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Social Realism In MR Anand's Novel '*Untouchable*'

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of Indo-Anglian fiction, alongside Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. Among these three literary stalwarts, Anand is particularly celebrated for his deep empathy toward the underprivileged and marginalized sections of Indian society. His novels focus on the struggles of the downtrodden, including outcastes and untouchables, making him a social reformer through literature. His works serve as powerful commentaries on the harsh realities of caste oppression, economic disparity, and human suffering in India.

Anand's literary journey was shaped by the socio-political changes occurring in India during the 20th century. The early decades of the century saw significant upheavals, including the rise of nationalist movements, social reform campaigns, and Gandhiji's philosophy of non-violence and equality. Anand's writing was deeply influenced by these developments, and his novels reflect the era's pressing concerns. His works, such as *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, highlight the injustices suffered by the lower castes and the working class. His ability to blend realism with a deep emotional and psychological insight made his fiction both poignant and revolutionary.

The period between 1917 and 1957 was crucial for India, as it witnessed a transformation from colonial rule to independence. This transition also reshaped Indian literature, giving rise to narratives that explored social injustices, identity crises, and cultural transitions. Mulk Raj Anand, with his deep social consciousness and commitment to justice, became one of the foremost voices of this literary movement, immortalizing the struggles of India's oppressed through his compelling fiction.

Keywords: Downtrodden, Indo-Anglian. Intuitive, Magnitude, Stagnation, Outcastes, Untouchable, Oppressed.

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand has made a significant contribution to the development of the Indo-Anglian novel, which has acquired an identity of its own over the years. Although Anand is at times prone to romanticizing his novels, he has largely freed the Indo-Anglian novel from the narrow confines of romance within which it had come to be posited by the earlier exponents. His novels undoubtedly project a lively image of India, and thus amply realistic sensibility of an artist, capable to plumb the very depths of human personality crushed under the inhuman social structure. He developed disgust for the crusty and hypocrisy of Indian feudal life with its caste, creeds, dead habits and customs. For an interpretation of the past, Anand thought the Marxian method better but considered humanism as a more comprehensive ideology.

'*Untouchable*', which went through nineteen rejections before finding a publisher, is now acclaimed as an archetypal novel, the best example we have in Commonwealth literature about conflict between society and the individual who is trying to free himself from it. Acclaimed as a minor classic when first published, *Untouchable* brought him world-wide recognition which is now available in forty languages, reprinted several times was reissued in 1970 in the Bodley Head edition with an 'Afterword' by Saros Cowasjee, Coolie, written with a deeper understanding of the nature of exploitation in a colonial situation, centers round Munoo, an orphan boy who dies of tuberculosis brought on by malnutrition. Munoo is not an untouchable, but comprehends great variety and a deeper level of degradation than does the untouchables.

Social Realism in '*Untouchable*'

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is a landmark novel that paints the brutal realities of Indian society in the early decades of the twentieth century with the colors of social realism. The novel is a striking portrayal of the plight of the oppressed, particularly the untouchables, who were subjected to inhuman treatment due to the rigid caste system. Anand's realistic storytelling exposes the injustices and harsh socio-economic conditions that defined the lives of the lower castes in pre-independence India. Through the tragic yet deeply moving journey of his protagonist, *Bakha*, Anand presents a heart-wrenching saga of suffering and silent endurance.

The novel does not depict suffering as an inevitable fate but instead portrays it as a man-made construct, enforced by societal norms and institutions. *Bakha's agony is not a divine punishment but a result of the social surroundings that systematically degrade and dehumanize him.* However, what makes *Untouchable* a profound piece of literature is that, despite all the oppression, there remains an immortal hope for the betterment of life, a belief in change and progress. Anand's writing is not just about reflecting the grim reality but also about inspiring transformation and reform.

Mulk Raj Anand is often regarded as a social reformer in literature, using his novels as a tool to question

social injustice, class discrimination, and economic disparity. His works are meant to disturb the reader's complacency, forcing them to confront the uncomfortable truths of caste and class oppression. Through *Untouchable*, Anand shocks readers out of their conventional attitudes and compels them to re-evaluate their perspectives on caste and human dignity. His humanism is evident in his deep empathy for the downtrodden, and he presents their struggles with raw emotional intensity.

Anand's social realism is deeply influenced by Marxist ideology, advocating for a classless and caste-free society. He aligns himself with the working classes and outcastes, making his writing a voice for the voiceless. Unlike writers who romanticize rural life or focus on upper-class narratives, Anand's work is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the oppressed, and he brings out their suffering with unfiltered realism.

Like Munshi Premchand, Anand is not just a novelist but a passionate social reformer. Both authors use fiction as a medium to critique the moral and social degradation caused by rigid hierarchies and oppressive traditions. Premchand's *Godan* and *Kafan*, much like Anand's *Untouchable*, trace the roots of social injustice to the erosion of unity, cooperation, and brotherhood. They highlight how inequality and tyranny have replaced humanity and empathy, leading to the marginalization of millions.

Anand does not merely narrate Bakha's suffering—he proposes solutions and envisions a future free from oppression. The novel's ending suggests different paths for social upliftment, including education, industrialization, and Gandhian principles. Through this, Anand not only exposes social evils but also presents a progressive and hopeful outlook for India's future.

In conclusion, *Untouchable* is a powerful blend of social realism, humanism, and revolutionary thought. It is a novel that challenges caste prejudices, provokes intellectual debate, and inspires a vision for a more just and equitable society. Anand's legacy as a writer remains unparalleled, as he continues to be a guiding light for generations fighting against oppression and inequality.

Anand has garnered a ripe harvest of experience before he assayed his first attempt at story-telling, despite the early age at which he has published *Untouchable*. True, he did not resort to any literary vivisection by allowing his realism to include every biographical and biological factor, record every breath, and analyze every individual thought of his characters, but none would question the skill with which he observes life in essential detail and describe it with an accuracy rarely exceeded. He was born into an atmosphere redolent with dissatisfaction of things as they were an atmosphere redolent with dissatisfaction of things as they were an atmosphere into which he infused his ardent belief that things could be bettered. In practice, therefore, he rejected the theory of art for art's sake; for there is abundant evidence that he was supremely conscious of a mission and that he definitely started out in many of his novels to reform abuses and right wrongs by means of subtle propaganda. He was a democrat with a passion for humanity. Anand appears to be universal in respect of the lower classes only. Just as no writer before Dickens had handled the English people, similarly no Indo-English writer before Anand had devoted so sustained and sympathetic an attention to the poor masses,

outcastes and the neglected lot of the society.

Anand was born in an age when moralizing was unusually popular and at the same time he had plenty to moralize about, the revolt against. He delights in the painting of those elements of human nature which call forth the common emotions of mankind like tears, anger, joy, sorrow, pity, sympathy, compassion and so on.

In *Untouchable* Anand reveals the curse of untouchability, exploitation, child labor, social governance. Social set up of society, customs, religious belief, prejudices and the theme of the miserable masses is studied in a rural and urban setting where hunger and starvation are caused by the operation of natural forces. This is nothing but a reflection of society. Both these novels deal with the theme of untouchability, exploitation, poverty, hunger and the suffering of the Indian masses. The theme of suffering caused by vicious circumstances in life has been realistically depicted, and the heroic struggle of the central figures, against heavy odds, raises the novels to the lofty heights of an epic.

Like Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Premchand's *Godan*, Mulk Raj Anand has created a unique protagonist Bakha in *Untouchable*. He has taken the theme of his novels from real life and so his novel is nothing but social realism. He brought to fictional life Bakha, his boyhood companion, the untouchable sweeper boy, in *Untouchable*. Anand's mother abused Bakha for 'polluting' her son when Bakha, carried home a bleeding Anand, hurt by a stone. Bakha is reviled by caste Hindus as he cleans latrines, but Anand captures Bakha is reviled by caste Hindus as he cleans latrines, but Anand captures Bakha's pride in his work. He tackles his odious job with a conscientiousness that invests his movement with beauty. The novel was not only a powerful social tract, but a remarkable technical feat as in a single days' action the author builds round his hero a spiritual crisis broad enough to embrace the whole of India. Forster wrote in its introduction. "It has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it."

Anand's realism is also seen in his use of literal translation of Punjabi exclamations and swear-words. These expressions like "Rape-mother", "Rape-sister", "WhaGuru", "Ri daughter of a Pie" are frequent in the novel. "Dogs" is the name that normally comes to the mind of the privileged folk to identify the outcaste. The "touching incident" reveals the horror of being an untouchable. The people who gather around Bakha shoot abuses by calling him, "low-caste vermin", "Swine", "Cock-eyed son of a bow-legged Scorpion", "dog", "brute", "dirty dog", "Son of a bitch", "Son of a dog", "Offspring of a pig" etc. These abusive words thrown on a lonely and helpless person and in opposition to the privileged folk's claim of being "twice-born". These words actually reveal their polluted mind. Excessive use of such expressions has been criticized as coarse and vulgar, but Anand could not have presented Punjabi life so realistically without a liberal use of such expressions as characterize modes of speech in Punjab.

Thus, Anand is a social reformist. He has concern for untouchables so he avoids all sorts of overt propaganda and sees that the novel develops along with the character in action. His strict fidelity to the facts of life and a variety of the social mores makes the novel at once a significant social document as well as a symbolic

projection of the whole saga of human suffering. Bakha is put to a complex congeries of social realities, and the three incidents in which he finds himself unwittingly implicated, are keyed up to bring out the poignancy in the life of his protagonist.

Certainly, Anand's novel *Untouchable* is a masterly work because it evinces a happy harmony between his social preoccupations and artistic gifts. As Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar sums up the novel:

Untouchable strikes us as the picture of the place of a society, and the certain persons not easily to be forgotten; a picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy. As a novelist addressing himself to the task of exposing certain evils, Anand has been as effective as Dickens Himself.

Thus, Anand has exposed social evil in its myriad manifestations and has evocatively presented different layers of human experience in the fiction. He enables to view humanity at large in a proper perspective. His close association with the underdogs and his passionate recordation of their woes has given his novel a rare cogency and an intimate quality of felt life.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand is widely regarded as a pioneering figure in Indo-Anglian literature, and his works are deeply rooted in social realism, which serves as the core essence of his major novels. His novel *Untouchable* is a powerful testament to his commitment to social change, shedding light on the grim realities faced by the downtrodden, the suppressed untouchables, and all those who suffer at the hands of social hierarchies. Through his compelling narrative, Anand exposes the harshness of caste discrimination, poverty, and injustice that plague Indian society.

A profound examination of *Untouchable* reveals that Anand did not merely write a story but crafted a mirror to reflect the injustices of the rigid caste system. The novel follows Bakha, a young untouchable sweeper, who aspires for dignity but is constantly humiliated and degraded due to his social status. The protagonist's suffering is not just personal but symbolic of the larger oppression faced by millions in India. Anand's portrayal of Bakha's aspirations, struggles, and moments of despair is a direct critique of the entrenched caste prejudices and the dehumanization of lower castes. His ability to capture the raw emotions and inner turmoil of his characters makes *Untouchable* a masterpiece of social realism, highlighting Anand's vision of a just and egalitarian society.

However, Anand's literary contributions extend beyond *Untouchable*. His other works, such as *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, and *The Big Heart*, also reflect his strong belief in humanism, social justice, and economic equality. In *Coolie*, he addresses the exploitation of child labor and the plight of industrial workers. *Two Leaves and a Bud* exposes the brutal treatment of plantation laborers by British colonial authorities. *The Big Heart* reflects the conflict between traditional artisans and modern industrial forces, portraying the struggles of a society undergoing rapid transformation. Through these novels, Anand becomes a voice for the voiceless, championing the cause of the underprivileged and marginalized.

Beyond his role as a social realist, Anand was a visionary thinker, a master of literary craftsmanship, and a deeply committed humanist. He infused his narratives with philosophical depth, psychological insight, and moral responsibility, making his novels much more than just social commentaries. His hatred for social evils, his socialist leanings, and his realist narrative style all contribute to his position as one of the greatest novelists of modern India.

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