of Charat Singh's warmth, defining himself only as "a sweeper" and not as the strong, intelligent person he has earlier understood himself to be.

By showing how much this act of kindness (or at least of basic decency) impacts Bakha, the novel thus demonstrates the insidious ways in which the caste system perpetuates itself. If Bakha only ever faced abuse from high-caste people, he would eventually give into the resentment and sense of injustice that plagued him earlier today. But when someone like Charat Singh or the Hakim Sahib shows a rare moment of warmth, the brief respite makes Bakha (like Lakha before him) feel special and tended to, causing him to forget his anger. And so it is this cycle of punishment and reward that makes Bakha and his ancestors sometimes view themselves as "unequal" rather than unfairly ostracized, seeking happiness (at least for the moment) within a broken

system rather than challenging the system as a whole.

> What had [Bakha] done to deserve such treatment? He loved the child. He had been very sorry when Chota refused to let him join the game. Then why should the boy's mother abuse him when he had tried to be kind? [...] 'Of course, I polluted the child. I couldn't help doing so. I knew my touch would pollute. But it was impossible not to pick him up. He was dazed, the poor little thing. And she abused me. I only get abuse and derision wherever I go. Pollution, pollution, I do nothing else but pollute people. They all say that: "Polluted, polluted!" She was perhaps justified though. Her son was injured. She could have said anything. It was my fault and of the other boys too. Why did we start that quarrel? It started on account of the goal I scored. Cursed me! The poor child!'

Related Characters: Bakha (speaker), Chota, The Elder Brother, The Younger Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

While Bakha, Chota, and the rest of the outcastes play a hockey game with the babu's two sons, the younger brother of the high-caste family gets (perhaps mortally) injured. Throughout the game, Bakha had done his best to protect the little boy—but the reality of Bakha's care and carefulness does not matter to the boys' mother. Indeed, her caste prejudice runs so deep that she sees Bakha's attempts to save the boys' life only through the lens of "pollution." So when Bakha reflects that he can "do nothing else but pollute people," it is because the higher-caste Hindus around him will not read his actions as anything but illicit and dirtying. No wonder, then, that Bakha feels almost gaslit into thinking the boys' mother is "justified," finding a way to blame himself ("it started on account of the goal I scored") just to make the oft-repeated illogic around him make sense.

Furthermore, just as the high-caste residents of Bulashah try and outsource their sense of bodily "pollution" to the outcastes, this passage also suggests that they do the same thing with emotional discomfort. The little boy was "dazed" and wounded, but rather than dealing with the pain and anxiety of a hurt child, the boy's mother lashes out at ("abuse[s]") Bakha; "her son was injured," Bakha realizes, "so she could have said anything." This heartbreaking exchange thus makes clear that the outcastes provide an outlet for any frustration or anger higher-caste Hindus might feel—using outcastes to escape their pain just as they use them to escape their waste.

> How [Bakha] had smarted under the pain of that callousness and cruelty. Could [Lakha] be the same father who, according to his own version, had gone praying to the doctor for medicine? Bakha recalled he had not spoken to his father for days after that incident. Then his grief about his unhappy position had become less violent, less rebellious. He had begun to work very hard. It had seemed to him that the punishment was good for him. For he felt he had learned through it to put his heart into his work. He had matured. He had learned to scrub floors, cook, fetch water [...]. And in spite of the poor nourishment he got, he had developed into a big strong man, broad shouldered, heavy hipped, supple armed, as near the Indian ideal of the wrestler as he wished to be.

Related Characters: Bakha, Lakha

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the story, Bakha has frequently reflected on the ways in which caste sensibilities are passed down and taught through generations. And after a particularly bad fight with Lakha, Bakha wonders if his father's cruelty is meant as a lesson to him—if, every time Lakha apes the abuse of the higher-caste villagers, he is trying to teach his son how to "mature" into the duties and mindsets of life as a sweeper.

Bakha is correct that Lakha's abuse is often the misguided product of his desire to protect his children from the dangers of outcaste life. But while Bakha temporarily takes pride in having learned his father's lessons, his instinct to be "less rebellious" is counter to the movement that will soon sweep India, to the anti-caste rhetoric that the novel espouses. In other words, by internalizing his father's abuse as a helpful lesson rather than a harmful one, Bakha puts "his heart into his work" rather than challenging the nature of that work in the first place. This is the generational cycle, the narrative suggests, that has allowed the cruel caste system to govern society for so long. But it is also the cycle that, by the end of this single day in Bakha's life, this young man will desire to break—a kind of "matur[ity]" very different from the one Lakha imagines.

Pages 105–139 Quotes

"Yes, Sahib, I know," said Bakha, without understanding the subtle distinction which the Colonel was trying to institute between himself and the ordinary sahibs in India whose haughtiness and vulgarity was, to his Christian mind, shameful, and from whom, on that account, he took care to distinguish himself, lest their misdeeds reflect on the sincerity of his intentions for the welfare of the souls of the heathen. To Bakha, however, all the sahibs were sahibs, trousered and hatted men, who were generous in the extreme, giving away their cast-off clothes to their servants, also a bit nasty because they abused their servants a great deal.

Related Characters: Bakha (speaker), Colonel Hutchinson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

After Salvation Army leader Colonel Hutchinson stumbles upon Bakha, the Colonel does his best to convert Bakha to Christianity, blabbering on about things Bakha does not care about and cannot understand. Comically, while the Colonel tries his best to distinguish himself from other British sahibs, Bakha sees exactly the same qualities in all of these men—the enviable clothing, with all the power it represents, and the "nasty" condescension. After all, even if the Colonel claims his own superiority on a religious level rather than on a racial one, he still preaches that same doctrine of British superiority.

Tonally, this passage—and the novel's description of Colonel Hutchinson as a whole—also slides fully into satire. Every phrase of this paragraph is meant to establish Hutchinson's own hypocrisy. He criticizes the other sahibs for their "haughtiness" even as he similarly looks down on "the heathens" whom he tries to convert—he accuses his fellow colonizers of vulgarity, but Bakha knows Hutchinson is every bit as "nasty" as the rest. By taking readers inside Hutchinson's delusions, therefore, Anand critiques colonialism from yet another vantage point, showing that colonizers are not only harmful but a little ridiculous.

The beautiful garden bowers planted by the ancient Hindu kings and since then neglected were thoroughly damaged as the mob followed behind Bakha. It was as if the crowd had determined to crush everything, however ancient or beautiful, that lay in the way of their achievement of all that Gandhi stood for. It was as if they knew, by an instinct sure than that of conscious knowledge, that the things of the old civilization must be destroyed in order to make room for those of the new. It seemed as if, in trampling on the blades of green grass, they were deliberately, brutally trampling on a part of themselves which they had begun to abhor, and from which they wanted to escape to Gandhi.

Related Characters: Bakha, Mahatma Gandhi/Mohandas K. Gandhi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

When Mohandas K. Gandhi, the famed leader of India's independence movement, arrives in Bulashah, there is a mad rush to get to him, so hectic that higher-caste Hindus brush up against Bakha without even realizing. But in focusing on the flowers, which "ancient Hindu kings" planted and designed, Bakha focuses less on the present implications of this moment and more on its historical import. Like the "garden bowers," caste dates back to the first years of Hinduism, originating in the "ancient" Vedic texts; like these flowers, the caste system symbolizes an "old civilization" that "kings" forged and perpetuated. To "crush" all of these things is thus to "make room" not only for Gandhi speech's but for the "new," anti-caste world that Gandhi imagines. But since caste is so deeply ingrained not just in Bulashah's political structure but in its social and emotional fabric, "trampling" on caste also means, for these villagers, "trampling on a part of themselves," erasing not only their external rules but also their internal beliefs.

And if trampling on the old flowers means trampling on the artificial, man-made landscapes, this stampede almost signals a return to nature. Despite the high-caste's cries of "polluted" whenever Bakha appears, *Untouchable* has shown over and over again that the truly polluting force in the world is the caste system itself—and by leaning into Gandhi's anti-caste rhetoric, natural equality and (dis)order might once again reign.

> He wanted to be detached. It wasn't that he had lost grip of the emotion that had brought him swirling on the tide of the rushing stream of people. But he became aware of the fact of being a sweeper by the contrast which his dirty khaki uniform presented to the white garments of most of the crowd. There was an insuperable barrier between himself and the crowd, the barrier of caste. He was part of a consciousness which he could share and yet not understand. He had been lifted from the gutter, through the barriers of space, to partake of a life which was his, and yet not his. He was in the midst of a humanity which included him in its folds and yet debarred him from entering into a sentient, living, quivering contact with it.

Related Characters: Bakha, Mahatma Gandhi/Mohandas K. Gandhi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

For a moment, when Gandhi first arrived to Bulashah, Bakha was just one of many in a throng of villagers. For this brief instant, the townspeople were united more by their shared desire to hear the Mahatma's words than they were divided by caste, class, ethnicity, or religion. But as the mob subsides, Bakha is brought back into the harsh, immovable reality of caste. Therefore, even as Bakha "share[s]" in this anti-imperialist "consciousness"-raising—even as feels, for the first time in the story, as if he "in the midst" of his village's "humanity"—he remains an untouchable. And again, Bakha's status as an outcaste brings with it this permanent sense of isolation, as he is once again denied the "quivering contact" that he so badly craves.

It is also important to note how much clothing shapes Bakha's sense of himself as different. As he looks around at the crowd, ostensibly joined in their ardent admiration for Gandhi, he cannot help but notice his own sartorial difference: he observes "the contrast which his dirty khaki uniform presented to the white garments of most of the crowd," which he knows stands in for "the barrier of caste." Clothing, in other words, represents an "insuperable barrier" between Bakha and the people around him. Thus, it's no wonder that Bakha fantasizes, most of all, about finding empowerment through dress.

> Bakha saw a sallow-faced Englishman, whom he knew to be the District Superintendent of Police, standing by the roadside in a khaki uniform of breaches, polished leather gators and blue-puggareed, khaki sun helmet, not as smart as the military officers', but, of course, possessing for Bakha all the qualities of the sahibs' clothes. Somehow, however, at this moment Bakha was not interested in sahibs, probably because in the midst of this enormous crowd of Indians, fired with enthusiasm for their leader, the foreigners seemed out of place, insignificant, the representative of an order which seemed to have nothing to do with the natives.

Related Characters: Bakha, Mahatma Gandhi/Mohandas K. Gandhi

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Historically, Gandhi was frequently jailed and then released from prison, and on the occasions when he did give speeches, they were heavily patrolled by British policemen. Such figures would normally represent the height of power to Bakha—these men wear British clothes and possess British influence, capable of chastising even the highest-caste Hindus and of monitoring the Mahatma ("great-souled one") himself. But for the first time, Bakha sees colonial authorities not as impressive but as outdated, "representative" of an old and vestigial "order." In other words, the source of power has shifted, transferring from the English colonizers to the anti-colonial figure of Gandhi. And similarly, the English clothes that have represented status and prosperity to Bakha now lose their meaning, as they are no longer linked to the true "leader[s]" of society.

On a more detailed note, Bakha in particular has been fascinated by the British topees (sunhats), which protect sunlight from their wearers' faces. So, it is telling here that he now specifically feels disillusioned with the British officer's "sun helmet," a sign that Bakha's loss of interest in all things British coincides with his excitement about nature and the sun.

❝ 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. He felt he could put his life in his hands and ask him to do what he liked with it. For him he would do anything. He would like to go and be a scavenger at his *ashram*.

Related Characters: Bakha (speaker), Mahatma Gandhi/Mohandas K. Gandhi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

As Gandhi (also known as the Mahatma, or "great-souled one") speaks out against caste, he goes to great lengths to elevate "outcastes", saying that he "love[s] scavenging" even though it still involves removing human waste. On the one hand, this passage speaks to Gandhi's ardent efforts to end the caste system, lending his own reputation and platform to the outcaste's cause. But on the other hand, this passage reflects some of Gandhi's more condescending, less radical tactics. Indeed, many of Gandhi's more radical contemporaries (including leftist activist B. R. Ambedkar) considered him to be overly patronizing to outcastes. Here, for instance, Gandhi's words sound false, as though he is romanticizing the dangerous practice of scavenging rather than seeking technological or political alternatives.

Still, despite Gandhi's rather superficial language, Bakha feels "thrilled to the very marrow of his bones." Yet it is not an accident that the language here almost exactly mirrors the language Bakha used to describe his reaction to Charat Singh's act of kindness with the hockey stick. Earlier in the novel, Bakha has vowed that he would be a sweeper forever, if only to please Charat Singh. Now, he feels ready to "go and be a scavenger at [Gandhi's] *ashram*." In both cases, this sudden, almost performative kindness from higher-caste individuals makes Bakha paradoxically feel less powerful, as if a moment's break from the daily abuse he suffers is enough to make him forget his anger at the caste system as a whole. And so even as Gandhi speaks against caste, Bakha mentally affirms his own outcaste status.

❝ 'It is India's genius to accept all things,' said the poet fiercely. 'We have, throughout our long history, been realists believing in the stuff of this world, in the here and the now, in the flesh and the blood. […] We can see through the idiocy of these Europeans who defied money. They were barbarians and lost their heads in the worship of gold. We know life. We know it's secret flow. We have danced to its rhythms. […] We can learn to be aware with a new awareness. We are still eager to learn. We cannot go wrong. Our enslavers muddle through things. We can see things clearly.'

Related Characters: Iqbal Nath Sarshar (speaker), Bakha, Mahatma Gandhi/Mohandas K. Gandhi, R. N. Bashir

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Iqbal Nath Sarshar, the progressive poet who utters these words, is perhaps the closest avatar in the novel for Anand himself. And though this passage is important for several reasons, including for the way Sarshar balances anti-colonial rhetoric with an implicitly anti-caste mention of "enslavers," it is perhaps most notable for the way the poet focuses on tangible, bodily experience. So many of the other characters in the novel, from Chota and Ram Charan with their fantasies of British life to the touched man and the local woman with their pretensions to purity, have avoided the physical facts of life. But Sarshar believes "in the flesh and the blood," in the reality of lived experience above all (just as, earlier in the novel, Anand critiqued the "laboratory scientist" as misguided and out of touch).

Importantly, because Sarshar focuses on "the stuff of this world," he understands that the way to end the stigma around outcastes is not through rhetoric but through an end to the work of sweeping—namely with flush toilets, which he will soon praise as a potentially nation-altering invention. And by giving Sarshar, whom Bakha so admires, this fiery, impassioned speech, Anand ultimately sides with the body—the visceral reality of which higher-caste Hindus have worked so hard to ignore. After all, everyone (from Pundit Kali Nath to Sarshar himself) has a body—the trick to acknowledge this fact rather than outsourcing all the gritty labor of "flesh and […] blood" to the outcastes.

❝ 'When the sweepers changed their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine, will be to introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone having to handle it - the flush system. Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society.'

Related Characters: Iqbal Nath Sarshar (speaker), Bakha, R. N. Bashir

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Iqbal Nath Sarshar's mention of the flush toilet is the first time Bakha has ever heard of this machine, even though it could potentially change his life forever. Sarshar's straightforward explanation recalls the language Bakha used to describe his life as a sweeper ("they hate dung," Bakha complained earlier in the novel, but "I hate it too"). But more than that, it introduces a new concept of modernity into the story. Whereas previously, Bakha equated modernity with British clothes and 'Red-Lamp' cigarettes—objects of his oppressors—the flush toilet marks the first time that Bakha is ever able to link modernity with his own personal and political progress.

Structurally, it is also vital to note that Sarshar's words fall at the end of the day and at the end of the text. Readers have been immersed, for the entire narrative, in the inner workings of Bakha's mind. But as Bakha's mind changes, rearranged by the new possibilities of the flush toilet, the literary world changes too—so radically, in fact, that the novel can no longer sustain itself. In other words, the invention of the flush toilet impacts the text just as radically as it will impact the country (though in reality, the flush toilet did not fully eradicate the horrific tasks assigned to sweepers).

❝ As the brief Indian twilight came and went, a sudden impulse shot through the transformations of space and time, and gathered all the elements that were dispersed in the stream of [Bakha's] soul into a tentative decision: 'I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us,' he whispered to himself, 'and all that that poet said. Perhaps I can find the poet some day and ask him about his machine.' And he proceeded homewards.

Related Characters: Bakha (speaker), Lakha, Mahatma Gandhi/Mohandas K. Gandhi, Iqbal Nath Sarshar

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

With this passage, night falls, and the book comes to a close. In addition to signaling hope about the end of outcaste stigma and harmful caste divides, these final sentences link Bakha even more explicitly to the sun. Twilight, this moment of "transformation" in the sky, also seals the transformations happening inside of Bakha. And though the "decision" he makes is nominally just to tell Lakha about all he has heard from Sarshar and Gandhi, Bakha is metaphorically choosing to challenge caste—to take pride in the "us" that he has previously felt so ashamed about.

Crucially, this ending moment—which sees Bakha returning "home" having learned a central lesson—cements that *Untouchable* is, at its heart, a coming-of-age narrative. Over and over again in the story, Bakha has wondered which of his father's lessons he should internalize and which he should reject. But now, he is excited to "tell" his father his own ideas about what is true—to instruct Lakha instead of waiting for instruction.

Ending on this "sudden impulse" grounds readers both in the immensity of Bakha's decision and in the relatively quotidian nature of even this more special day. But by emphasizing "the poet" (and Bakha's mission to one day "find" the writer again), Anand also subtly hints that literature can prove to be an important north star in the fight against caste. And in the end, *Untouchable* outlines the arguments against outcaste status, an artistic document meant to be used in a political fight.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PAGES 3–43

The outcastes' colony lies just outside the town of Bulashah, in the Himalayan foothills. Though the area was once clean and pretty, now, the dung of various animals and the lack of a drainage system has made it polluted and unpleasant. There are narrow, cramped houses made of mud and, on the far end of the colony, several rows of public latrines. This is where the leather-workers, washermen, grass-cutters, water-carriers and scavengers live, all deemed outcastes from Hindu society.

Right away, the narrative juxtaposes nature—clean and energizing—with the waste and pollution of human society. The tangible sights and smells of excrement are thus as unavoidable in the story as they are for the outcastes themselves. The higher-caste residents of Bulashah may be able to separate themselves from (or literally cast out) this most unpleasant part of life, but readers will not have this same luxury.

For 18-year-old Bakha, the son of Jemadar (head scavenger) Lakha, this colony is almost intolerable. After having spent some time working as a servant in the British barracks, Bakha has gotten used to the glamourous "Tommie" lifestyle. And because the Tommies treated him with kindness, Bakha now feels superior to his fellow outcastes. The only outcastes he respects are Chota, a leather-worker's son, and Ram Charan, a washerman's son. All three of the young men spend their time copying the English, oiling their hair, playing hockey and smoking cigarettes.

Bakha's fantasies of British life, which he shares with his friends, signal his childlike view of the world; at 18, he has not yet adopted his father's hardened view toward their circumstances. At the same time, the boys' obsession with British garb and traditions shows just how deeply they have internalized racial and colonial hierarchies, copying the English rather than challenging their power. Though Bakha does not know it yet, the timing of the story—on the eve of India's independence movement—makes these sharp obsessions both ironic and foreboding.

This morning, Bakha is woken up by the cold. Though the English blanket he uses is not warm enough, Bakha is a "child of modern India"; having observed the British for so long, he feels an overwhelming desire to "look like a sahib," even when his father Lakha scolds him. Bakha has received some English items as charity from Tommies and sepoys, but the rest of the **English clothes** and objects he covets he can only purchase at the rag-store. Though Bakha often admires the items there, for years, he never found the courage to ask the shopkeeper for any prices—after all, he wouldn't be able to afford anything.

Bakha's willingness to shiver to feel more English shows that his fascination with the British does truly cause him harm (even if, in this moment, it is only on a small scale). Moreover, Bakha's commitment to spending what little money he has on English clothing suggests that such dress allows him to symbolically surpass his own society's strict hierarchy; he may not be able to aspire to being a higher-caste Hindu, but at least he can "look like a sahib."

Finally, after earning some money at the barracks, Bakha had enough to buy a jacket, a blanket, and a pack of cigarettes. Though he knows there is nothing else English about him, it gives Bakha great pride to wear these **European garments**. At this moment, however, he is freezing, so he resolves to buy another blanket so his father will stop mocking him. Bakha feels frustrated with "old" Lakha's refusal to learn about the new English ways, not to mention his refusal to let Bakha play games with his friends.

By focusing so much on English clothing at the very beginning of the story, the novel emphasizes just how vital this symbolic garb is to Bakha's larger worldview. Crucially, Lakha's disdain for this clothing reflects both his more traditional values and his hesitation to buck his village's pecking order. Throughout the narrative, Bakha will increasingly challenge his father's acceptance of their circumstances.

Sure enough, Lakha wakes up and immediately orders Bakha to go clean the latrines, even though Bakha's younger brother Rakha and his younger sister Sohini are still asleep. Bakha thinks back to the morning of his mother's death, when he had faked sleep and thus angered his father. Bakha also recalls the milky tea his mother used to make him every morning. The tea was so delicious that Bakha's mouth would start watering before bed, just anticipating his treat the next morning. After his mother's death, this tea and so many other "splendrous details" of his life died, too.

The entire novel is set in a single day, so the level of "detail" on every page is striking. But Bakha's longing here makes clear that the details of his new life, after the loss of his mother, no longer hold any pleasure or warmth. In other words, whereas Bakha's mother worked to make the best of their tricky situation, Bakha now can only lament the job caste and class his situation has forced him into.

Bakha rises, deciding that he does not feel sad about his mother's death because her own life was so far from his modern world of cigarettes and **English clothes**. He goes to the latrines, shocked by how cold and congested he feels. A small, thin man yells at Bakha to clean the latrines immediately, as they are all dirty. Bakha recognizes the man as Havildar Charat Singh, a well-known local hockey player who suffers from "piles" (hemorrhoids).

There are two vital ideas in this passage. First, Bakha's use of English clothing and cigarettes to distance himself from the pain of his mother's death adds a new significance to this symbol: when he wears the Tommies' garments, Bakha can imagine himself not only out of his circumstances but away from his thorniest feelings. Second, Charat Singh's "piles" make it clear that, despite whatever artificial caste distinctions high-status villagers try to introduce, everyone's body is equally subject to waste and discomfort.

Bakha goes to work, cleaning the latrines skillfully and with great physical strength. Even though the work is dirty, Bakha remains clean; his focus lends him a look of distinction. When he emerges from the latrines half an hour later, Havildar Charat Singh is surprised to see a sweeper be so clean. At first Charat Singh sneers at Bakha, the familiar gesture of high-caste prejudice—but then Charat Singh relaxes, forgetting his bias and letting out a "childlike laugh."

The novel will often point to Bakha's handsomeness and grace to emphasize the arbitrariness of the caste system. It is also worth noting how the narrative equates Charat Singh's "childlike" behavior with his ability to temporarily forget caste; over and over again, the story will assert that caste is something grown into, a set of biases that children are too young and innocent to have internalized.

Charat Singh playfully mocks Bakha for his attempts to look English, and though there is warmth in the hockey player's voice, his patronizing grin still reflects "six thousand years of racial and class superiority." Thrillingly, Charat Singh tells Bakha that he will give him a hockey stick later in the day. Bakha expresses his gratitude and, newly energized, throws himself into his work, as if this "generous promise had called forth that trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers."

Though Charat Singh's hockey stick offer seems to signal warmth, this exchange paradoxically affirms rather than disrupts caste divides. Charat Singh's grin makes him feel superior, just as Bakha becomes "servile" with gratitude for the stick. The word "inherited" once more testifies to the idea that caste prejudice is passed down and hardened over time.

Bakha continues to clean the latrines as different men come through, mostly "Hindus" (meaning non-outcaste Hindus) and the occasional "Muhammadan" (Muslim). On the one hand, Bakha wants to be done with his work, but on the other hand, it provides him a comforting "intoxication." When a cramp forces Bakha to pause, he reflects that his time in the British barracks has made him judge Indians for the way they wash themselves. Even though the British customs are no less strange, Bakha accepts them as superior—"whatever they did was 'fashun.'"

Muslims, or Muhammadans (as Bakha will always refer to them), are also outside the Hindu caste system, though they are able to hold higher-status position than sweepers like Bakha are. Bakha's misspelling of "fashun" further points to his desire to copy a British tradition and style he does not quite understand.

Bakha is interrupted in his reverie when a villager scolds him that all the latrines are dirty again. Bakha goes back to work, clearing his mind as much as he can; he has developed this strategy to cope with the "awful sensations" associated with his task. The hard labor has made Bakha's body strong, and others often reflect that there is nobility in his form—"here is a man."

Many of the other men in the narrative, from Lakha to Charat Singh to (later) Pundit Kali Nath, are at the mercy of their bowel movements and bodily desires. But despite his low position in society, Bakha's masculine strength seems unmatched, as he is able to distance himself from the "awful sensations" associated with cleaning human waste.

Bakha burns the excrement he has swept up, then heads home, where he sees that his sister Sohini is struggling to light a fire. Bakha helps Sohini, blowing onto the fire with his strong lungs. Thirsty from his day's labor, Bakha asks for water, but Sohini informs him that they are out. Sohini goes to get more water from the well, balancing the family's pitcher on her head as she walks away. Bakha admires Sohini's figure while she walks, acknowledging that his feelings for her might not be "altogether that of a brother for a sister."

Bakha's sexual desire for Sohini sounds a discordant note with the rest of his characterization. While the novel mostly emphasizes Bakha's physical and moral assets, the oft-repeated suggestion that Bakha has incestual feelings for his sister hints that Anand might not be entirely free from the caste prejudices he writes about.

Since the outcastes are not allowed to draw directly from the well (because "Hindus" would view that as "polluting"), they depend on higher-status villagers to get water for them. Waiting for these villagers, and navigating this awkward request, is always anxiety-inducing for Sohini. At all times of day, there is a group of outcastes surrounding the well, clamoring for water. Today, for example, there are nine people in front of Sohini in line.

There is perhaps nothing more basic than the right to water—so the fact that outcastes are denied water emphasizes just how unequal and untenable this society is. As Sohini's experience in line shows, for outcastes, there is a high degree of difficulty and shame associated with even the most quotidian tasks. The idea that outcastes are "polluting," grounded in the high-caste belief that outcastes are dirty because they must deal with others' waste, will become a common refrain throughout the novel.

Gulabo, a washerwoman and Ram Charan's mother, is one of those in line. She had once been beautiful, but her beauty has faded with age; now, she resents Sohini for her youth and loveliness. Gulabo starts screaming at Sohini to go home, calling her a "prostitute" and enlisting other women in line to join her taunts. When Sohini laughs nervously, it only further inflames Gulabo, who tries to hit Sohini. Fortunately, she is stopped by one of the other women waiting for water.

In the hierarchy of outcaste life, washerwomen like Gulabo (who deal with laundry) rank more highly than sweepers like Sohini. Unfortunately, Gulabo's rage toward Sohini demonstrates how the strictly hierarchical system breaks down solidarity rather than unifying the outcastes; denied so much privilege in the wider community, Gulabo seeks to flaunt her slightly higher status however she can.

Things settle down, though Sohini still cannot bear the midday heat or the embarrassment of Gulabo's taunts. Gulabo, too, continues to complain, regretting that all of this is happening on the morning of her son's wedding day. A sepoy passes the well, but he refuses to stop for the outcastes. Eventually, Pundit Kali Nath, one of the priests in charge of the town's temple, agrees to help the outcastes—not because he wants to be generous, but because he thinks the exercise might help him be less constipated.

Just as Charat Singh had "piles," Pundit Kali Nath—a Brahmin priest, and thus one of the highest-status members of society—is concerned primarily with his own bowel movements. By portraying this priest as selfish and focused only on his own physical sensations, the narrative challenges the premise behind caste hierarchy: if someone at the very top can be so focused on his bowels, why are the outcastes the only people associated with excrement?

As the Pundit lifts the water, he wonders which of the foods he ate recently could be to blame for his bowel problems. The water is heavier than he is used to, but he does feel that lifting the filled bucket is helping with his constipation. At last, he gets the bucket out of the well, knowing that he will need to go to the bathroom soon. Gulabo demands to be first to get water, and the rest of the outcastes rush towards the well. Only Sohini sits alone, away from the fray.

Again, the depiction of Pundit Kali Nath veers into satire, so great is his obsession with his eating and intestinal habits. Gulabo's desire to be first speaks to her deep-seated desire to replicate existing caste distinctions within the outcaste community, even as she is being forced to beg for the basic right to water.

The Pundit notices Sohini, and he feels a twinge of desire at her innocent look and full breasts. He chooses to give her water first, and though Sohini is grateful, she fears Gulabo's jealousy. The Pundit instructs Sohini that she should come to the temple later that day to clean the courtyard. Sohini agrees and rushes away. On her way out, she runs into Lachman, a young Brahmin who has long nursed a crush on Sohini. But when the Pundit notices Lachman looking at Sohini's body, he quickly shuts any potential flirtation down.

The Pundit's fascination with his bodily sensations now takes on a new valence, as his desire to relieve himself gives way to a foreboding desire to have sex with Sohini. And to further challenge ideas that those further up the caste hierarchy are purer, the narrative introduces a second Brahmin, Lachman, who seems to have similarly lustful thoughts.

When Sohini returns home, her father is shouting at her for taking so long to get water. Complaining of a pain in his side, Lakha sends Bakha to sweep the streets in his stead. Bakha knows that his father is faking the pain, but he doesn't mind getting to sweeping instead of cleaning latrines. Before Bakha goes out to sweep, Sohini makes tea. Though Bakha's father drinks this tea slowly, as is the Indian custom, Bakha rushes through his tea, burning his tongue because that is what the Tommies do.

Lakha's cruelty toward his children might be similar to Gulabo's anger at Sohini: in both cases, these disempowered adults try to claim some sense of control over whoever seems even more vulnerable. Bakha's desire to rush through his tea, as the British do, stands in stark contrast to his memories of tea when his mother was alive. Therefore, Bakha's new approach to drinking this hot liquid once more conflates his obsession with the British with his desire to distance himself from his grief over his mother.

After his meal, Bakha goes outside, basking in the **sun** and recalling memories of childhood sunbathing sessions. For a moment, he is able to imagine that there is nothing on earth but him and the sun. Bakha realizes that Ram Charan, Chota, and his brother Rakha have all observed him talking to himself; now, they will make fun of him as they always do, teasing him for his **English clothes** even though they wear same ones. In return, Bakha makes fun of Ram Charan for his mean mother Gulabo and his pretty younger sister.

The sun allows Bakha to gain some separation from the arbitrary, invented injustices of life in human society. This symbol of natural peace is particularly poignant when contrasted with the status-obsessed banter Bakha engages in with his friends. Notably, all these young men are embarrassed by their fascination with English clothes, suggesting some ambivalence toward this colonial force (even if it is subconscious).

Ram Charan informs Bakha that today is his sister's wedding day, and Bakha teases his friend for his pretentious outfit. The other outcastes are also out on the street, silently taking in the **sun**, but Bakha does not need language to feel connected to them. This silence, "the silence of death fighting for life," is common in the outcaste community, though Bakha's youthful presence always injects some energy and optimism into his neighbors' days.

Again, the sun emerges as a powerful symbol of life and energy. It is also important to see the link between Bakha himself and the sun: both are revitalizing forces for this community, and both are almost scorching in their bright intensity. As the novel progresses, Bakha will begin to align his actions and feelings even more closely with the sun's movements.

Ram Charan and Chota try to convince Bakha to come play hockey, but he is firm that he needs to sweep the streets. Two younger boys, the sons of a higher-caste babu, appear. Bakha and his friends often play hockey with the elder brother (though they exclude the younger brother); today, they try to convince the brothers to lend them their hockey sticks. The elder brother in particular tends to ignore caste divides, playing with outcastes even though his mother chides him for it.

A babu, or a high-caste Hindu who can read and write in both English and Hindi, would be several rungs above Bakha on the social ladder. The fact that this babu's children are so eager to play with the outcastes then reiterates that caste prejudice is something people learn over time—children, interested only in games and friends and pleasure, have yet to absorb these biases.

Now, though, the brothers are on their way to school. Bakha once wanted to go to school, before he learned that outcaste children were not allowed. Still, dreaming of becoming a sahib, Bakha bought a primer and tried to teach himself to read (though he gave up after learning the alphabet). Today, Bakha decides to ask the two sons of the babu to teach him to read, volunteering to pay them for a lesson a day. The elder brother agrees, and Bakha heads off, overjoyed.

Now, the list of rights denied to outcastes comes into focus: by depriving outcastes of education in addition to basic needs like food and water, the higher-caste Hindus ensure that there will be no social mobility at all in their village. Seen in that frame, the elder brother's decision to teach Bakha to read has somewhat radical implications, as it could disrupt the carefully preserved Bulashah hierarchy.

Bakha now begins to sweep the streets, resenting the Municipal Committee for failing to live up to their promise of paving this part of town. He passes a funeral procession, and several shops filled with Muslim, Hindu, and British wares. Bakha stops to buy a packet of 'Red-Lamp' cigarettes, and the shop-keeper throws his money at Bakha, not wanting to so much as graze his hand. Too late, Bakha realizes he has forgotten to get a match, but he is too ashamed to go back to the same stall to ask for one.

Bakha's cigarette purchase affirms two of the novel's truisms. First, Bakha is almost single-minded in his pursuit of all things British (like the 'Red-Lamp' brand). Second, the shopkeeper exemplifies how hypocritical higher-caste Hindus can be: the shop-keeper will take Bakha's money, but he will not touch Bakha's hand (likely because he views Bakha as "polluted").

Bakha knows that smoking is considered presumptuous for a sweeper, but he wants to smoke like rich people do. Fortunately, a nearby Muslim shopkeeper gives Bakha a light, and Bakha reflects that Muslims are similarly barred from so much of Hindu society. Bakha then makes his way through the bazaar, marveling at the various colors and fabrics and scents, "a pleasant aroma oozing from so many unpleasant things" (like pungent spices and decaying vegetables).

This is not the last time in the narrative that Bakha will find solace and solidarity in a Muslim villager; because both groups are outcaste but neither is in direct competition with each other (unlike with sweepers and washermen), each is able to offer the other rare comfort.

Bakha sees the spice-shop owner but avoids his gaze, as Lakha owes this man money. Bakha then goes to admire some fine cotton cloth—the material the sahibs wear, though Bakha cannot afford it. Lastly, Bakha goes to the sweetshop, where he takes in all the syrupy delicacies before deciding to buy four annas' worth of jalebis, the cheapest dessert in the store. The shopkeeper smirks at this, thinking that "no-one save a greedy low-caste man" would ever buy this many jalebis.

Again, the sweet-shop owner is eager to profit from Bakha even as he demeans him. Bakha's trip through the bazaar also epitomizes the dueling emotions of his life. On the one hand, Bakha constantly feels this aspiration toward all things British; on the other hand, Bakha is always filled with shame and anxiety about his status, lack of wealth, or family. Implicitly, then, the desire for British garb seems to come directly out of this embarrassment.

The sweet-shop man packages the jalebis, throwing them at Bakha and naming his price. Bakha knows that he is being overcharged, but he nevertheless relishes the sweets, popping one and then another into his mouth. Bakha leaves the bazaar. As he walks, he notices the various advertisements around the village streets, and he wishes again that he could read. He also notices a beautiful woman sitting in a window, and lets his gaze be drawn to her.

Earlier, Bakha lamented that all the "splendrous detail" in his life had died off with his mother, but here, he finds pleasure simply in noticing the nuances of his surroundings. Bakha's ability to take pleasure in sensory experience and sharp observation is one of the things that sustains him through his unimaginably onerous work.

Suddenly, someone is yelling at Bakha, calling him "low-caste vermin" and a "swine." Bakha immediately plasters a smile onto his face, but the man will not stop screaming about how now he must wash himself, how his plans for the day have been derailed. As the touched man's cries get louder, a group of higher-caste Hindus forms around Bakha. Bakha realizes that he cannot escape. If he touches any of these people while trying to get by, the abuse he is suffering now will only double.

If the previous paragraph demonstrated Bakha's ability to find happiness even in unhappy circumstances, the touched man's accusations bring Bakha back to harsh reality. In addition to food, water, and education, peace is another thing that higher-caste Hindus deny to outcastes; as this passage demonstrates, Bakha's moment of enjoyment is enough to incense a crowd, who see his mere presence and touch as "polluting."

The rest of the onlookers join in, mocking Bakha's sahib dress and lamenting that outcastes now dream of having higher status. Two children even accuse Bakha of hitting them in the past, though he has done no such thing. But when Bakha tries to defend himself against this falsehood, the onlookers just scream louder. Bakha feels that his legs might give out with panic.

Though Bakha is not yet conscious of it, he is living through the era of Gandhi's anti-caste activism—so the hysteria the touched man exhibits here is just as much about a large-scale sociopolitical change as it is about his passing interaction with Bakha.

A tonga-wallah (rickshaw) drives up, scattering the crowd. Rather than move out of the way for the rickshaw, however, the touched man smacks Bakha across the face, knocking his turban off of his head and scattering his jalebis. Bakha begins to cry and to think about revenge. But the rickshaw driver stops him, encouraging Bakha simply to tie his turban and move on.

Perhaps nowhere else in the novel makes the paradox of high-caste status so clear: the touched man is terrified of being physically "polluted," but he is undeniably morally dirty, destroying Bakha's food and knocking his clothes off his body. Because the rickshaw driver is Muslim, this scene marks another moment of solidarity between those outside of the caste system.

Bakha continues sweeping, announcing himself as he goes: "*posh*, keep away, *posh*, sweeper coming." But though he shows outward humility, inside, Bakha is seething. As he replays the horrific confrontation, he alternates between blaming himself for not announcing his presence and blaming the touched man for his violent reaction. The higher-caste Hindus "always abuse us," Bakha thinks, "because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too."

Bakha is at war with himself. To some extent, he has absorbed Lakha's logic, which teaches that the caste system is grounded in religious principle and unalterable truths about superiority and inferiority. But Bakha also knows that he shares more with the rest of his village than anyone might care to admit—after all, everyone in Bulashah "hates dung" equally, just as everyone produces it equally.

Bakha laments that his jalebis are gone, though he thinks with a great deal of tenderness about the rickshaw driver's intervention. With a rush, the word "untouchable" pops into his head, a term that seems to make sense of every humiliation he has ever suffered in his life. Again, Bakha notes that Muslims and British people show none of the cruelty towards sweepers that other outcastes and higher-caste Hindus do. Bakha continues his work, though he feels self-conscious, as if everyone around him is watching him.

In this passage, which gives the novel its title, Bakha examines the isolation that goes along with his outcaste status—he is untouchable and thus unable to integrate into the world around him, a pain that will repeat throughout the story. Bakha's reflections that Muslim and British people do not share these biases once more underscores the invented, arbitrary nature of the caste system.

PAGES 43–73

As he keeps walking through the town, Bakha spots an old bull; the bull is belching, and both his dung and his breath have a foul stench. Bakha thinks back to the many hungry cows he has seen, browsing stalls at the bazaar and snacking on whatever food they can get. But higher-caste Hindus always treat these bulls with respect, a religious custom that Bakha does not quite understand. Moreover, if bulls are so sacred, Bakha wonders, then why are they never well-fed?

In addition to all the other things he is excluded from, Bakha is not allowed to read religious texts or participate in religious ceremonies—even though these are the very texts that are supposed to justify the caste system. Bakha's anger at the touched man perhaps allows him to see these contradictions in a new light, just as he now questions why higher-caste Hindus can treat their cows with a form of respect they do not deign to show to some other humans.

Bakha tries to keep sweeping, ignoring his environment, but every so often the stench of decaying vegetables or the heat of the day makes this task feel impossible. Bakha's only relief comes when he turns off onto a quiet street and sees a shop with lots of European instruments. The thought of the British military band comforts Bakha, and he is able to get some distance from the events of the morning.

Whereas Bakha gains strength from nature in its purest form, the spoiling vegetables and city streets just remind Bakha how tripped up he is by the invented rules and customs of his society.

Bakha sees a jewelry stand, but—because he knows that the English hate jewelry—he does not admire any of the wares there. Bakha's eyes linger on a picture of a barely dressed Englishwoman until the shopkeeper makes him leave. Though Bakha continues to announce his presence, people are too distracted by the various things for sale: wedding bangles and fancy pieces of cloth.

Once again, Bakha's admiration for the English runs so deep that it is literally rewiring his brain, forcing him to disdain things he might have once found beautiful (like elaborate Indian jewelry). It is also worth noting that this admiration extends to his sexual preferences and desires, as Bakha seems to be especially attracted to Englishwomen.

Finally, Bakha arrives at the temple. As always, he finds himself amazed by the intricate carvings of the gods with so many heads and arms. Bakha wonders what the various engravings on the temple's outer walls mean; he has been taught to revere these figures, but he has never learned their significance, and because he cannot read, he cannot experience the Hindu scriptures for himself. A crowd of worshippers streams into the temple, and Bakha is careful to keep his distance.

Though Bakha and Sohini are expected to sweep and maintain the temple, they are not allowed to go inside it—another example of high-caste hypocrisy.

Bakha begins to hear prayers to Rama and Kali and Krishna and Hanuman. Suddenly, consumed by curiosity, he decides to sneak into the temple so he can understand what is going on. In a rush, he climbs the steps, hiding out in a corner near the entrance. Now Bakha can see the service: he takes in the half-naked priest at the front of the room, and then the chorus of worshippers, raising their voices to sing "*Sri Ram Chandar ki Jai* (Long live the Great God Ram)."

Even as the novel critiques the caste system, which claims to be rooted in Hindu scripture, Bakha's eagerness to rush into the temple reflects the compelling force of the Hindu religion. Rama (or Ram), considered the ideal man in Hindu doctrine, is the figure that Bakha finds most compelling (both here and elsewhere in the story, where Bakha tries to draw a comparison between Rama and Christ).

Suddenly, Bakha is disturbed to hear the Pundit Kali Nath cry out "polluted, polluted, polluted." Bakha does not know what the cause of the cry is, though in his anxiety, he accidentally shows himself ("I have been seen," he thinks, "undone"). Worse still, Bakha now realizes that the "polluting" figure in question is Sohini. He runs out of the temple, while the worshippers fret that they have been polluted by the sweeper. But the Pundit is even more panicked, asserting, "I have been defiled by contact."

This crucial passage illuminates two ideas. First, the Pundit—who readers know is concerned mostly with his own dietary habits and bowel movements—cruelly affirms the logic that high-caste Hindus are clean while outcastes are "polluting" and "defiling" in their very personhood. And second, Bakha's pained words—"I have been seen, undone"—demonstrate how profoundly he has internalized the shame society ties to him, feeling that even to be noticed is to be destroyed.

The crowd continues to wail, noting that "a temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty-nine yards"; Bakha has been inside the doors. No one else notices Sohini, who quietly reunites with her older brother. Through tears, Sohini explains that the Pundit tried to touch her inappropriately. It was only when she refused his advances that the Pundit cried "polluted."

Earlier, the Pundit's own bodily focus led him to lust after Sohini. Now, in this clear abuse of power, the Pundit has tried to defile her—but because caste protects him, he can turn the situation on its head, falsely claiming that it is he who has been "defiled."

Bakha is livid, threatening to kill the hypocritical Brahmin. Bakha wants to know exactly what the priest did to Sohini, and she explains that he teased her and tried to touch her breasts. Before Bakha can do anything rash, Sohini calls him away from the temple. Bakha takes one last look at the imposing carvings, feeling a sense of real fear at the sight of these larger-than-life gods.

The carvings of the gods might symbolize the way Bakha looks at higher-caste figures—they are fearsome and inexplicable, governing his life even as he does not understand their motivations.

As Bakha and Sohini walk away, Bakha reflects on his sister's beauty; he envies any man who might one day become her husband. Bakha tries to remind himself that Sohini is his sister, but he knows that his attraction remains. To distract himself, he turns his thoughts back to the Pundit. For the first time, he feels desperate to retaliate. This intense emotion makes him recall his long-ago peasant ancestors, still lower class but much freer than Bakha's family is now.

Again, Bakha's incestuous feelings for his sister return, an uneasy thread of the plot that scholarly criticism rarely mentions. Bakha's reflections on his ancestors here show just how much caste prejudice is inherited: just as Lakha tries to pass his own feelings of inferiority to his children, when Bakha examines things from a distance, he can see how the caste system has hardened and grown more harmful over many generations.

On the one hand, Bakha feels like "a tiger at bay"; on the other hand, he knows that any revolt would be fruitless. Not knowing what else to do, Bakha puts his arm around Sohini and encourages her to go home. She assents, and Bakha continues along his journey, sweeping the street as he goes.

Bakha could never hope to rise up against the stone carvings on the temple walls, and similarly, the systems of high-caste power are so entrenched that he knows he cannot effectively challenge them. Bakha's kindness to Sohini here marks a moment of coming-of-age, as he takes responsibility for his sister despite the fact that he himself is hurting.

Though his hunger is dampened by his frustration, Bakha decides to go ask for food on a quiet side street. As he walks, Bakha finds himself overcome with anger at the various dogs and cows, with their dirt and their excrement. At first, the sound of some blacksmiths hammering copper provides a welcoming distraction, but gradually, the sound makes Bakha feel even more overwhelmed. Eventually, Bakha finds a house, and he calls up asking for "bread for the sweeper."

Even though Bakha's anger should be directed at the Pundit and other people in similar high-caste positions, he has internalized the biases of his society so much that he is almost scared to feel his true anger. It is important to note that just as outcastes have to beg for water, they also have to depend on high-caste charity for food, both basic natural resources that the upper castes hoard in this hierarchy.

Bakha continues going house to house asking for bread, but no one seems to hear him. Finally, hungry and exhausted, Bakha sinks onto some steps and falls into a kind of half-sleep. He has a series of strange dreams: he imagines traveling through a city, and then standing on a railway platform as freight trains filled with timber pass him. The dream gets darker, and he starts to imagine that he can hear someone getting murdered.

Bakha's dream is intentionally ambiguous, but the contrast between modern freight trains and felled timber suggests that Bakha is, even subconsciously, sensing that rapid modernization is on the horizon. Though technology will provide a source of hope to Bakha and other sweepers, there is also something violent and frightening (at least in the dream) about this impending loss of natural life.

Now, Bakha's dream takes him through a small village, where carts get stuck in the mud and cows wander everywhere. A little girl stands outside a sweet shop, and a silversmith places a burning ember in her hand. Bakha then pictures himself in a variety of places he has never been before: in a school room, at a beautiful palace, and at a burning-ground for human bodies. At that moment, Bakha is woken up by a cry: there is a holy man near him asking for bread. Though Bakha knows that the holy man will be served first, he hopes this holy man will get enough attention that he, too, will soon get some food.

Bakha's aspirations are so strong that they find their way into his dreams; in sleep, as in his waking life, he imagines the education and fine things society denies him as an outcaste. These dreams signal Bakha's childlike sense of excitement and optimism, but they also (on a symbolic level) point to the pain inherent in such hopefulness: just as the ember burns in the little girl's hand, Bakha's ability to dream also makes him vulnerable to disappointment.

One of the local women goes to give the holy man some bread, but she is stopped short in her tracks when she notices that Bakha is on her steps. The local woman starts screaming at Bakha, telling him he has defiled her home. She then gives the holy man a great deal of food—rice and vegetables and curry—and begs him to help her tend her sick child. The holy man promises to come back with some healing herbs. Before Bakha can scurry away, the local woman tells him that she hopes he will die.

Again, the higher-caste hypocrisy is clear—in the name of avoiding the "pollution" she associates with Bakha, the local woman pollutes herself morally, wishing death on Bakha merely for taking a nap.

At that moment, the local woman's son insists that he needs to go to the bathroom. The woman instructs him to go on the street as they will not have time to clean the indoor privy that day—and "the sweeper will clear it away." As the little boy relieves himself, the local woman throws bread for Bakha onto the ground. Bakha cannot bring himself to the clean the drain, so he walks away, prompting the local woman to reflect that the outcastes are "getting more and more uppish."

Though much of the abuse Bakha has to suffer is verbal, it is clear in this moment that higher-caste people view his job—cleaning up others' excrement—as punishment. In the eyes of the local woman, therefore, Bakha's sweeper status makes him party to a vicious circular logic: Bakha defiles her house because he deals with waste, but he must then clean up waste because he has defiled her house.

Bakha cannot stop feeling rage at the events of this morning, now made worse by the local woman's insults. Though his stomach grumbles, Bakha is anxious about what Lakha will say if he only returns home with two small chapatis (breads). And Bakha worries that if his father is angry about the bread, he will push to know what happened between Sohini and the priest, which he knows Sohini would rather keep private. Bakha resents that his father "always takes sides with the others. Never with his own family."

With each new humiliation and unfair outburst, Bakha is more able to direct his anger toward the high-caste people who perpetuate this cruel hierarchy. But the same is not true for Lakha, who is so deeply entrenched in caste logic that he always sides with "the others" (high-caste Hindus and higher-ranking outcastes) over his own children.

When Bakha returns to his street, he sees that many of the outcastes are outside; since none of them have lights in their homes, they try to take in the **sun** while they can. Bakha heads indoors, noting how messy the kitchen has been ever since his mother died. But Sohini has too much to do outside of the house to worry about housework, and water is so scarce anyway. Sadly, Bakha feels that the concepts of sanitation and cleanliness have lost meaning to his family.

The contrast between the rejuvenating natural world and the dispiriting world of society is especially distinct here. Bakha and the other outcastes find hope and happiness in the sun, but anywhere inside—even within the comfort of their own homes—the stigma and quotidian challenges of being an outcaste have destroyed all sense of warmth or comfort.

Though Lakha looks peaceful, perhaps because he has had a restful day at home, he still chastises Bakha about the lack of food. Lakha hopes that Rakha will return home with better treats; as he waits, he lets his mind wander to the sweets and pickles and fried breads he used to have at wedding celebrations. Lakha loved wedding food so much that he would encourage weddings anytime he could. And as the head sweeper, Lakha was in charge of the distribution of snacks, meaning his wife's cabinets were never empty.

Much like Bakha seeks solace in donuts and games of hockey, Lakha seems to use delicious treats and fun activities to distract from their unbearable circumstances. But while Lakha lets these distractions overwhelm his desire for justice and change, Bakha balances momentary relief with a clearer sense of bigger picture unfairness.

When Bakha protests that he doesn't know the townspeople well enough to beg from them, Lakha points out that Bakha will have to work for these people for the rest of his life. Bakha is terrified by this idea. Instead, he dreams of working in the barracks—the glimpse of the Tommies' world has filled him both with a sense of childlike wonder and a hatred for his own cramped quarters. **English dress**, to Bakha, represents a "new world" of his own making, allowing him to be a "pioneer in his own way."

There are two critical things to take away from Bakha's obsession with the Tommies here. First, his childlike sense of joy at the Tommies' customs also leads Bakha to have a more mature, critical view of his daily reality. And second, the mention of "pioneering" in this "new world" links Bakha's love of the British more directly to their colonial power. When Bakha is made to feel weak, is it any wonder that colonial dress and rhetoric is a comforting mental escape?

Lakha can tell that something is upsetting his son. Against his better judgment, Bakha tells his father about the touched man. But rather than offering sympathy, Lakha scolds his son, asking if he announced his approach. "Why weren't you more careful?" he asks. Bakha insists that the Untouchables get abused whether they shout warnings or not, but Lakha disagrees, insisting that the higher-caste Hindus "are our masters." Moreover, Lakha knows that the police would offer no protection if Bakha were ever to spar with higher-caste folks.

Just as Bakha predicted, Lakha sides with the high-caste people over his own family, chiding Bakha for failing to isolate himself sufficiently. Interestingly, however, Lakha's kneejerk instinct to blame Bakha is not just because he has internalized others' prejudice. Instead, Lakha knows that outcastes are not protected legally—and that a failure to defer to upper-caste people could put his children in real danger. Even as Lakha seems cruel and unsympathetic, then, the novel also demonstrates his profound, protective paternal instinct.

To calm his son, Lakha tells a story from his own youth. When Bakha was a baby, he had fallen deathly ill. Lakha was desperate to get medicine, but he was forbidden from going into the shop, and none of the higher-caste Hindus who went in would help him. After an hour of waiting, Lakha ran back home empty-handed, fearing that his baby Bakha was dying.

Lakha's humiliation as he waits for this medicine echoes Bakha's experiences from the morning, the first time the father and son have ever run parallel to each other instead of seeming at odds.

When Lakha saw just how dire Bakha's condition was, he rushed back to the shop and went straight inside, not caring that it violated all the rules. The higher-caste Hindus shouted at Lakha to leave because he was polluting everything, and the Hakim Sahib (doctor) initially refused to help Lakha. But Lakha pleaded with him, vowing that if the Hakim Sahib was compassionate enough now to help with Bakha, he could exact any punishment he wanted later. At that moment, Bakha's uncle rushed in, announcing that the baby was dying.

Strikingly, Lakha's story shows that as a younger man, he, too, shared some of Bakha's willingness to disregard the rules (though in Lakha's case, it was only when his son's mortality was on the line). The Hakim Sahib's reaction, caring more about his shop being contaminated than about Lakha's dying baby, once more suggests that the real "pollution" lies in the souls of the higher castes.

Lakha returned home, hopeless—but a few minutes later, the Hakim Sahib showed up at the family's door with medicine in tow, and Bakha was saved. Though Bakha points out that he might have died, Lakha uses this story as evidence that many of the higher-caste Hindus are kind. Bakha notices that his father "had never throughout this narrative renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of the laws of fate."

In this exchange, one of the most important in the entire narrative, Bakha and his father split in their fundamental conclusions about caste. While Lakha uses this story to claim renewed faith in and patience with the caste system, accepting it as "fate," Bakha sees this anecdote as proof of high-caste brutality—after all, the Hakim Sahib was temporarily willing to let a newborn die to preserve his own sense of cleanliness. This split will reverberate and grow through the rest of the story.

Having finished his story, Lakha demands food. Bakha feels a sense of resentment that his father puts his own needs first, especially since Lakha has done nothing all day. Fortunately, before Lakha can eat all of the chapatis Bakha has collected, Rakha comes home. Bakha studies his little brother, with his strange face shape and his "not-there" eyes. The only sign of Rakha's intelligence, Bakha decides, lies in his impish ears. Unlike Bakha, Rakha is "a true child of the outcaste colony"; he embraces the dark and the bugs and the trash heaps.

Given how difficult life in the outcaste colony is, each individual needs to find their own way to survive. In Rakha's case, that is by listening but not looking, tuning out of all the sensory input (the insects and sewage and slime) that makes each day so hard to bear.

Rakha drops the food on the ground and immediately begins eating, horrifying Bakha with his refusal to even wash his hands. Bakha tastes a damp morsel, but then he pictures the Tommies washing their hands over the food that his family now devours. Suddenly too disgusted to continue eating, Bakha stands. To explain his sudden change of heart to Lakha, Bakha declares that he is going to Ram Charan's sister's wedding.

This is the kind of food Bakha eats every day, as the outcastes do not have consistent access to any nutrition besides what higher-caste Hindus throw their way. So Bakha's rejection of the food in this moment signals just how much his mindset has changed—between the touched man, the local woman, and the story about the Hakim Sahib, Bakha is looking with new outrage at the routines he has done every day of his life.

PAGES 73–105

Of course, Bakha has not been invited to this wedding; Gulabo would not want him at her daughter's ceremony. But Bakha needs to get away from home—and more than that, he wants to catch a last glimpse of Ram Charan's sister, with her shaved head and her wistful gaze. When they were little, Bakha used to play with this girl, pretending to be husband and wife. Though Bakha has known of this impending marriage for a year, he is surprised at the sudden strength of his desire for the bride-to-be and at his sense of loss now that she will be wed.

Romance, whether sweet or illicit, is forced to the corners of Bakha's life, perhaps because the daily struggle of life as an outcaste does not leave him time for the kind of internal reflection and attention that attraction calls for. Again, Gulabo takes every opportunity she can to assert her own meager degree of superiority over other, lower-ranking outcastes.

Then another memory comes into Bakha's brain: one day, several years ago, he saw Ram Charan's sister relieving herself. For the first time, he was seized by an almost animal desire to hold her naked body. The vision frightened him—how could he be a good, respectable boy and want these things? To distract himself from this memory and the shame it carries, Bakha turns off onto a side road, where some of the washermen are working.

The Pundit Kali Nath and Lachman, another Brahmin, felt no compunction about their strong physical desires for young women. The fact that Bakha does suggests that, even though he spends his days working in close proximity with human bodies and their waste, he still strives to be spiritual and thoughtful in a way members of the priest caste often fail to do.

As a child, Bakha longed to be a washerman, until Ram Charan pointed out that Bakha would never be able to rise in station in such a way. Bakha decides to head back to the wedding, but he feels self-conscious about the idea that he will arrive uninvited. Fortunately, when Bakha arrives at the wedding, he sees that Chota has had a similar thought and is standing on the outskirts of the celebration. Gradually, as Bakha and Chota take in the fancy dress and upbeat music of the celebration, they shed their shared anxiety.

As young children, the distinctions of caste were almost nonexistent between Bakha and his two best friends. But as they got older, Ram Charan started to inherit his mother's own sense of hierarchy—and now, sidelined on the edge of this wedding, the subtle gradations between the young men feel more tangible than ever.

Chota calls to Ram Charan, who is wearing a ridiculous combination of **English clothing**: a large topee (sunhat) and shorts. At first, Ram Charan is too lost in some sugarplum desserts to notice, but eventually, he walks toward his friends. Though Gulabo shouts at him for associating with people beneath him, Ram Charan is able to sneak away, promising that he has brought sugarplums along.

Though Westerners would consider the English clothes Ram Charan is wearing informal (and though the clothes look ridiculous to Bakha), the mere fact of their Britishness makes Ram Charan see them as fancier than any nice Indian clothes. Again, the presence of sweets (in this case, sugarplums) helps the boys distract from their unpleasant daily routines.

The boys now leave the village, climbing the grassy slopes of the nearby Bulashah Hills. Bakha lets his friends walk ahead so he can take in the nature all by himself. Bakha feels happy to be away from people, and he recalls with pleasure the battle games he and his friends used to play here when they were young. Then, before he can get sad about his current lack of such leisure time, Bakha switches back to thinking about the landscape.

Bakha's sense of ease and peace in nature reflect the earlier glimpses of calm he felt whenever he stood in the sun. Interestingly, two of the novel's core themes come together here: Bakha associates this freer, natural state with a childlike sense of innocence and naivete, before the rules and expectations of caste were burned in his brain.

Bakha is cheered by the beautiful flowers around him, but he has never been given the time or freedom to truly appreciate nature. Yet, though Bakha lacks so many experiences by virtue of his restrictive lifestyle, he has a powerful "sense of the world […] such as the peasant has who can do the job while the laboratory agriculturalist is scratching his head." A strange intuition takes hold, and Bakha finds himself filled with energy. He rushes towards a pool of water and lies down next to it, falling asleep.

Later in the novel, Mohandas Gandhi himself will testify to the virtues of physical labor and tangible knowledge. And indeed, the narrative has shown over and over again that those with power and privilege—like the "laboratory agriculturalist"—are confused and out of touch with the world they aim to govern and interpret. By this logic, only lower-caste folks like Bakha, who deal with everyday life as it happens on the streets, can truly "do the job."

Chota wakes Bakha up by tickling his face with a straw, but rather than receiving this joke with his usual good humor, Bakha still feels upset from the events of the morning. The boys try to shake it off, teasing each other for trying to be "gentreman" as per usual. But when Ram Charan tries to give Bakha a sugarplum, the sweeper will not accept it unless Ram Charan throws it to him—the first time Bakha has ever treated their friendship as if it abides by the subtle gradations of caste.

This upsetting interaction shows that, despite his growing awareness of the injustice of caste, Bakha is still not able to separate others' cruelty from his own feelings of shame and self-loathing. And though moments ago Bakha relaxed into childlike pleasure at the nature around him, now, he himself is the one who brings the strictures of societal hierarchy to this peaceful place.

Chota and Ram Charan want to know why Bakha is so down. Bakha explains what happened with the touched man and the Pundit and the local woman. Chota swears to help Bakha get revenge on the Pundit, while Ram Charan just feels embarrassed by the whole thing. But Bakha finds that sharing the story with his friends unburdens him. He takes in the mushrooms and mango groves that dot the landscape, feeling that, for a moment, his outcaste neighborhood "has been effaced clean off the map of his being." The boys agree to play hockey later that afternoon, and Bakha resolves to get the promised hockey stick from Charat Singh.

Bakha's ability to ignore painful stimuli—to erase his most hurtful memories "clean off the map of his being"—is another survival strategy, just like his ability to focus on pretty nature and pleasant sensory details helps distract from his work with waste.

When Bakha arrives to the barracks, looking for Charat Singh, he is surprised to find them empty. The only thing he sees is a solar topee (sunhat); many rumors circulate about this hat, including that it is has been left here as a symbol of sahib power. And though some believe the solar topee is haunted, everyone from little children to the sepoys who guard the hat secretly covet it. After all, "the spirit of modernity had worked havoc" on nearly everyone in Bulashah, and nothing signifies "modernity" like **European clothes.**

Now, the symbolic English clothing takes on almost magical significance, as Bakha feels himself drawn by the power of this sunhat. Furthermore, while Bakha may not be able to articulate the connection between modernity and the end of his own plight, the novel will later make this link clear: as India modernizes, getting new flush toilet technology, sweepers could suddenly become a thing of the past.

Bakha wonders if he could quietly steal the hat or befriend one of the officers guarding the barracks and ask for it outright. For a moment, Bakha lets himself fantasize about wearing the hat, which he has wanted since he was a little kid. But then he stops himself short, feeling strange about his obsession with **English clothing**. Bakha heads to the Havildar's quarters, trying to shake off his feelings of embarrassment. As always, he is "ashamed of feeling seen."

As always, Bakha's desire to escape to this fantasy of sahib life stems from his own self-consciousness. This is not the first or the last time that, because he is so often treated as a pariah, Bakha wishes to be invisible instead.

Worrying that Charat Singh has forgotten his promise, Bakha lays down under a tree to wait. Charat Singh is one of Bakha's childhood idols; it is rumored that he has as many scars on his body from playing hockey as the great Rajput (warrior) men of olden days had from their battles. Charat Singh even has gold teeth because his natural teeth were knocked out in a game.

The rumors about Charat Singh, comparing him to the warriors of old, show that caste hierarchies and myths can persist, in new forms, even as India modernizes.

At last, Charat Singh emerges, chiding Bakha for working too hard (though just that morning, he yelled at Bakha to work harder). Charat Singh asks Bakha to get him two pieces of coal for his hookah, a task most high-caste Hindus would not entrust to a sweeper because it would be seen as "polluting" the coal. This trust makes Bakha feel overjoyed, as if he would "do anything" for Charat Singh. When he goes to get the coal from the cook, the cook is surprised that anyone so dark-skinned should be given such a task.

Any tasks that involve water or cooking of any kind are considered especially subject to pollution, so Singh's request to Bakha to deal with his pipe preparation represents an unusual break with routine—though again, Bakha seizes on Singh's kindness not to question caste divisions but to mentally affirm them. In addition to caste and racial hierarchies, this passage also makes clear that colorism is a large part of the way Bakha's society is structured.

Bakha returns with the coal, and Charat Singh casually uses it to smoke. Better still, when Charat Singh's servant brings him tea, he offers some to Bakha, instructing the sweeper to drink from the same pan that the sparrows use. Bakha drinks his tea quickly, and when the two men have finished, Charat Singh rises to give Bakha a hockey stick. When Bakha realizes that the hockey stick is brand new, he feels overcome: "he was grateful, grateful, haltingly grateful, falteringly grateful, stumblingly grateful." In fact, the stick feels so perfect that Bakha worries Charat Singh has gotten confused and made a mistake.

Because it is so rare for higher-caste people to show even basic decency to outcastes, Bakha finds Charat Singh's generosity almost impossible to bear; it "halts" Bakha in his tracks, making him "falter" and "stumble." In other words, because the demoralizing routines of caste are so deeply ingrained in Bakha's mind, the absence of expected cruelty feels incomprehensible.

Bakha heads back home with his stick, feeling almost perfect happiness. With each step, he sticks his chin out and struts—until he catches sight of himself and grows suddenly self-conscious. Feeling embarrassed by his earlier confidence, Bakha wishes that Chota would come, though he knows that Ram Charan might only make things worse, making comments that would disparage his new hockey stick. He also wishes the two babu's sons would make good on their promise to teach him to read.

Again, Bakha does not want to be seen, likely because the gap between his internal life (where he relaxes into fantasies and feels some measure of pride) is so far from how he is perceived. Bakha's differentiation between Chota and Ram Charan perhaps reflects how much Gulabo has instilled her own prejudices in her son.

A little while later, Bakha runs into the younger brother from earlier in the day. Bakha likes these brothers: despite their high caste and their father's prominent position, they are always kind to Bakha. Now, Bakha shows his stick to the younger brother and is disappointed to learn that Charat Singh gave almost an identical hockey stick to this young boy just a few hours ago. The younger brother begs to play hockey, but Bakha holds him off, insisting he is too young.

In one of the novel's subtlest moments of tragedy, the very hockey stick that seemed so unfathomably exciting to Bakha is an everyday occurrence for the babu's younger son. In addition to facing daily indignities and challenges, then, Bakha must also now consider all the simple, quotidian pleasures he misses out on as an outcaste.

Ram Charan and Chota arrive, alongside the elder brother, and the game begins. Bakha feels bad for the younger brother, and he does his best to comfort him, telling him to "keep a watch" over his jacket so the little boy will feel like he has something to do. But Bakha is about to score a goal, and he cannot concern himself with the younger brother's feelings for too long.

Bakha's warring instincts, as he flips back and forth between comforting the little brother and getting lost in the game, epitomize the moment of transition 18-year-old Bakha is in: he is not yet able to give up the impulsive joys of youth, but he is also learning to take on more responsibility with every passing moment.

Eventually, Bakha does score—and, defeated, the rival goalkeeper tackles him. Soon, that offense turns into an-all out brawl between the two teams of local boys. Chota suggests that his team (known as the "38th Dogras") should throw stones at their opponents, and the rest of the players soon follow suit. But unfortunately, a bad throw from Ram Charan hits the younger brother, who screams and falls unconscious.

In naming their team after a British-led military regiment, the boys once more try and attach themselves to the power of the colonizing force.

Having heard the fighting, the boys' mother rushes out, terrified that her son is dead. Immediately, she accuses Bakha of being a "dirty sweeper" and blames him for the incident, even when the elder brother explains what really happened. Bakha mourns the incredible injustice of these accusations, lamenting that his happiness from the encounter with Charat Singh can only last for such a short time. "Pollution, pollution," Bakha reflects, "I do nothing else but pollute people."

The younger brother's mother's anger is particularly ironic given that, just moments ago, Bakha was doing his best to care for and entertain the little boy. Thus, even though the entire narrative has demonstrated Bakha's vast and nuanced capabilities, Bakha can "do nothing else but pollute people"—because the people around him refuse to see anything but "pollution."

Bakha returns home, hiding his hockey stick in the bushes so that Lakha will not be angry with him. Immediately, Lakha begins to berate his son for having been gone so long, but Bakha cannot engage; he is too exhausted from the day to respond. Even Rakha joins in on the chants of "dog" and "pig," helping to mock Bakha for wanting to "be a sahib."

Bakha may try to copy English mannerisms and styles, but Lakha and Rakha have absorbed the language of their oppressors even more, repeating insults much like the ones Bakha has heard from the local woman or the touched man.

Eventually, Lakha's rant escalates, and he tells Bakha to leave the house and never come back. Bakha would normally be able to ignore such a statement and patch things up, but today, he has none of this restraint. His body feels powerful and controlled as he runs out of the house and heads to the river, where water crashes dramatically into high boulders. Being here makes Bakha think about the morning, when the rising **sun** made him feel full of the "spirit of adventure."

This familial rift suggests that caste, with its cruel hierarchies and confidence-destroying assumptions, has infiltrated even the most intimate human spaces. It follows, then, that Bakha can only seek solace in the untouched natural world, seeking to learn strength not from his father but from the powerful sun—in some ways, the only constant in Bakha's life that caste logic has not yet corrupted.

Bakha now reflects on another time his father threatened to kick him out of the house, the winter after his mother died. That time, Lakha would not let Bakha in for an entire night, even though Bakha had nowhere to sleep in the cold. Bakha struggles to reconcile this version of his father with the story Lakha told about trying to get his baby medicine. Still, Bakha wonders if his father's harsh punishments motivate him; after all, he became a much faster worker after that awful winter night. Bakha takes a moment to feel proud of his strong body and work ethic before grumbling that Rakha probably got him in trouble on purpose.

In this critical moment, Bakha sees that Lakha, whom the higher-caste Hindus have abused, has repeated that cycle of abuse in his own family, abusing his own sons. But just as Bakha comes to that realization, his own internalized bias cuts him short—and just as Lakha accepted the high-caste mistreatment as a valuable lesson, Bakha now attempts to justify his father's cruelty in similar terms.

PAGES 105–139

Bakha sits down, putting in his head in his hands and giving in to a sense of defeat. After a while, he is interrupted by Colonel Hutchinson, head of the local Salvation Army, who asks Bakha if he is alright. Hutchinson is well known in the area for dressing in (his idea of) Indian clothing; he spends most of his time talking to the Untouchables about Jesus Christ and trying to get them to convert. In Hutchinson's early years, he was handsome and well-groomed, but now, he is balding and his mustache is drooping. Everyone in town knows that his wife has grown to resent him.

When Bakha and his friends try to dress like the English, it suggests the ways they have internalized colonial hierarchies. By contrast, even though Colonel Hutchinson tries to dress in Indian garments, he still retains his belief in his own cultural superiority (as his attempts to convert others demonstrate). Thus, even the British people who present themselves as charitable or generous enforce the harmful ideologies of colonialism.

Hutchinson has tried to learn Hindustani (Hindi), and he carries Hindi translations of the Bible with him wherever he goes. But despite his best efforts, the Colonel never really succeeds at speaking this other tongue. For his part, Bakha is both confused by this strange man, always going on about someone named *Yessuh Messih*, but he also endows Hutchinson with some of the respect and glamour he associates with the other sahibs.

Tonally, there is a measure of comic relief in Hutchinson, who—in his own ridiculousness—shows just how unfounded this English worship really is. The phrase "Yessuh Messih" is likely Bakha mishearing the phrase "Jesus Messiah," which Hutchinson frequently uses whenever he refers to Christ.

The narrator reflects on the somewhat "hackneyed" efforts Hutchinson makes to connect with the villagers. The Colonel lectures Bakha about how he is different from the other sahibs because he sees himself as much less vulgar and haughty. But this does not mean much to Bakha—to him, all that matters is that Hutchinson is a sahib and that he is touching him, asking him kind questions. Bakha wonders if he really should seek guidance from this odd figure.

For most of the novel, the narrator has remained removed and impassive, leaving all opinions to his characters. But here, the narrator weighs in to openly criticize Hutchinson, seeing him as the embodiment of British condescension and hypocrisy. This intervention perhaps signals the narrator's frustration with paternalistic forms of European colonialism. Separately, Bakha's joy at being touched by a non-outcaste figure speaks to the depth and pain of his everyday isolation.

Hutchinson begins to sing songs about how Jesus died for humans' sins and about how religion is free of charge to everyone. Bakha finds himself moved by these songs, though he does not understand them. And when he asks clarifying questions, trying to understand Christ and *Yessuh Messih* in terms of Hindu gods like Rama, Hutchinson does not provide answers. Bakha starts to feel bored, reflecting that he only continues walking with Hutchinson "because the sahib [wears] trousers," and "trousers [are] the dream of his life."

Even though Hutchinson claims to want to convert the Bulashah locals, he does not show any interest in actually sharing a dialogue with Bakha. But while Bakha finds this Englishman to be exceedingly disappointing up close, he cannot let go of Hutchinson's English clothing, the symbol of power and social mobility that has become "the dream of his life."

Hutchinson continues, explaining that Christ sacrificed himself "to help us all; for the rich and the poor; for the Brahmin and the Bhangi" (Untouchables). Bakha is intensely moved by this idea of equality, though he still struggles with Hutchinson's insistence that everyone is born a sinner. Bakha wants to know more about Christ, but Hutchinson just keeps talking about the necessity of conversion and the sin of Hindu idolatry. Bakha gets bored again.

There is a great deal of narrative irony in the fact that this colonial figure, representative of his oppressive government, preaches equality even as he insults Hinduism. But at the same time, the idea that Brahmins and Untouchables could even be on the same plane is novel for Bakha, planting a seed that will grow once Gandhi arrives to town.

The two men have arrived at Hutchinson's home, a former opium distillery that he bought and converted five years ago. While Hutchinson starts singing another hymn, his wife yells out that their afternoon tea is ready. When Hutchinson does not come inside right away, his wife comes out to get him—and scolds him for "going to these blackies again!" Bakha cannot help but notice how unattractive this woman is, even under all her makeup. Bakha cannot understand what the Colonel's wife says, but he does hear the word *bhangi*, which makes him blame himself for her anger.

Most of the story has been focused on caste hierarchies, but the Colonel's wife's vitriol shows just how many intersecting prejudices Bakha must face: his status as outcaste is compounded by racism and colorism from the British and from lighter-skinned Indians. And like Gulabo, the Colonel's wife copes with her own disappointment in life by insulting those who are more vulnerable.

Bakha scurries away, lamenting again that "everyone thinks us at fault." As he walks, the weight of his sadness causes him to feel nauseous, and he obsessively replays the day's events. Bakha cannot stop seeing the angry glares of the touched man and the Colonel's wife, though the latter is the most terrifying to him of all, because he feels that "the anger of a white person mattered more." Feeling horrible that he might have displeased a white person, Bakha transfers his anger at the Colonel's wife back to the touched man from this morning.

Bakha's reflections that the Colonel's wife's anger "matter[s] more" than the other abuse he has faced is telling: while Bakha is increasingly able to recognize caste prejudices as misguided, his fascination with English clothing and customs makes it harder for him to parse his internalized racial prejudice. Still, it is important that Bakha chooses to be angry at the touched man rather than blaming himself—slowly but surely, Bakha is learning to shed his shame, replacing it with a burning sense of injustice.

Bakha arrives near the railway, where there are many beggars and lepers. But just as Bakha, feeling repulsed, is about to turn away, he hears shouting: "The Mahatma has come!" As if by magic, Bakha and the rest of the crowd immediately rush to the spot where the Mahatma is supposed to speak. In their chaos, no one cares about caste, and Bakha ends up brushing arms with people of "all the different races, colours, castes, and creeds." Once the crowd gathers, Bakha is amazed by the variety in dress and skin tone, by the Muslim and Hindu and Sikh and Christian men and women who have gathered here.

The Mahatma (meaning "the great-souled one") was a common name used to honor activist Mohandas K. Gandhi. In this telling passage, the excitement the villagers feel about Gandhi—and the Indian independence he so skillfully advocates for—allows a momentary blurring of the social hierarchies, as racism, caste prejudice, and religious prejudice vanish in favor of this unified rush to hear the speech. The tension Bakha notices here—between unity and division, between hierarchy and equality—would define many of Gandhi's political actions.

There is not enough room to see the Mahatma—Mohandas K. Gandhi—in the narrow road where everyone is standing. Instinctively, Bakha hops a fence to stand in a field, and the crowd follows him, trampling flowers as they go. As his feet crush the blooms, Bakha reflects that they need to step on everything old (including these flowers) to make room for Gandhi's new India.

The flowers seem to stand in for caste and tradition, emblematizing the old beliefs and routines that Gandhi is ushering out. In reality, though, Gandhi preached the importance of traditional values, arguing against many new forms of technology and emphasizing the importance of Hindu practice.

Bakha has heard all sorts of rumors about Gandhi's amazing power, and for a moment, all he can feel is an almost terrifying sense of devotion. But then Bakha remembers his khaki uniform, which delineates him from all the higher-caste people wearing white. Even as he joins in this moment of shared consciousness with the crowd, then, Bakha cannot transcend the "insuperable barrier" of caste.

Just as quickly as it formed, the social melting pot vanishes. It is vital to note that clothing is one way Bakha experiences caste divides, as his khaki clothes point to his status as an outcaste. No wonder, then, that Bakha turns to clothes—like the British pants and sunhats he loves—as key symbols of power and social advancement.

Now, Bakha overhears a nearby babu talking to a peasant. The babu is rehashing a newspaper article from that morning, explaining that all of Europe is being wracked by political and economic unrest. The babu insists that only Gandhi can teach Europe to strive for "sense-control," which the babu believes is the central principle of Hinduism. The peasant is amazed by this speech; to him, Gandhi is less a political figure than "a legend, a tradition, an oracle." All he wants for himself is to touch Gandhi's feet, to have some contact with this great man.

Again, even as the babu and the peasant seem to be unified in their respect for Gandhi, the two men are actually feeling very different emotions. The babu is thinking in terms of the newspapers he reads and the political theories he debates, whereas the peasant, probably not able to read, views Gandhi as something more natural, understanding him through the lens of the rumors and near-mythic stories he has heard.

The peasant continues to ask the babu questions, wondering how the canals and courts will be managed if the British are to leave India. The babu has answers for both these questions, but Bakha lets his mind wander to Gandhi's position on the Untouchables. He has heard that Gandhi is an important advocate for Untouchables' rights, but he does not understand how Gandhi's commitment to fasting could help the lower castes. Maybe, Bakha decides, Gandhi is just fasting because he thinks the Untouchables don't have access to food, and he wants to understand.

Historically, Gandhi was an important voice speaking out against the caste system—but his rhetoric and policy proposals also enforced some of the very caste prejudices he claimed to oppose. Bakha's comments here, as he wonders how Gandhi's hunger strikes are at all related to the lived experience of an outcaste, point to the ways in which Gandhi is at once impassioned and out of touch.

Just then, Bakha hears an official announce that Gandhi has been released from British prison for this speech on the condition that he only talks about "harijans," (rather than speak about his anti-colonial beliefs). This thrills Bakha, who knows Gandhi uses the word "harijan" to describe outcastes. Bakha links Gandhi's care for the outcastes to the equality Hutchinson was talking about; he fantasizes about sharing his story and seeing Gandhi publicly reprimand the touched man. But mostly, Bakha is amazed that Gandhi will talk "about us, about Chota, Ram Charan, my father, and me."

The term "harijan," which translates to "children of god," was Gandhi's attempt to destigmatize the language around outcastes—other anti-caste activists preferred to use the term dalit, *which is common today. It is telling that Bakha responds so strongly merely to the fact of being featured in Gandhi's speech—after so long trying to be invisible, the idea that someone important would talk "about us" is revolutionary to Bakha.*

Bakha sees Gandhi's motorcar drive up, and though he wants to rush it, he knows he cannot, despite the fact that Gandhi has abolished all caste distinctions for the day. So Bakha climbs a tree, taking in Gandhi's "saintly" face and "Mephistophelean," determined chin from a distance; he also notices that Gandhi is dark-skinned ("like me," Bakha thinks, "but, of course, he must be very educated").

The word "Mephistophelean," which stems from the demon Mephistopheles, is often used to describe someone cruel or diabolical. By describing Gandhi as both "saintly" and "Mephistophelean," therefore, the narrative implies that Gandhi is a contradictory figure, both unbelievably good and somehow calculating or nefarious. Bakha's reflection that Gandhi has darker skin helps him identify with this powerful figure, though his caveat ("but […] he must be very educated") reflects Bakha's own internalized colorism.

Bakha sees a British guard guiding Gandhi through the crowd, and for the first time in his life, Bakha does not feel impressed by a sahib's presence. As people join hands to show their respect for Gandhi, Bakha thinks that the sahib looks out of place, as if he represents an old, dying order. Then Gandhi raises his hand and begins to pray, silencing the crowd. The air feels electric to Bakha as Gandhi recites a hymn. Bakha's mind drifts again, and he wonders why he is struggling to pay attention when everyone else looks so rapt.

Over and over, Bakha and his friends have obsessed over British people and clothing, feeling that the foreign objects have almost mystical power. But now, the sense of spiritual force that Bakha once attributed to the English belongs to Gandhi and his hymn—and so for the first time, Bakha sees British garb not as empowering but as outdated, the relic of a soon-to-be-bygone era.

At last, Gandhi begins his speech. He discusses the "penance" he has recently suffered at the hands of the British government, and he critiques the English strategy of "divide and rule," which segments Indian voters by class. But then Gandhi changes his tune: "we are asking for freedom from the grip of a foreign nation," Gandhi points out, but "we have ourselves […] trampled underfoot millions of human beings."

The English strategy of "divide and rule" references the early years of the British Raj, when the English used the census to formalize and harden the caste system. By pointing out how caste and colonialism intersect—and by acknowledging how hypocritical it would be to protest one but preserve the other—Gandhi introduces a kind of intersectional thinking that Bakha has not yet dared to consider.

Gandhi begins to tell a story about his childhood friend Uka. Uka was a scavenger, and if Gandhi ever touched Uka, his mother would force him to perform ablutions afterwards. But from a young age, Gandhi insists, he saw the belief that any person could be "polluted" as sinful and wrong. Today, Gandhi concludes, his friendship with Uka has motivated him to fight for the Untouchables. Bakha is moved by Gandhi's genuine sympathy, especially when Gandhi announces that if he were reborn, he would like to be born as an outcaste.

Gandhi's story about Uka is revealing for several reasons. First, Gandhi's use of this tale for political purposes suggests that narrative is a form of activism—a belief certainly shared by Anand and many of his peers, all members of the leftist, South Asian Progressive Writers' Movement. But second, there is also something a little manipulative in the way Gandhi brings up Uka, identifying himself with the outcastes while also distancing himself from them. It is perhaps these sorts of tactics that make Gandhi somewhat "Mephistophelean" even as he is sometimes truly "saintly."

But Gandhi then shifts again, instructing outcastes to "purify their lives"; he implies that some outcastes are unclean, or that they refuse to read the Hindu scriptures, or that they give themselves over to drinking and gambling. Bakha does not like this part of the speech, as he feels that Gandhi is unfairly blaming the outcastes for circumstances out of their control. When Gandhi starts talking about how outcastes should no longer have to eat higher-caste people's leftovers, however, Bakha feels better. He wishes that Lakha could hear the speech and see how much the Mahatma sympathizes with their plight.

Gandhi's patronizing rhetoric here reflects the real historical figure, who was considered—especially by more radical anti-caste activists like rival B. R. Ambedkar—to be more focused on condescending to outcastes than on being their actual ally. Yet despite these flaws in Gandhi's speech, Bakha still wants his father to hear Gandhi's message. After all, Gandhi might be the only person powerful enough to cut through the morass of Lakha's internalized sense of inferiority.

Lastly, Gandhi declares that Hindus are misinterpreting their own scriptures. To correct this problem, he argues, India must open all of its schools and temples and hospitals to Untouchables. Gandhi concludes his speech, and the crowd scatters. Bakha marvels that the Mahatma could seem to know him so intimately, while other members of the crowd, inspired by Gandhi's words, rally to burn their **British clothing** or show newfound tenderness to each other.

At the beginning of the narrative, Bakha would have balked at the idea that any precious British clothing might be burned. But now, faced with the potential to gain access to the things right in front of him—like temples and schools and hospitals—Bakha no longer needs to escape to this fantasy of British life.

Even as most of the crowd rejoices, though, Bakha hears one man dissenting. The man complains that Gandhi's commitment to orthodox Hinduism is in conflict with his anti-caste sentiment. Having read Rousseau and Hobbes, the man (R. N. Bashir) thinks Gandhi needs to pay more attention to democratic philosophy. Bakha is going to sneak away, but before he can, the man summons him ("eh, black man") to fetch a bottle of soda water. Bakha takes in the man: he is Muslim and dressed in a beautiful **English suit**. Bakha cannot tell if the man is Indian or British.

Though not actually an historical figure, Bashir is still meant to symbolize a particularly contradictory strain of the Indian independence movement. On the one hand, Bashir preaches total democratic freedom and equality for India. On the other hand, he cites European authors, wears British clothes, and engages in casual colorism as he orders low-caste Bakha around.

Bashir shifts his attention to his friend, a handsome poet (Iqbal Nath Sarshar). The poet has a more nuanced take on Gandhi, arguing that he is a great liberating force but that his refusal to accept modern technology (like the sewing machine) will prove problematic. The man in the suit is pessimistic, believing that peasants will never adapt themselves to an industrialized society. But the poet is firm that "it is India's genius to accept all things."

As a character, Iqbal Nath Sarshar is likely intended to be a composite of many members of the Progressive Writers' Movement. Interestingly, while Bashir focuses on ideas, Sarshar is more interested in "all things" related to daily experience. In other words, unlike either Gandhi or Bashir, Sarshar believes in practical, tangible remedies to the harms of caste because he seems to understand that so much of the pain of outcaste life lies in the details of their daily encounters with natural waste.

Sarshar believes that the British, obsessed with commodity, have lost sight of what really matters—but Indians have always been realists, "believing in the stuff of this world, in the here and now, in the flesh and the blood." Therefore, Sarshar argues, Indians can see more clearly than their "enslavers."

Now, Sarshar links his focus on daily experience to his own broader anti-colonial philosophy. While the British fixate on money and intellectual debate, Sarshar believes that feelings, technologies and quotidian actions are the most important units of change.

Sarshar goes on, accusing Bashir of copying everything from the British, from his philosophical ideas to his **English clothes**. As Bashir gets more and more irritated, Sarshar continues, positing that everyone is basically equal and that the caste system is a result of Brahmin greed and manipulation. To prove his ideas, Sarshar points to the eloquence and poetry of Indian peasants' speech. And if all this is true, Sarshar concludes, there is nothing to do but abolish caste completely.

Strangely, Sarshar's words echo the rhetoric Colonel Hutchinson was using about total equality in the eyes of Christ. For Bakha, hearing these two suggestions on the same day introduces him to ideas he had never before considered. And rather than imagining himself into the British clothes Sarshar now mocks, Bakha is at last starting to imagine a world without caste or colonialism, a political dream—and call to action—instead of a sartorial one.

Bashir cannot imagine how such a radical shift could ever be possible. But Sarshar points to the newly-invented mechanical "flush system"—soon, excrement will be cleared away "without anyone having to handle it." Sarshar thinks this new invention will lead to "organic" change, even if Bashir disagrees with him. With that, the two men walk away, leaving Bakha—who has stood at some distance to listen—to ponder these words. Bakha wishes the "gentreman" had not pulled the poet away so soon.

Many times throughout the story, Bakha has encountered situations that remind him how much of his life is determined by the single fact that he has to work closely with human waste. And more than any philosophy, the thing that will impact his life is distancing himself from the foul smells and substances that high-caste Hindus force him to deal with (and then hold against him). By having Sarshar voice this logic outright, Anand is echoing the language of Ambedkar, who believed that industrialization was the single fastest cure to caste brutality.

The sun begins to set, and Bakha feels the intense colors of the sunset echoed in his own confusion. He does not know where he should go now, though he takes courage from the Mahatma's speech. Finally, knowing that Gandhi respects scavengers, Bakha resolves to go on cleaning the latrines. He only hopes that one day soon, this flush machine will relieve him of this labor. Bakha wonders if he will ever get to wear sahib **clothes**. But then the image of the British guard at Gandhi's speech pops into his head, and suddenly, Bakha doesn't know if he even wants to dress like a sahib anymore.

Only a single day has passed—the story began as the sun rose and now ends with it setting, a natural parallel to Bakha's own journey. But even though minimal time has elapsed, so much of Bakha's worldview is radically different. Instead of freezing under an English blanket, Bakha questions if he even admires British clothing anymore. Rather than dreading an eternity of latrine-cleaning, Bakha allows himself to hope for a world of mechanized toilets. The next time the sun rises, the novel seems to imply, Bakha's hopes and goals will be different, more focused, more practical—a miniature coming-of-age journey.

Night falls quickly, and Bakha resolves to return to Lakha and his siblings. "I shall go and tell my father all that Gandhi said about us," Bakha vows, filled with conviction; "perhaps I can find the poet someday and ask him about his machine." And with that, Bakha heads home.

Once again, the novel emphasizes the flush toilet—and technology—as more integral to the anti-caste movement than any rhetoric could be. Bakha's decision to return home suggests that, rather than letting caste hierarchies deform even his most intimate relationships, Bakha will redirect his focus: for the first time, he and Lakha could be an "us," finding solidarity and hope in the coming political movements.

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