

A Critical Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract:

The turn of the nineteenth century witnessed a rapid development in Indian Writings in English especially Indian novels in English. One of the trios of Indian novelists in English, Mulk Raj Anand emerged as a significant novelist who gained popularity worldwide. His six novels published between 193 to 1942 dealt with the different themes and present realistic picture of the urban proletariat and low caste people. Anand's masterpiece *Untouchable* (1935) attracted attention of the readers and scholars towards the social evils, oppression of the low-class people, especially outcastes prevalent in the South Indian societies. The present study is an attempt to critically analyse Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*.

Keywords —Bakha, Forster, Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchable

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian English novelist Mulk Raj Anand is one of the most incredible Indian English novelists whose writing career covers over a period of four decades. As a humanist and a socialist, Anand was against superstitions, casteism, capitalism, exploitation of poor, colonialism etc. He condemned the barriers that disturbed happiness and comfort of human life especially in the South Indian Society. Nandini Bhattacharya rightly opines, "The entire question of sanitation, disease and public health was further acerbated with the rapid urbanization, sudden explosion of population, and creation/accumulation of unmanageable waste in the European as well as Indian spaces. All these concerns inform and enrich our understanding of *Untouchable*" (191). Anand advocated that all the people must have liberty and equality for a happy, prosperous, peaceful, and healthy life. Hereiteratedon the need for emancipation of lower class especially outcaste people from the clutches of untouchability, a social evil. For this, he played role of an educator, social reformer and crusader against

such social evils that were prevalent in the South Indian Society and projected against the liberation of outcastes. He vied attention of readers, audience and the upper-class people against the exploitation, enslavement and ill-treatment of the downtrodden people. He experienced that many individuals were confronted with the human rights problems such as torture, hunger, and socio-cultural discrimination. He propagated that the real humanness lies in the treatment of people with compassion and pity. As a writer, Mulk Raj Anand addressed the social problems in a realistic manner.

II. DISCUSSION

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* mirrors the traumatic horror of untouchable life in India. The pathetic sufferings undergone by the untouchables have found voices of resentment, anger and protest well depicted in the novel. The religious history reveals that the untouchables are part and parcel of Hindu society in their social and religious practices and values. The untouchables are subjected to traditional disapproval to low work and social ostracism. It appears as if the untouchables were a

separate nation. Their education, their residential localities, their jobs were all determined by the Caste-Hindus. The upper caste- Hindus built up the philosophy of caste superiority in order to enable them to justify any act of brutality taken against the untouchables. The literary scholars and readers of Mulk Raj Anand try to create a link between fiction and human rights principles. They try to build the training of basic freedoms to further develop basic liberties and rehearses that are set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through the novels of Mulk Raj Anand. The link between the literary art and human rights is profound touching almost every epoch and every society on earth. Therefore, they find suitable and perhaps relevant to learn Human Rights principles through literature and Anand's writing fulfil their needs.

S. M. Michael writes, "To be an Untouchable in the Indian caste system is to be very low in and partially excluded from an elaborately hierarchical social order. Untouchables are persons of a discrete set of low castes, excluded on account of their extreme collective impurity from particular relations with higher beings, both human and divine" (2). However, the social condition of the untouchables in India was considered worst before Independence. It is noteworthy that Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* was published in 1935 and the Government of India Act 1935 came into existence in the same year. The novelist depicts that the upper caste Hindus treated them badly and identified them 'pariah'. In this way, the untouchables were not allowed to earn their livelihood in every walk of life like others. They were not given rights to get education, professional career or equal rights and opportunities like people from upper class of society. Moreover, they were also not permitted to enter any temple because it would be defiled and polluted by them if they entered it or touched it. The untouchables were always kept away from the upper caste Hindus so that they would not touch them and defile. They must shout from distance of their approach so that the upper caste Hindus could keep themselves away from them. The untouchables must live outside the town and could live only on the left-over food from the plates of the rank Hindus. They must not climb

up the caste and the steps but could beg from a distance. If by mistake they touched anything, the upper caste Hindus sprinkled water on the things touched by the untouchables and made them pure. Even the untouchables were given rights to take water from wells or the lakes meant for the upper caste Hindus. They could receive water from the caste Hindus only as favour. Thus, the social condition of the untouchables was worse than that of the animals. A writer's views and mind-set condition articulated his work. They are the result of several influences that operate upon him. Mulk Raj Anand is no exception in this respect. His domestic background, his social milieu, his education, his readings and his connections with people, have all conditioned his literary output and gone into the making of Anand the novelist. Mulk Raj Anand had first-hand knowledge of the country life of Punjab and North-East Frontier Provinces of those days.

As a child Anand lived in the army cantonment. The colony of the untouchables was quite close to it. He played with the children of this colony. He had closely seen their lives and was affected by it. He developed sympathy for them. He had seen people in the rural spaces living under squalid conditions and utter poverty. He had also seen village life of people who were exploited by parasites and religious hypocrites. He had experienced the fact that how the upper-class sections of the society gave inhuman and insulting treatment to the lower and backward class section of the society. All these cast a spell on the mind of Mulk Raj Anand. Consequently, he decided to write about those people who were being insulted by orthodox Hindus. Through his novels, short stories, and creative writing he determined to give voice the voiceless, marginalized section of the society. Moreover, Gandhian impact on Anand is also obvious. Shiv Kumar Yadav argues, "The influence of Gandhi on Anand is an open secret, but in *The Untouchable*, he is so enchanted with Gandhism that he visualises the problem of untouchability thoroughly through the lens of Gandhi having few disagreements" (11).

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is one such effort to give voice to the unending and unbearable

sufferings of the untouchables. The novel portrays the period around 1930-40 as the problem of untouchability and life of outcastes were severe in those days. The caste system in Hindu religion is very old. But it was based on the work and not on birth. In addition to deliberate on Anand's depiction of the pitiable status of outcastes, the study also deals with the critical evaluation of Lakha as the Jamadar of the sweepers of Bulashah. He is an untouchable of the common sort who submissively accepts his lot and feels no resentment. He represents that type of sweepers who were considered uncultured, unhealthy, and servile sometime. Though he gave up work, he enjoyed a superior position among the sweepers. His son Bakha has also come up to take his place to help him.

The close reading of the novel reveals that Bakha, 'the son of Lakha' and the leader of 'all sweepers in the town and the cantonment is the central character of the novel. He is depicted a young boy of eighteen. The novel on account of the variety of experiences 'of a day in the life of Bakha' presents the inner thoughts of the protagonist in the 'stream of consciousness' technique. The readers can have a glance at and experience sufferings of Bakha and recognise painful and subjugated life of the lower-class. Thus, Bakha's role and appearance symbolize a stout and healthy man. Further, the real picture of the people live in the outcaste colony is equally realistic and graphic. Bakha and Sohini are exceptional examples of cleanness. But his brother Rakha is a representative of the people living in the colony. Rakha, brother of Bakha helps readers understand novelist's motive of making symbolic discrimination between cleanness and filthiness in the lives of two brother respectively. The novelist presents the pitiable experiences of the protagonist of the novel, Bakha. The realistic description of the outcastes' colony, the brutal treatment given to Bakha by the upper caste Hindus and its analysis is significant to understand the plight of the social pariahs. This section also includes the episodes like the touching episode, the molest episode and the chapatti throwing episode. By writing *Untouchable* Mulk Raj Anand tried to support the social pariah—voiceless section of the society. The opening of the

novel, the description of the outcaste colony, the bitter experiences of the untouchables or social pariahs, the humdrum life of the untouchables, the inner voice of the untouchables, and their insults, hypocrisy and hunger for food and sex—all these aspects have been depicted very well in the novel.

The description of the bitter and painful experiences of the protagonist which are rationally presented by the writer, powerfully draws readers' attention to the sub-human treatment given to Bakha, Sohini and other outcastes. The novel portrays a variety of tormenting experiences of the hero and what makes him extraordinarily intense is the fact that they happen in a quick succession in a single day: Sohini, Bakha's sister is not permitted to fill her pitcher from the caste-well; The cigarettes are flung at Bakha; Jalebis and chapattis are thrown at him; the temple-priest shouts that Bakha has polluted the Temple; Pandit Kali Nath tries to molest Bakha's sister; Bakha is abused for defiling the house of an upper-caste Hindu Lady. The sequence of these incidents may or may not be important, but the reality depicted by the novelist cannot be ignored. Further, sometimes the characters speak, at others the situation.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude the discussion about the voices of the marginalized in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*, one can express one's agreement with E. M. Forster that untouchable could have been written by an Indian writer only who observed untouchability from outside. After its publication, the novel was appreciated by a few people but criticized by many. Several newspapers in London criticized it and hailed it as 'a dirty work'. But this criticism was well responded by E. M. Forster in the "Preface" of the novel. Forster writes, "It seems to me indescribably clean, and I hesitate for words in which this can be conveyed. Avoiding the rhetoric and circumlocution, it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it" (9).

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