



Caste as a Tool of Victimisation in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Mulk Raj Anand is one of the most famous Indian novelists writing in English. Anand, a versatile genius, is known all over the world as a short-story writer, a novelist and an art critic. He is better known as a social activist. His writings do not categorize with propaganda writing alone. But he is whole heartedly concerned for the lives of the poor, the untouchables and the downtrodden in his novels. He makes a sincere attempt to articulate the suppressed feelings and emotions of the silent sufferers. Earlier, Indian Literature was taken to be the literature of fantasy and fairy tales. But writers like Sharat Chander and Rabindernath Tagore introduced a note of realism in their works. This realistic portrayal of events finds a clear expression in the works of Mulk Raj Anand. The Indian society in pre-independence times was suffering from the age old customs, blind faiths, orthodox practices and traditions. People had discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, region, religion and class. The whole society stood divided on these lines.

Mulk Raj Anand appeared on the literary horizon at a critical time. Being a sensitive heart, he realized the pain and suffering of the people. In the earlier part of Twentieth century when people from all walks of life were fighting for the cause of freedom of the country, Anand also wanted to avail of this opportunity. A strong believer in Gandhian philosophy, he urged one and all to be united for the betterment of humanity putting aside all the differences and ills the society of the time was suffering from. Through his writings, he left no stone unturned to ameliorate the destiny of the suffering humanity. He made a vigorous attack on the caste system, poverty, backwardness, exploitation and class struggle.

Certainly, Anand is the mouthpiece of the people who belong to the lowest rung of our society. He has depicted artistically the trauma of the 'untouchables' in his debut novel *Untouchable*. He has been successful to draw the attention of the readers to the pathetic condition of the 'untouchables' through the heart-rending story of Bakha, a sweeper-boy. A young boy with his supple body and strong mind is exploited by the society because he is *valmiki* by caste. He wants to contribute sincerely, through his role, for the growth of the society. But, unfortunately, he is made to realize by the upper caste powerful people that he has to live in the peripheral areas

and cannot dare to be a part of the centre. Bakha is all helpless before this system. His vision of a homogeneous society gets shattered in the very beginning.

Anand acts more as a social activist to bring about reformative changes in the society. *Coolie*, another famous novel by Anand published in 1936, successfully communicates that the country is divided into two classes-the rich and the poor. The rich dominate and rule over the poor. The poor are taken to be the slaves and the rich become the masters. The novelist, through Munoo-the suffering hero of the novel, reflects on the hopes, aspirations, pains and frustrations of this class of the society. The novel is endowed with the exploitation of the lower class by the upper class. The powerful and the wealthy dictate terms to the poor and the deprived. The poor have to obey these rich masters to keep their body and soul together.

It is not 'art for art's sake' but 'art for lives' sake' that Anand believes in. His aim of writing is to improve the life condition of the deprived section of the society. Through his realistic portrayal of characters and true and bold depiction of the problems of Indian caste ridden society he has experienced himself, Anand seems committed to bring about reformative changes to change the lot of those who have been rendered helpless. He enjoys the status of a leading writer due to his realism, humanism and social protest. His humanism can be seen in his love for the working class people and the downtrodden. The protagonists that Anand has chosen for his novels are either sweepers or coolies or simple farming labourers.

Anand's *Untouchable* is the realistic portrayal of the horrifying sufferings and inhumane treatment of those who have been declared 'untouchables' by the Caste-Hindus. They are scavengers and have to carry human-dung of their higher caste Hindu masters on their head. This unbearable treatment seems to be their destiny which has gone down deep in their psyche that they have been sent by God to serve their masters.

The novel describes Bakha's experience in the course of one particular day, where the caste factor is the only criterion determining his destiny. The events and experiences of his one day speak a volume about his trauma of sufferings. His main grudge against the Caste- Hindus arises from the fact that they call him 'untouchable' and his touching makes them polluted. And to feel fresh and clean they have to take bath again and sprinkle some holy water on their clothes. Mulk Raj Anand, as a social-activist, is very much critical of this kind of attitude of the Caste-Hindus. The 'untouchable's are doubly exploited. First, they are compelled to carry human-waste on their heads and afterwards they are declared 'untouchables' as the job they do is not supposed to be done by any human being.

Anand very beautifully portrays reality what he has experienced himself. The tale of Bakha's sufferings is the reflection of the sufferings of one little boy belonging to 'untouchables' that Anand met in his childhood. In the very opening of the novel, the novelist bombards on the all authoritative attitude of the masters when *Havildar* Charat Singh comes shouting:

Ohe Bakhya! Ohe Bakhya! Ohe, scoundrel of a sweeper's son! come and clean a latrine for me! why aren't the latrines clean, the rogue of a Bakha? There is not one fit to go near. I have walked all round. Do you know you are responsible for my piles! I caught the infection sitting on one of those dirty latrines!(Untouchable p.1)

Bakha, fully committed to his vocation, works earnestly saying, "All right, Havildar Ji, I will get one ready for you at once". The job of sweeping and scavenging has turned the 'untouchables' into 'outcastes'. When they visit streets, they have to shout 'sweeper coming', 'sweeper coming' to forwarn the people around, otherwise they will be polluted. The *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*-the two upper castes in Hindu society - try to justify their superiority by asserting that they have earned their position, of being born in upper castes, by the good deeds of their previous lives.

The 'outcastes' are even not allowed to mount the platform of the 'village water well' because if they are ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the upper castes will consider the water polluted. Nor are they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it will contaminate the stream. So the 'outcastes' have to wait for some kind Hindu who could pour water into their dirty pitchers.

The exploitation of the 'untouchables' is not limited only to scavenging, sweeping and untouchability, rather their wives and daughters are looked down upon in such a way that they are exploited physically and emotionally. Sohini, the elegant sister of Bakha, is invited by Pandit Kali Nath, the priest of the temple, to clean the toilet of his house in the compound of the temple where he tries to molest her. When Sohini refuses to gratify his lust and objects to his advances, the Pundit turns the table upon her shouting polluted, polluted. Anand makes a scathing attack on these upper caste people who steer the society the way they like. Anand says that first the 'untouchables' are made to carry the human -waste on their heads. It is made their compulsion to earn bread to, somehow, sustain their lives. And then, all of a sudden, it is declared that they are filthy and, thus, 'untouchables'. They have to carry the burden of untouchability on their heads throughout their lives and they cannot integrate with the mainstream society. Sohini, who attempts to defend her chastity and virginity, is declared immoral by the orthodox Kali Nath. She is helpless to the extent that she cannot utter even a single word against this demon disguised as a religious authority. Bakha, enraged by the temple incident, wants to kill the Pandit in a fit of anger as it was something beyond tolerance for him. But he is also helpless and cannot dare to break the security cover around the Pundit. The novelist applies his wit in exposing the orthodox attitude of the demi-gods like Pundit Kali Nath who do not hesitate in coming closer to 'untouchables' as and when it suits them.

Bakha's anguish and disliking for the Caste-Hindu is quite evident in his encounter with a Caste-Hindu in the street of the village when the latter is touched unknowingly by Bakha. The Hindu shouts at Bakha:

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 bow-legged 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!
(*Untouchable* p.12)

Bakha, thus, got abused, rebuked and even slapped only due to touching him unknowingly. The novelist puts it emphatically that a neat and clean boy works diligently so that his masters of higher castes can enjoy a status-life but, ironically, he is not entitled even to touch them.

Noted critic E.M. Forster comments on Bakha's predicament: "The Sweeper is worse than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and 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 the 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 a disgusting object to the orthodox as he works along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming."

Caste proves to be a stigma for Bakha everywhere. In spite of his cleanliness, stout framework of body and high muscle power, Bakha is unable to impress his lords. Just like Munoo of *Coolie*, he tries to belong to them but he is made to realize that he is mere dirt in the system deep-rooted in the psyche of the Caste-Hindu. Even Mahatma Gandhi's speech on the life of 'scavengers' and 'untouchables' does not influence him much, though it acts as soothing balm up to some extent when the Mahatma exhorts people to extend dignity to every profession, be it scavenging or sweeping.

Bakha's tale of suffering is a valid cause to raise a banner of protest against this tyranny. Anand advocates for the reforms in our social set up. Adopting Gandhian philosophy he pleads for a casteless and classless society where all could avail equal opportunities paving way for the homogenization of the society.

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