

MARGINALIZATION AND CASTE: A CULTURAL MATERIALISTIC ANALYSIS OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

Anand Bajaj

Assistant Professor, English
Department of Applied Sciences
DAVIET, Jalandhar

Abstract

A nascent discipline in literary theory and criticism, cultural materialism is the British counterpart of American New Historicism. The term cultural materialism gained currency in the 1980s after the publication of *Political Shakespeare* in 1985, although its roots lie in the work of British academics of late 1980s and 1970s like Raymond Williams, Simon Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Catherine Belsey, who challenged the traditional approaches to literature. Mulk Raj Anand is one of the prominent voices in the field of Indian Writing in English. *Untouchable* has attained the status of a classic as it beautifully depicts the trials in the life of the untouchable protagonist Bakha. The novel beautifully depicts how the untouchables are marginalized and dominated through the working of Ideological State Apparatus of Religion. The caste system which has the sanctity of religion makes sure that untouchables remain at the bottom of the pyramid. The upper castes organized themselves as Brahmins, Kashtriyas and Vaishayas and joined hands to exploit the labour power of Shudras. The novel traces how the master discourse does not allow the untouchables any room for resistance and how under the panoptican gaze of the dominating discourse the marginalized untouchables are forced to internalize the dominating ideology.

Keywords:- caste system, untouchable, cultural materialism, dominating ideology.

The emergence of the holy trinity of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan on the literary scene is the watershed moment which gave a new direction and height to Indian Writing in English. In his fiction Mulk Raj Anand always talked about the lives and hardships of the marginalized and the downtrodden to highlight inhuman condition in which they live and survive. *Untouchable* belongs to the earlier phase of Anand's writing and it has acquired the status of a classic. It has been translated into more than twenty world languages. While situating his characters in the specific socio-cultural milieu he always kept in mind the varying contexts of Indian reality. His attitude towards Indian past is at times ambivalent. In the words of M.K Naik "On the one hand, he is indignantly critical of the dead wood of hoary Indian tradition – its obscurantism, and fossilization; on the other, as his life-long interest in ancient Indian art and the intuitive understanding of the Indian peasant mind, in his writings indicate, he is equally aware

of its inner and enduring aspects as well.” (155) E. M. Forster was fascinated by *Untouchable* when he read its manuscript. In his “Preface” to this book, he calls it a “remarkable novel” and finds it “indescribably clean”. (Forster, Preface to *Untouchable* 5) On its publication, the novel was genuinely greeted by eminent reviewers like D. A. Scott James, V. S. Pritchett, Storm Jameson, Edward Thomson and Bonamy Dobrie. (Anand, “The Story of My Experiments with a White Lie,” *Critical Essays*, Ed M.K. Naik 18) The novel has attracted a lot of critical attention since then and has been explicated from different perspectives. Williams Walsh finds it “Dickensian” and says that Anand “writes in angry reformist way, like a less humorous Dickens and a more emotional Wells, of the personal sufferings induced by economics — really economics, one feels, even when he is writing about caste.” (177) M. K. Naik also refers to its “beautifully sculptured form” though he believes that this form “is flawed in the end by an insistence on inartistic direct statement.” (181) K.R.S. Iyengar praises the photographic fidelity with which the novel is suffused and which creates “a picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy.” (339) It is evident even from this extremely brief overview of scholarly interest in Anand’s *Untouchable* that this novel is a classic having multiple facets; and it requires continuous engagement with it.

The present paper aims to probe *Untouchable* from the perspective of Cultural Materialism, to show that the novel does not have a transcendental signified, rather it aims to explore some shades or slants of meaning, which have perhaps not got adequate emphasis. Before, we analyze *Untouchable* from the perspective of cultural materialism; it is worthwhile to discuss in brief its methodology as it is a nascent discipline in literary theory and criticism. The British counterpart of American New Historicism, the term “cultural materialism” gained currency in the 1980s after the publication of *Political Shakespeare* in 1985.

The editors of the book, Dollimore and Sinfield, set out the key principles of cultural materialism in the Foreword to this book: “Our belief is that a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis offers the strongest challenge (to traditional methods of interpretation) and has already contributed substantial work.” (vii) Peter Barry, in his *Beginning Theory*, has offered brief and useful explanatory comments to the four basic principles outlined by Dollimore and Sinfield. He says that emphasis on historical context suggests that timeless value can’t be accorded even to a canonical text. (182) This aspect of cultural materialism aims to allow the literary text to “recover its histories.” (Barry 183) The emphasis on theoretical method signifies a rejection of liberal humanism and the alignment with the structuralist and the post-structuralist methodological practices. (Barry 183) The stress on political commitment implies the influences of Marxist and feminist perspectives. (Barry 183) Finally, the emphasis on textual analysis marks “a commitment not just to making theory of an abstract kind, but to practicing it on (mainly) canonical texts which continue to be the focus of massive amount of academic and professional attention and which are prominent national and cultural icons.” (Barry 183)

Guided by a Marxist and feminist vision of the future, cultural materialists employ diverse and ever evolving strategies to study texts, subjectivity and society. They aim “to read literary texts in ways which frustrate conservative interpretations, either by interpreting texts as the vehicles of radical critiques of conservative politics, or by exposing the means by which texts do serve the interests of conservatism.” (Brannigan 186)

The study of ideology remains one of the prime strategies of cultural materialists to integrate the textual and the social domains. Sinfield, for instance, studies the feudal ideology and its different manifestations in the Renaissance period and how their limits create possibilities

of dissidence in a text like *Othello*. * Similarly Catherine Belsey studies fictional texts especially novels as interrogative texts so that “radical critiques of conservative politics” can be made. Sometimes they employ non-literary texts to juxtapose them with literary texts to emphasize, contradict or deepen insights.

*-- Sinfield does not follow Althusserian Marxism saying that it is mired in entrapment model, but he ignores the possibilities of scientific knowledge as outlined in Althusser’s essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” included in his *Essays on Ideology*.

Sinfield’s assertion that ideology “produces, makes plausible, concepts and systems to explain who we are, who the others are, how the world works,” (806) can be conceptualized through Althusser’s concept of ideology. In his influential essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” he explains how dominant ideology saturates the lives of individuals through different organizations and institutions, enabling them to understand their lived experience in a particularly “slanted” way which appears normal because ideology “derives its strength” from the way it gets to be common sense ; it “goes without saying.” (Sinfield 806)

Althusser maintains that “Ideology is a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” (36) It implies that we can’t know the real world directly; what we know are always representations of that world or representations of our relations to that world. Catherine Belsey clarifies this concept thus: “Ideology is both a real and an imaginary relation to the world — real in that it is the way in which people really live their relationship to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence, but imaginary in that it discourages a full understanding of these conditions of existence and the ways in which the people are socially constituted within them.” (109)

Untouchable quite clearly foregrounds trials and tribulations of the lives of untouchables in pre independence Indian society which was marked by caste consciousness among people. The novel traces the inhuman treatment meted out to the marginalized untouchables by the dominating upper castes. The untouchables don’t have access even to the basic amenities of life. They lead their lives sans food, water and education. The scavengers, the lowest of the lowly castes are the worst sufferers as they are considered polluted and have to announce their arrival by shouting “posh, posh, sweeper coming” (*Untouchable* 55) lest they should accidentally touch any upper-caste Hindu and pollute him.

From the perspective of cultural materialism, it would be instructive to compare this picture portrayed in *Untouchable* in enslaved India in 1935 with a report about the status of the untouchables in 2005. Chandra Bhan Prasad writes thus in his report entitled “Untouchability: What the Tsunami Couldn't Wash away”:

However, like the deadly tsunami which travelled hidden underwater, untouchability too lived up to its potential. The untouchable survivors of the tsunami were thrown out of relief camps. They were reportedly barred from using makeshift toilets, and given leftover, stale food [...] Tamilnadu itself is not an exception. In the aftermath of the Gujarat earthquake in January 2001, when thousands lost their lives and millions were rendered homeless, a similar pattern of discrimination against Dalits was witnessed [...] In Madhya Pradesh [...] three Dalit women of a

family were gang-raped on July 5, 2004 [...] In West Bengal last July, Dalits in Murshidabad district were prevented from entering the Durga Puja Pandal, a religious festival meant to bring people together.

One is struck by the uncanny resemblance between the histories contained in this factual report and their fictionalized account written more than seventy years ago. The “oppression of the rural poor” and the use of the state power, which many texts suppress, have been beautifully highlighted by Anand. One doesn't need to recover their histories from the silences in the text. These are fore grounded in *Untouchable* in the tradition of realistic novel.

The novel beautifully depicts how the untouchables are marginalized and dominated through the working of Ideological State Apparatus of Religion. The caste system which has the sanctity of religion makes sure that untouchables remain at the bottom of the pyramid. The upper castes organized as Brahmins, Kashtriyas and Vaishayas joined hands to exploit the labour power of Shudras. The novel traces how the master discourse of the upper castes does not allow the untouchables any room for resistance and how under the panoptican gaze of the dominating discourse the marginalized untouchables are forced to internalize the dominating ideology.

By keeping the untouchables at the lowest rungs among even the outcastes, the religious ideology ensured that an untouchable lad like Bakha could only clean the latrines and the roads. He could be abused, humiliated and even slapped on the face just because he had accidentally touched an upper-caste Hindu. His sister Sohini could be molested by a priest and Bakha could be abused even when he helpfully carried an injured boy to his mother. Worst still, centuries of ill-treatment, because of the ISA [Ideological State Apparatus] of religion, had made permanent scars on the psyche of the untouchables. They had themselves internalized this ideology and while on the road would not mind calling out “Posh, posh, sweeper coming.” (58)

Bakha's father Lakha and his younger brother Rakha have completely internalized the dominating ideology. They firmly believe in the Manichean opposition of their inferiority and the superiority of the upper castes which has been created by the discourse of truth of religious ideology. They are at peace with the work of scavenging and accept their lot as the will of God. It is because of the internalization of the dominating ideology that they never realize that their economic and social condition is determined by the master discourse which wants to use and exploit them mercilessly.

Though like Lakha and Rakha, Bakha is also constituted in religious ideology yet his anglicization, however comic and incomplete it might be, gives him an alternative position which is at odds with his position in religious ideology. The narrator explains that Bakha “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 clean [...] he had built up a new world, which was his heaven, if for nothing else, [...] it represented a change from the old ossified order and the stagnant pools of the lane near which he was born” (86). Thus his sensibility shows a certain disruption which accounts for the anger that he feels when he thinks about the injustices meted out to him and his sister Sohini and the frustration that he experiences because he can't hit back.

For instance, when he thinks how the “Brahmin dog”(69) had tried to molest his sister, “he felt a wild desire to retaliate, retaliation meaning to him just doing anything to the man, from belabouring him with blows to killing him if need be [...] and yet there was a futility written on his face. He could not over step 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 itself, and he lapsed back, wild with torture, biting his lips, ruminating his grievances” (71).

Clearly, Bakha has also internalized the caste-consciousness under the influence of the ISA of religion, yet there is conflict in his mind. He is angry because of the unmerited injustices and frustrated because he can do nothing to redress his grievances. However, this conflict dramatizes the intensity of the havoc that the religious ideology and consequent suppression have played over the centuries upon countless generations of Bakhas.

As Althusser has pointed out, the ISA of family always complements the ISA of religion. Lakha, the hero's father teaches him a suitable subservient ideology. Referring to the atrocities committed by the upper caste Hindus, he says: “They are our superiors. One word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us” (88). Lakha's words show how his ideology is a complex mix of earthy awareness of their helpless situation, the partisan role of the repressive state apparatus of police and the sense of subservience derived from the internalization of the caste-consciousness. In order to make Bakha accept his role fatalistically, he even gives the allowance to the caste-Hindus that they are themselves helpless as they too are bound by religion. He says: “We must realize that it is religion which prevents them from touching us” (91). This innocent remark betrays the real nature of the religious ideology which created the worst possible apartheid ever practised on this earth. And it was supported fully by the ideological state apparatus of family.

Anand has created a loveable character in Sohini. The dignified restraint that she shows when Gulabo unnecessarily abuses her at the well or the dignified composure that she exhibits when a molestation attempt is made in the temple, reveals Anand's attitude towards women. He may not be a feminist yet his essential humanism considers women at par with men. Professor Gowda appears to have erred in his appreciation of Anand's stance when he suggested that Sohini should not have resisted the priest's molestation attempt and should have instead demanded a price for it. (Gowda 53) Had Anand done that, the sense of injustice would have become extremely diluted and Sohini's humiliation would have appeared justified. The way this episode stands in the book, it arouses reader's indignation and shows the priest in an ugly light, dramatically demonstrating the moral bankruptcy and the hypocrisy of the upper-castes vis a vis the untouchables.

Many scholars insist that the novel is not a great work of art as the ending is not finalized. E.M. Forster rightly says that the ending is an inseparable part of the author's scheme, (Forster 8) but his scheme does not aim at a seamless design. Through the unfinalised ending of the novel, Anand has beautifully depicted the historical situation in which the untouchables were placed at that point in time. No one knew which of the options would be opted for by the untouchables and whether or not it would work for them. The ending, instead of favouring one point of view, raises questions about the feasibility of options. From the point of view of cultural materialism, the ending beautifully transforms a declarative text into an interrogative text. It interpolates the reader into the interrogative process, disquieting him and giving him a jolt. The reader is made to sit up and ponder over the plight of the untouchables and like Bakha he is forced to think about different alternatives even if hazily.

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