

SOCIAL ASPECTS IN MULK RAJ ANAND’S ‘UNTOUCHABLE’

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ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand the eldest of the three great Indian novelists, is regarded as the father of Indo-English literature, the other two being Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan. He was born on December 12, 1905 at Peshawar. He was the greatest exponent of Indian writing in English, whose literary out-put was infused with a political commitment that conveyed the lives of India’s poor in a realistic and sympathetic manner. He writes realistically in his novels all about the miserable lives of the poor. Anand being a novelist of the common man, has profoundly dealt with the villages, with the extreme poverty, with orphans, untouchables and urban labourers. He took upon himself the task of attacking social snobbery and prejudice. The Indian life that he portrays in his novels is that of outcastes, peasants, soldiers, the depressed and oppressed ones of the society. Anand has, says the noted critic P.K. Singh, great concern for down-trodden people of India and his novels therefore throw light on the existing pains and predicaments of ‘have-nots’. His novels present minute pictures of Indian society, with special focus on the plights of poor people.¹ Anand’s early novels deal with the misery and the wretchedness of the crushed and oppressed people and their struggle for a better life. His subsequent novels are almost a variation on the same theme. The present research article is an attempt to study how several social issues and aspects are reflected in Mulk Raj Anand’s ‘Untouchable’.

Fiction, of all literary forms, is closely connected with social aspects and values, and at this time, Indian society, “galvanized into a new social and political awareness, was bound to seek creative expression for its new consciousness and the novel has, in all ages, been a handy instrument for this purpose.”² Anand took to writing at a time when India was in the throes of adverse circumstances. Along with the struggle for political freedom started another struggle for freedom on the social plane in the form of a fight against poverty, illiteracy, superstition, the caste system and untouchability etc. No artist, creating during that period, could avoid reflecting this upsurge in his work. As Dr. Iyengar remarks, “Anand could not but respond to the impact of events in India. With him, however, as Bankim Chandra before him, political action took the form of writing novels. He wrote of the people, for the people and as a man of the people. It may

be said that his early novels reveal a sense of direction, as much as an avalanche or a flood shows a fury of momentum, a surge of force, a heady rush towards the goal.”³

Mulk Raj Anand is basically a champion of down-trodden and under-privileged people. He has always been conscious of the need to help raise the untouchables, the peasants, the serfs, the coolies and the other suppressed members of society, to human dignity and self awareness in view of the abjectness, apathy and despair in which they are sunk. Saros Cowasjee holds that Anand “in his narratives introduced a whole new people, who had seldom entered the realm of literature.”⁴ He talks of the Indian society caught up in “the march of evolution and subject to pressures both conventional and contingent.”⁵ He is the forerunner of social change in Indian English novel and he has portrayed the shams and hypocrisy underlying the polished layer of social life with “Dickensian piquancy of realism”.⁶

Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel, *Untouchable* (1935), is a chilling expose of the day-to-day life of a member of India’s untouchable caste. The central figure in the novel is Bakha, a sweeper boy. Bakha, an eighteen year old untouchable boy, like his father Lakha, a sweeper, a cleaner of latrines, is regarded as an outcaste by the society. The hero is simultaneously a rebel and victim. He protests and resents against the callousness of caste Hindus. At the same time, as a tradition-follower he is an idealist and cannot think of going against society and the ‘agents’ of religious institutions. Anand, as has been suggested by Prof. H. M. Williams, “exemplifies the problem of ‘untouchability’, the treatment of the latrine-cleaning class condemned to isolation and deprivation as handlers of excrement; he exposes this as a social evil and suggests its remedy”.⁷ The novel focuses attention on contemporary social beliefs, customs, traditions and social evils of the Hindu Society in 1930s, particularly the curse of the caste and class system. It is in fact, a socially conscious and sociological novel. It throws light on the sorrows and sufferings that caste Hindus inflicted on the untouchables and the outcastes-the scavengers, the leather workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters, and so on. It registers a strong protest against social injustice meted out to untouchables. With unflinching realism Anand narrates a single day in the life of Bakha. It is a typical day in the life of an untouchable, mixed with hunger, hope, small pleasures, insults and setbacks. With Bakha, there are other characters who also suffer because of their lower caste. They suffer and suffer only and they have no right to protest or express their emotions. Bakha is a universal figure who symbolizes the exploitation, oppression, injustice and humiliation which has been the fate of the whole community of outcastes. His suffering and humiliation are not of his alone, but the suffering of all under-privileged and outcastes. C.D. Narasimhaiah remarks that Bakha seems to be a typical representative untouchable exemplifying the plight of not only the so-called Hindu untouchables but also of dispossessed people everywhere.⁸

The theme of the novel - untouchability itself is very realistic. *Untouchable* is a realistic novel of socially crushed protagonist Bakha. It is a slice from a life without any change or modification. The novel begins with a realistic picture of the outcastes’ colony. Anand describes;

The outcastes’ colony was a group of mudwalled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather- workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides

and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. p.

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Bakha's day begins with endearing entreaties and downright abuses by his father and his encounter with the high-caste people, who cannot put up with his very sight. His father, Lakha, the Jamadar of the sweepers, first of all ill treats him by asking him in the early hours of the cold morning to go out to clean latrines.

"Get up, ohe you Bakhiya, ohe son of a pig!"

..Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoys will be angry." P.15

Wherever he goes, the treatment that is given and expected to him is worse than the treatment that is given to an animal. When he is hungry, chapattis are flung down to him from the third floor. Likewise, jilebis are given to him in a way a bone is thrown to a dog. A Hindu shopkeeper throws a packet of cigarettes at him. He has been suffering a series of humiliating experiences right from the morning. He is extremely shocked when he is slapped by a caste-Hindu, for having polluted him. The high caste Hindu further abuses:

"Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bowlegged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt

I put on this morning!" p.53

Of course, Bakha has the muscular strength to hit back, but he remains silent, taking all the indignities to his pace. As the novelist narrates,

"...His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, for away from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the onlookers, but a moral one." P. 55

The action of the caste Hindu, touched by the untouchable Bakha, is typical one. It only reveals the tragic dilemma of the untouchables. As Bakha says:

"...All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused?

The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it to... I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an untouchable!" p. 58-59

These sad situations and painful experiences indeed, stir the feeling of protest in Bakha.

The sweepers who are responsible for the maintenance of cleanliness are destined to live in places, unknown to hygiene and sanitation. Their predicament is so dire that they are not allowed to draw water from the well. They have to depend on the mercy of caste Hindus for it. Here Anand presents the real picture of the harsh reality and the curse of untouchability. The water episode is very touching and heart rendering. Anand's powerful observation, use of regional language, use of abuses and the naked picture of untouchability clearly states social realism. Sohini, Bakha's sister is treated badly by the high-caste Hindus. The untouchables don't have their well. As Anand narrates;

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they

allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. They had no well of their own because it cost a lot of money to dig a well in such a hilly town as Bulandshahr. Perforce they had to collect at the foot of the caste Hindu's well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. p.26

Sohini has to wait quite a long to fetch a pot full of water, for her tired and thirsty brother. After a long while one of the Hindus, Pandit Kali Nath, draws water for her and calls her his house to clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. Sohini innocently goes to do so, he catches her by her breast but she refuses his designs. Anand here throws light on the hypocrisy and lustfulness of pretentious, so called priest Pandit Kali Nath who believe to be polluted by the touch of untouchable and has strong sexual desire with Sohini, an untouchable. This duality and hypocrisy is vividly revealed by Anand in the novel. He then raises an alarm of;

'Polluted, Polluted, Polluted!' shouted the Brahmin below.....Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony. P.69

This is the height of hypocrisy. Bakha comes timely on the scene and the situation rages a feeling of anger in him. He realizes caste malice and hypocritical social inequities when he comes to know Pandit Kali Nath's attempt to molest Sohini, his sister. Sohini tries to tell the truth but nobody is ready either to believe or support her. Bakha bursts out in a rage with an impulse to beat him up but Sohini stops him. As both of them realize their helplessness due to the limitations of their caste, they decide to give up. Such humiliation is common for untouchables and they have accepted as it is age old tradition. He returns home desperately and tells his father Lakha about his insult and Sohini's molestation by the Pandit.

"...They think we are mere dirt,
Because we clean their dirt." p.89

To lessen his son's grief Lakha narrates him a nasty experience of his own life. It brings Bakha back to his senses.

Towards the end of the novel, Mulk Raj Anand suggests three solutions to overcome the vice of untouchability- Christ, Gandhi and the flush system. Bakha happens to see Colonel Hutchinson, the Christian missionary, who takes him to the church. He asks Bakha to confess his sin so that he can be converted to the Christian religion. He suggests that Christianity is the only solution of untouchability. Hence Bakha is not satisfied as the Missionary cannot clarify who Christ is. Mahatma Gandhi, whom Bakha listens to in a public meeting at Golbagh, provides another solution. In his long speech Gandhi says that all Indians are equal and gives an account of a Brahmin doing sweeper's work. He even expresses his wish to be reborn as an untouchable. He gives them a new name 'Harijan' and calls them the cleaners of Hindu religion. He also warns them against their bad habits and asks them to stop begging the food for their work. Gandhi's words go straight to Bakha's heart. Hard upon this comes the third solution: the introduction of the water – closet, as promised by the poet. Neither god nor vows of self sacrifice are needed to secure the untouchables, but simply and solely the flush system to beat all the vices connected with untouchability. Bakha realizes that the only solution to get rid of untouchability is the use of machine or the flush system. Bakha thinks of everything he has heard and returns to his mud-walled hut, thinking now of the Mahatma, now of the Machine. He desires to tell his

father all what Gandhi said about them and about the flush system. This way the novel ends with a resounding note of optimism. By the realistic and compassionate portrayal of an individual, Mulk Raj Anand displays his acute thought and humane attitude in understanding the grim realities of the social life in India. As Prof. Nagarajan remarks, Anand sees life in the raw and exposes as a novelist in mercilessly, flesh wounds, blood and all...shedding sentimentalism and writes with a fine touch of scorn of social and economic inequalities.⁹

Anand wants to awaken the exploited, suppressed, oppressed and dehumanized classes of the society. He, therefore, criticizes social maladies, human hypocrisies, and individual idiosyncrasies. He has pointed out social conflicts and ills, which he has seen and experienced intimately in his own surroundings. Along with criticizing social snobbery and prejudice in his novels, Anand urges for a larger outlook, more tolerance, more intimate, more self-sacrifice and better understanding. Keeping in view these literary qualities of Anand, a noted critic P.K.Singh calls him “a communist behind curtain.”¹⁰

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