



MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE AND COOLIE ARE NOTHING BUT "THE PICTURE OF THE SUPPRESSED, OPPRESSED AND DISPOSSESSED POOR SOULS": AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper examines Mulk Raj Anand's contribution to the evolution of the genre 'novel' which is used by him as a means for communicating some truths of life, projecting the problem of human sensibility in the present complex and picturing the tragic dilemma of modern man with a focus on the portrayal of the suppressed, oppressed and dispossessed poor souls. It neatly portrays his characteristic concerns of the social evils that affect the Hindu people and the society in India as well through the pathetic condition of the characters like the untouchables Bakha and Munoo and studies in depth how the untouchables and coolies are suppressed, oppressed and even humiliated to the core by pointing out cruel man's inhumanity to innocent man on earth.

In the 1930's, there were such three distinguished novelists as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan who could be considered as "the inaugurators of the novel form itself..... they defined the area in which the Indian novels were to operate, drew the first models of its characters and themes and elaborated its particular logic" (Walsh 62) what is seen in Mulk Raj Anand is a humane concern for the underdogs, in R.K. Narayan "the comic mode as equivalent to the tragic in his evocation in mediocrity" (Narasimhaiah 4) and in Raja Rao, "a serious-mystical, metaphysical or transcendental" treatment of life" (P61).

Mulk Raj Anand's contribution to the evolution of this genre lies in the fact that he had "freed the Indo-Anglian novel from the narrow confines of Romance within which it had come to be posited by its earlier exponents" (Paul 1). He wanted to use 'fiction' as a means for communicating some truths of life, projecting the problems of human sensibility in the present complex, and picturing the tragedy of modern man. Anand's plea for a truly humanistic art commensurate with the needs of our time is typically Indian. His humanistic vision helped richly in raising the untouchables, the peasants, the serfs, the Coolies and the other oppressed, suppressed and disposed members of the society to human dignity and self-awareness in view of the abjectness, apathy and despair in which they are sunk" (P93). Anand's concept of humanism was based on European Hellenism which emphasizes the fact that man is the measure of all things. Anand was drawn towards Marxist ideology. It is not dogma but the humanism underlying Marxism attracted him most. Anand's acquaintance with Gandhiji in 1932 and his stay with him in Sebarmathi Ashram had mellowed him into a fine humanist. He believed that novel could become the weapon of humanism because the novel is complementary to the other disciplines, for confrontation on another plane of the human situation. He says:

"The novel states the problems of man's destiny, it does not solve them, as did the old epic and the bardic recital' but it can focus attention on the real drama of body-soul..... the truth of life, with all its suffering and its mightiness which may resurrect genuine humanity through the writer's ability to bear the yoke of pity" (Anand 120)

Anand's first novel **untouchable** projects his characteristic his characteristic concerns of the social evils that effect the Hindu people and the society in India. The matter of concern is the untouchability, an unhealthy result of the existing Caste-system. By taking this, cruel evil 'caste' as the theme of the novel, the novelist's intention is to create in the minds of readers an awareness of the dehumanizing social evil, thus inducing their kindness and compassion for the suppressed and oppressed. The novel is episode in form which covers the happenings in the life of Bakha, a low-caste sweeper, in a single day from dawn to dusk. It is a well-organised novel dealing with the problems of "Caste and poverty, squalor and backwardness, ignorance and superstition" (Iyengar 338).

Being greatly influenced by Gandhiji in that he wrote about the poorest, the lowliest and the most exploited sections of the Hindu society, Mulk Raj Anand projects in his **Untouchable** the society oppressed people. The author provides a setting for the story by depicting the out-caste's colony in the beginning of the novel. The colony is dark, damp, uncongenial and unhygienic for human living. The one-roomed thatched mud-houses are not fit for human habitation. The scavengers, Leather workers, washermen, barbers, water-carriers and grass-cutters live like sub-human entities. The outcaste's colony itself is situated and segregated from the living places of the Caste Hindus. The colony is a concrete symbol of the evil practice of 'untouchability'. The protagonist of the novel is Bakha, is a sweeper and his father is the Jamedar of all sweepers in the town of Bulandshahr. The family consists of Lakha, the father, Bakha and Rakha, the sons and Sohini, the daughter.



Their way of life indicates how the untouchables behave even at the dawn of the day. This is noticed when the father wakes up his son as;

“Get up, oh you Bhakya, one son of a pig!
Get up and attend to the latrines or sepoy
Will be angry” (Untouchable 13)

This abusive call from Lakha angered Bakha as he is already rather depressed. As a young out-caste with a modern out-look, Bakha hates the work of cleaning latrines. Yet he is a dexterous workman. The novelist beautifully describes Bakha’s daily morning. Routine painstakingly pointing out his efficiency and Callousness of the beneficiaries. As the barracks, Bakha cleans three rows of latrines twice. Work is worship for Bakha for he does the first morning task of latrine cleaning to the fullest satisfaction of the Caste-Hindus. Havildar Charat Singh Commended him for his work efficiency. in fact, he performs his work as an art. Havildar Charat Sing commended him for his work efficiency. In fact, he performs his work as an art. Havildar Charat Singh’s offer of a new Hockey stick has called forth that trial of servility in Bakha which he has inherited from his forefathers:

“the weakness of the down-trodden, the helplessness of the poor
and the indigent receiving help, the passive contentment of the
bottom dog suddenly illuminated by the prospect of fulfillment
of a secret and a long cherished desire” (Untouchable 18)

Bakha is moved to the core as is usual among the untouchables, at the benevolent act of the Havildar. The out-castes are economically dependent on the caste-Hindus. After cleaning the Latrines, Bakha has to clean the surrounding areas around the latrines. He collects the refuse lay strewn around the latrines and burns it. He does it for twenty minutes. Anand here presents the feelings of Bakha while he does the cleaning work thus:

“But he worked unconsciously. The forget fullness or emptiness
persisted in him over long periods. It was a sort of insensibility
created in him, by the kind of work he had to do” (P21)

The thirst of the untouchables cannot be quenched as they have no well of their own. There is no facility to store enough water at home. It will cost a lot of money to dig a well at the hilly terrain. That is why Sohini, Bakha’s sister, runs to the well owned by a Caste-Hindu when asked for water. Meanwhile, Anand portrays how the untouchable women are treated and looked down upon as a pleasure-providing tools. The description of the pathetic conditions of the untouchables while they go for fetching water from the well of a Caste-Hindu will speak volumes of the indignities to which they are subjected:

“The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform
surrounding the well, because, if they were to draw water from
it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the
water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby
book as their use of it would contaminate the stream” (P24)

So the untouchable women have to patiently wait in queue for some good-hearted and sympathetic Hindus to come and draw water from the well and give. The plight of the untouchables for water is exposed in these lines:

“Oh! Maharaj ! Maharaj ! won’t you draw some water please? We
beg you. We have been waiting here for a long time. We will
be grateful”, shouted a chorus of voices to a sepoy who was in a hurry” (P28)

Not only this, the untouchables are not even allowed to attend school and learn. While the upper caste boys of the age of Bakha persist learning, Bakha is still persisting in his heart. As a child of the modern India, Bakha has been impressed by the clear-cut styles of the European dress. He has an urge to learn, to read and to write. His self-education does not proceed beyond the alphabets. So educational opportunities are thus denied to untouchables. The tendency of the poor people is to compensate for their inferiority by smoking majestically like the rich people. At the betel-lead, shop with great humility and joined hands, Bakha begs to know as to where he should place the coin on the place pointed out by the shop-keeper. The betel-leaf seller sprinkles water over it, because of the pollution complex. Having purified it, the shop-keeper throws the coin at the counter. Then he flings a pocket of Red-Lamp cigarettes at Bakha as a butcher might throw bones to an insistent dog. He picks up the pocket and moves away. It is the belief of the upper caste Hindus that the objects polluted by the touch of untouchables can be purified by sprinkling water on them. Bakha received another blow of humiliation when he buys ‘jabelis’. Even here the untouchables are exploited and insulted by the shop-keepers:

“The shop-keepers always deceived the sweepers and the poor
people, charging much higher prices as to compensate
themselves for the pollution they courted by dealing with the out castes” (P49)



Here also, the boy Bakha will have to place the coins at a particular place on the shoe-board. The coins at a particular place on the shoe-board. The confectioner's assistant sprinkles some water on it and takes it. The confectioner puts the sweets in a piece of paper and throws it at Bakha like a cricket ball. Bakha feels embarrassed and humiliated. It is in this way that the untouchables are suppressed, oppressed and even humiliated to the core.

Then occurs the pollution episode which has spoiled Bakha's whole day. While walking along the street and enjoying eating the jalebis, Bakha inadvertently touches a Lalaji. The touched man makes a hue and cry about the pollution. Abuses came like a shower:

“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 low-legged scorpion. Now I will have to go and take bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt, I put on this morning” (P51)

These words of Lalaji reveal the feelings of the uppercaste people about the untouchables. Taking into account all these, Anand's reformist zeal compels him to suggest ways and means to build a casteless and creedless society. K.R.S. Iyengar says,

“As a kind of epilogue : Anand offers three solutions to Bakha's agony of self-abasement and total frustration” (P338)

The first solution is proselitization, i.e., conversion to Christianity to escape from the clutches of Hindu cruelty. The second one is that of Gandhiji for who untouchability is “the greatest blot on Hinduism” (P161). To quote the statement of Balarama Gupta here rather evidently as:

“Realising the injustice done to untouchables, Gandhiji generously, called upon them ‘Harijans’ or ‘the men of God’ and denounced untouchability as a grave sin” (P25)

Gandhiji expressed his wish as to be born as an untouchable:

“If I have to reborn, I should wish to be born as an untouchable” (P162)

The last solution is ‘introduction of the flush system as the only solution to the problem of untouchability, that is put in the mouth of a young poet, the editor of Nawan Jug who seems to be the mouthpiece of Anand. To the poet, “Caste is an intellectual aristocracy, based on the conceit of the pundits being otherwise holy democratic” (P171). To achieve social reforms, a change of heart is needed. Humanism is a weapon to combat the evil forces corroding the humanity. Anand establishes the dignity of common man like Bakha in the novel like Untouchable. Though the novel ends inconclusively, Anand asserts, “on the surface of the earth, if not in the depth of the sku, a change is at hand” (Foster 8). The change will be organic and not mechanical” (untouchable 171)

Coolie is an attempt by Anand to show how the canker of class system segregates and subjugates thousands of people into perpetual misery and eventual extinction. The author portrays artistically the capitalist system of exploitation. The introduction of machines in the place of primitive Indian modes of production results in social progress and development. But mechanization also gives rise to so many new problems. People are segregated on a new line as capitalists and workers. Under capitalist economy profit is the main motive and the poor poorer. The economic contradiction between the haves and the have-nots leads to hostile situation and exploitation. As a result, the labourers or coolies are impelled to resort to war-path taking cudgels against the rich. In turn, the rich suppress and exploit the poor and make them disposed at all levels.

The novel **Coolie** presents the various experiences of Munoo at the hands of different exploiters at different places. Munoo, the hero of the novel, is a coolie forced to work even from his childhood and his life is a journey from innocence to experience, from life to death. Munoo plays different roles in different places i.e. at Kangra hills, the role of looking after the cattle, at shamnager, the role of a domestic servant in a middle-class family, at Daultpur being a worker in a primitive pickle factory at Bombay, a labourer in a cotton mill and at simla, that of a page-cum-rickshaw puller to an Anglo-Indian woman. Being a passive character, Munoo is drifted by the social evil of exploitation in his native place itself. The village landlord has taken away the five acres of land for his father's debts and for the unpaid rent and the interest of the mortgage. The cruel landlord does not show any mercy even when there is draught and bad harvest. Munoo's father dies of shock and disappointment. In this early phase of his life, Munoo is much affected due to his father's debts and this phase of his life highlights the plight of the poor peasants of the cruel hands of the rural landlords. The ugly face of fendalism deprives the peasants of the means of their livelihood-even the little piece of land and the exorbitant rate of interest charged by the



landlords turns of peasants into helpless victims of exploitation thus making them dispossessed of their properties and belongings and leaving them depressed to the core.

The very first lesson Munoo learnt in the modern world is:

“He realized finally his position in the world.
He was to be a slave, a servant who should
do the work, all odd jobs, someone to be
abused, even beaten” (Coolie 30)

Munoo realizes the fact that money decides the relationship between man and man Munoo works day and night and earns only two annas a day. What Munoo experiences at the Vegetable market is only poverty, hunger and degradation. The scene at Chaupati, a part of Bombay, is one of hunger, poverty and extreme degradation and suffering in these words:

“The naked lappers moaned. The others clutched their garments
closer or awakened suddenly from the intoxication of the sweet
early morning’s sleep, thankful to God even in their discomfort
as they mourned Ram, Ram< Sri, Sri” (Coolie 192)

The Coolies are landless and homeless people who possess only their hands (labour) to sell. But the supply of labour is so high that they offer themselves for low wages for any available work in the cities, in the factories. In the market, etc. The money-minded employers underemploy them. Jemie Thomas employs Harihar and his family and Munoo as workers with a low salary. He exploits the poor by appointing them for low-wages, lending money at an exorbitant rate of interest and also giving his huts on high rents. Jimmie exploits the workers by forcing them to accept the loan lent by him at high rate of interest. He would say

“And now, I suppose you have no money.
I will advance you ten rupees at four annas
In the rupee, which sum I will add to the regular
Monthly commission you give to me.. Agreed? (P200)

Indeed, the vivid picture of the Coolies brings out the inhumanity bred by avarice and Cash-nexus. Anand portrays how even nature is also hostile to the labourers. Once thunder storm and pelting rain render them homeless and their huts being washed away. All these bouts of exploitation and dispossession at various levels grind the Coolies to dust because of their low-born, and low-placed economic condition. Munoo who moves from place to place from the Kangra Hills down to the plains of Bombay and back to the Punjab hills is made to realize his pathetic predicament – an unsettled existence. He is everywhere as the scum of the earth when he stands in front of a Sikh’s shop, as a leper when he buys a soda and is cursed beyond measure by the cart driver. He is, at every turn of his life, ruthlessly exploited and dispossessed of even his little means.

To conclude, the life history of Munoo is nothing but the life history of starving millions of India who are over-worked and treated as beasts of burden till they die prematurely, die of hunger and suffering. In Munoo, one gets a picture of a harassed underdog, a helpless victim of oppressive forces and a sport of quixotic destiny. Munoo does symbolize the disinherited and the dispossessed of the earth whose tragic life indicates man’s inhumanity to man on earth.

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