

UNTOUCHABILITY AS A THEME OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S NOVEL *UNTOUCHABLE* AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY.

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ABSTRACT

Untouchable, is not only a novel but a work of social relevance. And when a novel has its social relevance that means it's a social novel. A social novel, sometimes also referred as social problem novel. It may be a work of fiction in which a prevailing social problem such as of gender, race, or class prejudice, is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel. But if the social problem discussed in the novel or any literary work is still prevailing in the society then the relevance of that particular work is still sought. *Untouchable* is a novel in which the burning issue of its time has been dramatized. As name suggests, untouchability remained the central issue in the novel. Mulk Raj Anand rose to the fame after the publication of *Untouchable* in 1935. Its social relevance can be measured by the fact that apart from a writer Mulk Raj Anand is also accredited as a social reformer. Most of his literary work remained attributed to the social cause especially to point out the social evil rooted in the society. Whether it is *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *Across The Black Waters*, or *The Sword And The Sickle* all were dedicated to the downtrodden, deprived, socially and economically backward people of labour class, of lower strata of the society or the people of lower and abandoned caste and class. The author showed his personal sympathy to these sects of society. Indian society is a caste ridden society where caste based discrimination is an age old problem. From the ancient time to the modern, casteism remained a sensitive issue. The hero of the novel *Untouchable*, Bakha is an untouchable, around whom whole of the plot revolves. He is introduced to us on the very first page of the novel, as a youngman of 18, who is in the profession of manual scavenging, cleaning the public latrines and considered as untouchable in the hindu society. The one who cleans the dirt of the society is considered as unclean and untouchable and is treated inhumanely. In Indian society, the presence of caste based discrimination cannot be denied even today.

KEYWORDS :Social relevance,Untouchability,Social evil,Manual scavenging,Caste based discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand is no doubt a novelist, with a great deal of social commitment. A detailed study of his novels and works reveals his enthusiasm to unveil stark reality of society. In *Untouchable*, the matter of deep concern is the frightful and ugly evil of untouchability present in the Indian society especially in Hindus and has shown us that how deep rooted it is. The miseries and the plight of untouchables is artistically portrayed in his novel. In this context E.M.Forster, who wrote preface of the novel, says :

The Sweeper[untouchable in this case] is worse than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is disquieting as well as disgusting object to orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming.

It is believed that Mulk Raj Anand's aunt committed suicide for being ostracized by her family because she had a meal with a muslim woman. This incident affected the author deeply and led him write this novel. He was a firm believer in the dignity and equality of all men. He was shocked to see the manners of Indian society. The ill treatment of untouchables by those who belong to the so called "twice-born", the Brahmins influenced Anand substantially. The untouchables were not allowed to step on the platform surrounding the source of drinking water in the town of Bulandshahr called 'the caste-well'. They had to stay on the mercy of hindus to pour the water from a sufficient distance. Bakha the unheroic hero the novel unintentionally touched the tunic of a hindu while he was lost in the taste of Jalebi. The scenario turns worst while he started yelling at Bakha. Returnig back to his senses, Bakha takes himself aback and he immedietly joined his hands in apology with a complete silence of regret. The crowd gathered around that

made Bakha more embarrassed and nervous. The whole situation artistically drawn by the author and fills our heart with sympathy and compassion for Bakha.

The evil of untouchability is the main theme of the novel *Untouchable*. It draws our attention toward the miseries faced by the untouchables. The injustice, humiliations, and degradation faced by a particular section of the society is even visible in modern Indian society. Although the practice of untouchability is legally abolished in India, the incidences of violence against dalits still occur in some parts of the country. A data collected by the India Human Development survey conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research says that :

- About 27 % of the Indian households still practice untouchability.
- 52 % of Brahmins still practice untouchability.
- Only 5.34% of Indian marriages are inter-caste.
- About 15% of scheduled caste and 22% of schedule tribe admitted to the practice.
- It is most widespread in Madhya Pradesh with 53% practicing untouchability, Followed by Himachal Pradesh with 50%. At third position there comes Chattisgarh with 48%, Rajasthan and Bihar with 47%, U.P. with 43% and Uttarakhand with 40%.
- Almost every third Hindu practices untouchability.
- More than 160 million people in India are considered as untouchables.
- Statistics compiled by India's National Crime Record Bureau indicate that in the year 2000, about 25,455 crimes were committed against dalits.
- Every hour two dalits are assaulted; everyday two dalits are murdered, and two dalit homes are torched.

These are not mere data but a mirror which is showing the reflection of modern India. On either side we are talking about the Globalisation and on the other side these data are emerging as a sign of embarrassment and they serve as a blot on the face of any civilization. Today the name of our nation is pronounced among the leading economies in the world, and is supposed to be the third largest economy of the world by 2028. But the mindset of the society is still stuck in age-old orthodoxies. The caste system remained a major hurdle in the way of development of our nation. An evil is an evil. And it's an age-old evil whose tentacles have been spread to the wider extent. The caste system makes people more prone to the prejudices that lead to differences among the groups and consequently communal harmony of the society gets disturbed. Situations may even get worse when the issue of law and order comes into the play.

Mulk Raj Anand knew the intensity of the problem and he showed his keenness to bring forward the heart of the matter. We are talking about the relevance of his work, with *Untouchable* in particular. I strongly admit that his work is still relevant. In my personal opinion, the issue of casteism and untouchability is still prevailing in modern society with some cosmetic changes. Only the body has become somewhat feeble or pretends to be so, but the soul is roaring as ever. The outer frame has changed but the motive and the instinct of the problem is still the same. Or we can say only the hardware is changed but the software is the same. It seems that the venom of casteism has reached into our blood stream now. The question arises, Is there is no solution for this problem? What we have done until now for the eradication of this disease? The answer is yes, we have taken a lot of measures to abolish the practice of untouchability. We have put a constitutional ban on discrimination based on caste. But we remained unsuccessful in our efforts to build a casteless society. India's caste system is supposed to be the world's longest surviving hierarchy. Despite its constitutional abolition in 1950, the practice of untouchability remains very much a part of rural India. It has been observed by the Human Rights, during the process of relief and rehabilitation of Gujarat Earthquake in 2001, communal discrimination in distribution of relief and rehabilitation played a negative role. The incidence of honor killing are frequent in some state of India. In May 2000 in Hardoi district of U.P., a police constable enraged by his daughter's marriage to a Dalit was joined by other relatives in shooting and killing four members of his son-in-law's family. So the hatred for the lower caste people is still prevailing as it was shown in the Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Untouchable*.

Mulk Raj Anand also gave some solutions in the novel. Let's explore the solutions that Mulk Raj Anand advocated. The detailed study of the Novel let us know the three-point solution. First one is bit controversial and not dealt seriously, the conversion to Christianity. Mulk Raj Anand presented his Christian point of view by portraying the character of Colonel Hutchinson, the chief local of Salvation Army. He has firm faith in his cause and is a propagator of conversion. He invites the hero of the novel, to the Church. In the Church Bakha understands nothing but "He(Christ) sacrificed Himself to help us all; for the rich and poor; for the Brahmin and Bhangi". But, on the other hand Colonel's wife is not happy with him because of his association with the low caste Bhangis. It realizes Bakha that his miseries won't end even after conversion. So this solution in the novel was bit ambiguous.

Secondly, the Gandhian philosophy provides a full proof solution to the problem of untouchability and casteism. It also has positive influence on the Bakha. Gandhiji's solution of peaceful persuasion suggests that Bakha must passively wait for a change of heart in the Hindus of India. Ultimately Bakha goes home, thinking of Gandhiji.

Thirdly, the introduction of Flush system will end the practice of manual scavenging.

The novel ends with a positive note with some suitable solution but the path of their execution seems to be difficult. Whether the solutions offered still have their validity that's the point of discussion. The conversion is seen as a serious threat to the Hinduism and it is a difficult decision for the sufferer. It is extremely difficult for an individual to convert and to adopt an alien culture. Secondly, the Gandhian philosophy has healing touch but practical adaptation is still a myth. The third solution, the introduction of machines to replace the process of manual scavenging is a useful technique but it does not guarantee the rid from the prejudices. The literacy rate in India is above 74%. Most of the population is aware that the practice of untouchability, racial discrimination, casteism etc. are illegal. Article 17 of the constitution abolishes the practices of untouchability and is a punishable offence. The manual scavenging is banned under rule. Even there is law to abolish the employment as manual scavenger. But our traditional mindset is not ready to accept this. Our brains are fed with the diet of casteism. The Indian Society is divided into castes, sects, and different groups. Same as shown in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* depicts. The scenario is not much different as shown in the novel and as it is obvious.

CONCLUSION

Mulk Raj Anand is not only regarded as a writer but a social reformer and Dalit writer too. His work remained dedicated to the poor and underprivileged section of the society, and *Untouchable* is a work that shows mirror to the society. And it still has a remarkable appeal for the reader of the current time. In 2004, a commemorative edition including this book was launched by then Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh. Although there is a sort of improvement in the condition of untouchables with the protection provided by several law and the movements run by different Dalit leaders and Human Right activists but the relevance of the novel *Untouchable* cannot be denied. The issue raised in the novel still have their presence in the society. He not only raises the issue of untouchability but also of child labour, corruption of temple priests and humiliation and degradation of human values. Until the presence of the practices of untouchability and casteism are there the novel, *Untouchable* would seek relevance. A casteless society is a imagination which may turn into reality with the intensive efforts of all the sects of the Indian society. Only legal bonding may not help too much. The ultimate solution is to wash it from our brains first, to have a complete faith in humanity.

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