

B. A. Third

Untouchable Essay Questions

1- What purpose does Sohini's assault serve in Untouchable? Why did Anand think it important to include her assault in the novel?

Sohini's assault, an event that draws on the themes of "class struggle," "the untouchable's burden," and "cyclical oppression," serves two major purposes. First, it shows how vulnerable untouchables, particularly female untouchables, are in India. The restrictions placed upon and the prejudices against them make them easy victims of crime and violence. As we see time and time again in the novel no one believes the word of an untouchable. Unfairly characterized as liars and thieves, they hold no sway in society or in the courts. Because of this, it is futile for Sohini to lodge a public complaint against her assaulter. No one would believe her over a priest. It is also futile for her brother to seek revenge for her. Avenging Sohini would most likely mean Bakha's imprisonment and/or death. Pundit Kali Nath and other caste men are aware of this, and take advantage of the unjust system.

The second reason Anand included Sohini's assault in the novel is because it grounds the novel in reality. The reality is that during the time Anand wrote *Untouchable* and in present-day India, untouchables are victims of numerous violent crimes, including rape. In historical, realistic novels it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the connections between the fictional stories the author crafts and the real events that inspire those stories. Sohini's assault is an attempt to prevent a myopic interpretation of *Untouchable* and the stories contained in its pages.

2- Whiteness, in the form of the British and other Europeans, has an elevated status in Untouchable's India. Why is whiteness so highly regarded? What are some examples of white supremacy in the novel?

By colonizing India, Great Britain established itself as the top dog on the Indian Subcontinent. When tides of British immigrated to India for various pursuits, including missionary work, they brought with them British and European culture, goods, machines, and ideals. These ideals hoisted up the British way of life as correct and modern while the Indian way was put down as wrong and backward. In this way, England's colonization of India was not purely economical and political—it was a type of cultural imperialism as well. And while Lakha's generation are resentful of the British, most likely because they can remember a time before colonization, Bakha's generation idolize them.

Examples of white supremacy in the novel occur at two levels—the systematic and the personal. The two levels are linked and impact one another, but the former is primarily about governments and courts, while the latter is about the individual. An example of systematic white supremacy is the story of the solar topee's fabled owner. In the story the Tommie kills a sepoy, another human being, but "since he was a white man [he] could never be put behind the bars" of barracks holding cell (Anand 194). Because he was essentially free while he waited for his day in court, the man was able to flee and escaped his punishment. This is one example of the different laws governing white people on the Indian Subcontinent.

An example of white supremacy at the individual level is Bakha's reaction to the anger of Mary Hutchinson, the wife of the Salvation Army chief. For him, the few words of anger "she had uttered carried a dread a hundred times more terrible than the fear inspired by the whole tirade of abuse by the touched man" (Anand 260). Even though his altercation with the touched man tore at Bakha's pride and soul, "the anger of a white person mattered more." Bakha says it himself:

The mem-sahib (Mary) was more important to his slavish mind than the man who was touched, he being one of his many brown countrymen. To displease the mem-sahib was to him a crime for which no punishment was bad enough.

For Bakha, the regard of the white woman is more important than that of his fellow brown Indians. This is a prime example of white supremacy.

3- In *Untouchable* Bakha is constantly daydreaming and falling into trance-like states. What role do his dreams and trances play in the novel?

Bakha's dreams and trances are the principal way he escapes mentally from the realities of his life. The dreams he has when he takes a nap while begging for food are particularly escapist. He sees himself in a classroom, achieving his dream of learning how to read. He also witnesses himself leaving Bulashah via a freight station wearing a solar topee (Anand 133). Both of these scenarios are ones he hopes for but are at present beyond his reach. And so they occur only in his dreams.

4- Though a serious and at times tragic work, *Untouchable* is also known for its comedy. Analyze several instances Anand uses comedy in the novel.

Comedy in *Untouchable* comes from two major sources—the violent language used by some of the novel's characters and the hockey player Charat Singh. Many of the insults directed at Bakha, his family, and his friends are transliterated Punjabi and Hindu idioms. All of them are deeply offensive, but some of them, such as “cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion,” are hilarious in their creativity. The seriousness and anger with which the users of the insults hurl them at their victims add to the hilarity. Sohini's brush with Gulabo at the well comes to mind. Even Bakha's sister laughs at the woman's passionate, heartfelt cussing.

Charat Singh and his “chronic piles” are another source of mirth in the book. Infamous in the colony for his frequent cases of diarrhea, Singh is an example of the bathroom humor typical to *Untouchable*. Later on in the novel his recommendation that Bakha should “blow off” his work is as funny as it is paradoxical considering he shouted at Bakha earlier in the day for neglecting his sweeping duties. Part of Charat Singh's comedic flair is his unpredictability. One moment he yells at Bakha, the next he makes jokes and gives him gifts. You never know what to expect.

5- The inclusion of Mahatma Gandhi helps place *Untouchable* in a particular temporal and physical setting. His speech, though largely incomprehensible to Bakha, contains a plethora of political and social commentary on India. Analyze Gandhi's speech. What are the points he is trying to articulate?

Gandhi has three main points in his speech. He first addresses the hypocrisy of Indian society as a whole. He points out that while India is fighting for independence from Britain, India herself has stripped the freedoms of “millions of human beings without feeling the slightest remorse for [its] inequity” (Anand 283). By millions of human beings he of course means the untouchables. Gandhi's second point is his condemnation of untouchability. He believes it to be Hinduism's greatest blot and behooves his audience to no longer acknowledge it. This point is the easiest to understand given the content and overall message of *Untouchable*. The last point of the Mahatma is that untouchables are not only blameless victims. In his opinion, they too must change their habits in order to be accepted.

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