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### Holiday Assignment

**Class : IX**

**Subject : English**

**I. Read the story, “The Road” given below written by Mulk Raj Anand. After reading the story write a review in about 120 – 150 words.**

#### **The Road**

The theme of *Untouchable* (1936) recurred twenty five years later in *The Road*. Though the setting and characters are changed, the theme of exploitation of the low caste by the high caste is the same. Bulandsheher of Uttar Pradesh is replaced by Govardhan of Haryana. Bhakha is replaced by Bhikhu. Pandit Kalinath is replaced by Pandit Suraj Mani. Mala and Rukmani replaced by Sohini of *Untouchable*. When Saros Cowasjee asked him why he wrote this novel since he had covered much the same ground in *Untouchable*, Anand replied; “Well it was a kind of shock to me when I went to live in Haryana, twenty miles from Delhi, in the human empire of Jawaharlal Nehru, to find that the outcastes not only in South India, but in the mixed north were still consigned to the limbs of oblivion. There was something tragic coming to me in the fact that the caste Hindus would not touch the stones carried by the untouchables to make the road, because the stones had been touched by the untouchables. I mentioned this to the great Nehru. He did not believe me. He was quite angry at my mentioning this awkward fact. I said I would prove it him by showing it to him in the ‘enchanted mirror’.

Anand wants to point out that attainment of independence has not made any significant change in the misfortune of the untouchables. The low caste people turn a little rebellious but the high caste also turn more rigid in their attitude towards them. Anand suggests that it is necessary for the high caste Hindus to get down from the camel of their conservative attitude to achieve prosperity. Dhooli Singh says “No one can enter the little door sitting on a camel”.

*The Road* deals with a single incident in the life of an untouchable in a small village. The incident of constructing the road to facilitate transportation of milk from Govardhan to Gurgaon, a town nearby creates a conflict between the caste Hindus and the low caste untouchables. The construction of the road shortens the distance between two places but widens the gap between the two classes. The novel opens with the conflict between the high caste Hindu boys and

Bhikhu the low caste untouchable on the issue of the untouchables going to the temple. The humiliation of his mother infuriates Bhikhu. When a kind hearted man intervenes, the boys run away muttering filthy abuses.

Bhikhu goes to Dhooli Singh's field to his work on the construction. On his way he broods over the conflict and looks around the well for the landlord's daughter Rukmani whom he loves. A seventeen year old beautiful girl is also drawn towards the untouchable but her mother's advice to beware of the low caste warns her to avoid the thoughts of Bhikhu. She says "I am pure the daughter of the landlord".

Thakur Singh criticizes Dhooli Singh for his close relations with the untouchables and warns him that if they get financially self reliant, the arrogant untouchables will one day dominate the high caste Hindus. He condemns Dhooli Singh for defying 'Dharma'. His arrogance of class superiority makes him believe that exploitation of the low caste is his birth right. On the contrary Dhooli Singh who is equal to the Thakur in social status plays a significant role in the emancipation of the untouchable. He tries to make the Thakur aware of the hardships of the untouchables who have neither land nor work.

The Thakur meets Pandit Suraj Mani, the only Priest of the temple to enforce religious sanctions against Dhooli Singh, but changes his mind and requests him to persuade Dhooli Singh. Pandit Suraj Mani, whom Dhooli Singh calls a crafty Brahmin dog, is shrewd enough to exploit the situation. He decides to go to Dhooli Singh to have a compromise with him.

The Thakur's son Sanju expresses his reluctance to Dhooli Singh towards his son Lachman for his close relations with the untouchables. Lachman tries to protect his father's intention but agrees with his friend's opinion on joining them in the battle against the untouchables. The fear of losing Rukmani, his would be wife does not allow him to quarrel with Sanju.

Sanju and Lachman set the huts of the untouchables on fire. The untouchables understand that it is a punishment for their children's act against the high caste Hindus. When Dhooli Singh comes to know that his son is behind the arson he feels himself guilty for it and offers shelter to the untouchable victims. He offers them food and clothes. The government agent, Diwan inquires into the incident of arson.

Lachman admits his guilt and returns to his father. Sanju, another culprit in the act of arson accepts Dhooli Singh's offer to join them in the task of the construction of the road in order to save himself from the punishment. The Pandit also understands the situation and joins Dhooli Singh.

The Thakur, gets frustrated with his son's sin and Pandit's treachery. But his son returns home soon. He feels guilty of joining the untouchables. After the completion of the road, the Thakur invites Bhikhu home. Rukhmani offers him water in a brass cup. Sanju turns violent for polluting the brass cup and kicks the cup out of Bhikhu's hand. Bhikhu is hurt but does not retaliate. Humiliated, he leaves and walks towards the newly constructed road, in the direction of Delhi

“where there would be no caste or outcaste...”. The conflict ends with the defeat of the untouchable. The failure makes Bhikhu leave his birth place.

Anand is severely criticized for the protagonist's escapisms. C.J. George in his *Mulk Raj Anand : His Art and Concerns* says,

“Bhiku is portrayed through the novel as a defiant person who faced the realities of life boldly and with determination. Hence his escapist action at the end of the novel is not in conformity with his character”. (Anand, 50)

Bakha of *Untouchable* and Bhikhu of *Coolie* share almost the same aspirations as well as appearance. But Anand fails to do justice to Bhikhu as a protagonist. Some critics call him a shadow of Bakha, some say that he is a caricature of Bakha. Bakha succeeds in reflecting the pangs of the untouchables through his inner conflict. He thinks about the retaliation against his exploitation but does not take any action. Bhikhu, on the contrary is a little more rebellious. He stands firmly against the high caste Hindu boys to protect his honour. Both face the slap incident and both react almost similarly. Both get furious but succumb to the exploitation. When the Thakur's son slaps “Bhikhu stretched out his to full height again till the Landlord's son cowered back”.

Bhikhu is thus the authentic voice of the downtrodden, low caste poor. He is both a victim and a rebel. He has almost all the qualities of the hero. Rukhmani finds him, “...young body with the pucca- coloured, even face .... finest man among the outcastes gay and good”.

At times, he goes against the rigid social system but realizes that there is no escape from the sufferings. Bhikhu belongs to the class of the exploited but he has guts of the class of the exploiter. Simultaneously, he has a common sense and sanity.

He knows that he is being exploited without any fault on his part. He says that one is a leather worker by profession and not by birth. When he is obstructed by the high caste Hindu boys he protests strongly. He feels “why should he suffer this humiliation now ... The bard in him, who felt equal to life inside him if not from his status in the world, summoned up a strange foolhardy courage into his limbs...”. He is painfully conscious of his exploitation, of his ill treatment by

the boys of the high caste. He knows he is physically capable of hitting them back but he socially is not capable to do so.”...he remembered that he was a chamar untouchable and controlled himself”. He only burns with anger whenever any caste Hindu exploits him.

Though Bhikhu is the principal character, Dhooli Singh also occupies a place of equal importance. Anand casts him in the mould of a social reformer. He goes against his own family and caste, for the emancipation of the untouchables. He does not hesitate to bend before an untouchable to express his apology for his son's guilt. Such type of gesture is not only uncommon but also revolutionary on the Indian social background. He performs another revolutionary act by offering shelter to the untouchable women in his house. Though he accepts his religion without any doubt, he feels that the religion should not lay down the hurdles in the construction of the road which paves the way to progress, development and modernity.

He is undaunted by the sneering attitude of the high caste exploiters. It does not mean, however, that he is completely free from the superiority sense of the high caste Hindus. When the Thakur threatens him that his closeness to untouchables may induce his daughter to marry an untouchable, Dhooli Singh says “she will not set her affection on the mean” (23). But when his son involves himself in the arson he frees himself from the shackles of orthodoxy and identifies himself with untouchables.

The female characters in the novel are simple, sincere but suffering souls. There is not much difference between the exploitation of the women of high caste and that of the low caste. If we compare Bhikhu's mother Laxmi, Sanju's mother Bhagwanti and Lachman's mother Sapti with each other, they are found not much different in their attitude towards life. All of them are superstitious, religious, stereotype, rustic women. The same is true about the Thakur's daughter Rukmani and Dhooli Singh's daughter Mala. Both of them are exploited through the dowry system. They do not have their own voice. They cannot venture to break the ties that bind them to the Indian traditions. These female characters are thus relegated to the background. There is no need of elaborate characterization in the development of the central theme as the theme does not deal with the exploitation of an individual. It is an exploitation of one class by other.

The novel deals with the conflict between the high caste and the low caste Hindus. The high caste Hindus refuse to touch the stones quarried by the untouchables. The irony here is that the villagers are ready to enjoy the yield of the fields tilled by the untouchables but refuse to touch the stones quarried by them. So the real problem is not of polluting the religion. The untouchables are allowed to walk in the streets. Bhikhu and the boys of high caste Hindus have been friends. They play together and work together on the fields. “The earth had kept them together, but the togetherness had now been lost because money wages had come in” (8). Even Bhikhu says to his mother,

“Since money come into the world there has been less and less love”. An advent of the wage system for the work disturbs the high caste Hindus. The landlord says “They hope to ingratiate themselves with the sarkar and earn money so that they can buy the status of the twice born”.

This economic independence instills courage in the untouchables to stand against the high caste Hindus. Babu, one of the untouchable friends of Bhikhu shows the awareness of their economic independence when he says, “We are field labourers no more, growling on the earth”. He shows courage to comment on high caste Dhooli Singh for the arson. He calls him one among the exploiters when Laxmi tells Bhikhu that it is inauspicious to see a Brahmin’s face as first thing in the morning. It appears unusual but the statement clearly indicates that they no more call themselves inferior to the Brahmin. Even Bhikhu’s illiterate friends are not riddled with the false sense of karma. They do not regard the caste Hindus in anyway superior to them.

The exploitation of women is yet another dominant theme of *The Road*. Mala and Rukmini become the victims of the dowry system whereas Bhagwanti and Sapti are the victims of the patriarchal system. Bhagwanti though a wife of the Sarpanch of the village, has no voice of her own. Sapti, goes against her husbands wish but only temporarily. Both Bhagwanti and Sapti are superstitious women. Pandit Suraj Mani takes disadvantage of their blind faith. He compels Sapti to desert her husband and compels Bhagwanti to perform special pooja for his own advantage. Laxmi is the victim of the social exploitation. Being a woman of a low caste, she is not allowed to go to the temple. Rukmani and Mala belong to the high caste but they are not even considered as human beings while arranging their marriages. They are offered by their parents in a bargain for the marriages of their sons. Rukmani exposes her anguish over the social system. “O why, O Why were the tribes of men so privileged”.

*The Road* is a symbol of progress, a symbol of sympathetic gesture of the low caste downtrodden towards the high caste Hindus, a symbol of friendship offered by the exploited to the exploiters. The completion of the road symbolizes the advent of modernization but the humiliation of Bhikhu displays rigidity of the orthodox caste system.

Anand has been criticized by many for the way the novel ends. According to Premila Paul, the end of the novel “...makes Anand’s views quite ambiguous” (24). According to C.J.George also, Bhikhu’s act of heading towards Delhi is confusing. George says,

The hero’s action hardly has any symbolic significance. Perhaps Bhikhu must have reached the conclusion that even if prosperity and modernity embrace the village, the attitude of the villagers will not change and untouchability is bound to haunt and harass him and therefore, the solution to his problem may be found in his anonymous mingling with multitudes in Delhi.

As a realistic novelist, Anand does not end the novel with the happy union of the two classes. He knows that untouchability is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. The high caste youth 'Sanju' accepts the compromise to work with untouchables only superficially. He returns to his people and shows his arrogance, which is his true nature. He kicks the brass cup of water from Bhikhu's hand and mourns. "Our whole house will have to be purified". The attitude of all the friends of Sanju clearly shows that the youth of the high caste Hindus is not ready to accept the change.

This rigidity of the high caste youth compels the low caste youth to think about going far away from their birth places. Bhikhu fails to emancipate himself from his caste bonds and decides to desert his own people. His decision to go to a place where he cannot be recognized by his caste is symbolic. It could be realized as an escape of the protagonist from the bondage of the orthodoxy of the village life and an attempt to plunge into the wide arena of the modernity of the city life.