

CULTURAL CONFLICT IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S 'UNTOUCHABLE'

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Abstract

"A powerful undercurrent of humanism runs through all the novels of Mulkraj Anand" (Krishna Menon in Apology for Heroism). Among the Indo-English Novelists; Mulk Raj Anand is the most conspicuously committed writer. He enjoys the reputation of being a pioneer novelist because of a corpus of creative fiction of sufficient bulk and quality. In the choice of themes, Anand is unquestionably an innovator. He is the first novelist writing in English to choose as his raw material the lower-class life of the Indian masses. The novel 'Untouchable' published in 1935 was his first attempt at novel writing and it proved to be a great success. The theme of the novel is the evils of untouchability commonly prevalent in Indian society. It not only exposes the contempt of the caste Hindu for the poor untouchables but also highlights Anand's sympathy with the underdogs and his humanitarian and reformative zeal. A ray of hope is awakened towards the end of the novel when Bakha listens to the speech of Mahatma Gandhi. It instils him with a confidence that on the surface of the Earth, if not in the depths of the Sky, a change is at hand.

Key-Words: Culture, Conflict, Humanism.

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The novel evidently expresses the novelist's belief in the dictum '*man is the measure of all things*'. To him, man is able to remove the misery and unhappiness in society with the aid of advancing science and technology and with the practice of love and compassion for the weak and low. But in case of Bakha, man is the root cause of his problems and sufferings. Anand, here, tries to counter his belief by mentioning that casteism is a heinous crime and it should be abolished. In the novel the author has created a character who is seeking identity for himself in a world which is forever suppressing and torturing the weak. Generally, His heroes are seen striving and adjusting with the present and struggling for the future. They do not deny the codes set for them immediately rather they command the codes to be changed by the oppressors. In *Untouchable* the novelist almost dreads the flight of imagination; feels shy of soaring high and keeps close to the ground with a vengeance. He does not hesitate to turn the floodlight on the darkest spots in Indian Life. Anand has, in the novel, chiefly dealt with the ghastly evil of untouchability afflicting the Hindu Society of the Pre-Partition era in the larger back-drop of the caste-configurations within the Hindu Society that has successfully stifled the healthy growth of a considerable section of Indian Community for centuries. This long drawn tradition which has heinously affected the Indian society, even before partition, is the main focus of the research paper. It not only highlights the tumultuous life of Bakha at the hands of the so called sophisticated elite Hindus of our society but also dares to peep into the lives of those who, despite the treacherous life, provide Bahka the power of sustenance and endurance.

The opening paragraph of the novel epitomizes the '*big divide*' between the untouchables and other resident communities in the town. Anand has described with remarkable realism the ugliness of the outcastes' colony situated in the outskirts of the city. It is a dark, damp and dreary place which suggests the feeling of apathy and indifference of the caste Hindu towards untouchables. The scavengers, the leather workers, the washer men, the barbers and the water carriers live in sheer isolation cut off from the civilised life. The sweepers, who are responsible for the maintenance of cleanliness, are destined to live in places, unknown to hygiene and sanitation. The novel actually has no story interest; it is just an impassioned plea for a social cause. It exposes the evils of untouchability and analyses its various aspects – social, moral, psychological, religious etc.

Actually, caste system dominates and organises the division of labour and money in human society. It is a system of social satisfaction and bases for strong affirmative action. Historically, communities were defined into thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called 'Jati'. The jatis were further grouped by the Brahminical texts under four categories known as 'Vernas via Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Certain people who were engaged in lower works were excluded altogether, ostracised by all other castes and treated as '*untouchables*'. Ironically, what had begun as a classification based on the type of work performed by individuals, eventually decayed into a rigid stratification with the Brahmins forming the top of the pyramid and shudras the base. Thus, the caste system based on services and functions which was meant to be an all inclusive order without any common dogma allowing the fullest latitude to each group changed with the passage of time. Brahmins, kshatriyas and vaishyas tried their best to curb the freedom of shudras who formed the base of the caste- pyramid.

The novel clearly foregrounds the trials and tribulations of the lives of untouchables in pre-independence Indian society which was marked by caste consciousness among people. It traces the inhuman treatment meted out to the marginalised by the upper dominating castes. They don't have access even to the basic amenities of life. The scavengers, the lowest of the lowly castes, are the worst sufferers as they are considered most polluted and have to announce their arrival by shouting, '*Posh, posh, sweeper coming*' (Untouchable, 55) lest they should accidentally touch any upper- caste Hindu and pollute him. The oppression of the rural poor and the use of the state power have been exceedingly highlighted by the novelist. The novel traces how the master discourse of the upper castes does not allow the untouchables any room for resistance and how under the panoptic gaze of the dominating discourse the marginalised untouchables are forced to internalize the dominating ideology. Thus, Anand lays bare the evils of the caste-system in Hindu dominated society. The line, '*They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt*' (untouchable, p.39) sums up the novelist's understanding of the grim realities of India's social life.

The novel begins with an autumn morning in Bakha's life. It is significant that he is constricted by a '*moral*' hindrance and a '*notion of detachment*.' Both concepts are products of orthodox Hinduism which misinterprets the caste system. Throughout the novel the Hindus are shown treating Bakha, the supreme specimen of humanity, worse than they treat their animals. He is introduced as the most conspicuous man in the colony. The animal imagery in his description is a device to hint that Bakha is a moral victim of the society which treats him as a butcher might treat a dog sniffing around his shop. But

actually, he is a tiger at bay, an enmeshed lion and a wild horse. He is extremely sensitive and his aspirations deserve a decent life with a good education. But in spite of his merits he is insulted and put beyond the possibility of recognition. The baggage of insults which are showered on his head by the upper class-men and women alike, are merited by the accident of his birth as an untouchable. It brings to light the sufferings and sorrows that the Hindu upper caste wrought upon the poor sweeper who is the parish protagonist of the novel.

We are brought in contact with a community which is ridden with superstition and false notions of class and hypocrisy. The Hindu priests are the worst of the lot and in the figure of pundit Kali Nath we see the worst possible conjunction of decadent traditions and hypocrisy. He is one of the priests-in-charge of the temple, ill-humoured old devil who symbolizes hypocrisy, gluttony and false pretensions of the caste Hindu and their negative attitude towards untouchables. Though he would never allow an untouchable to enter the temple, he has no compunctions in making indecent suggestions to Sohini, Bakha's sister, and he even tries to molest her. Pride in his superior caste has made him cruel and unjust to the untouchables, more so because the poor, weak and helpless cannot hit him back. Mulk Raj has satirized religious hypocrisy through the portrait of Kali Nath.

Besides this, we have in Untouchable a minor character named Gulabo who is a beautiful, fair complexioned, middle aged washer-woman who regards herself as superior to the untouchables and sweepers. Here an analysis of our society will clearly describe the reason which has led to the destruction of all moral values for Gulabo. A beautiful outcaste girl in a Hindu upper-caste dominated Indian village or town is most likely to become what Gulabo is. Through her, Anandhas emphatically expressed that the passion of love knows no caste system and finds that poverty stricken and fear-ridden outcaste girls are easily or forcibly accessible to the high castes' gratification. Exploitation through caste system has been a hydra-headed phenomenon. Besides, through the character of Gulabo, the writer projects that among the outcaste too there is a hierarchy and Gulabo's caste is at the top. She is, therefore, proud and looks down upon sections that belong to the lowest strata of this hierarchy.

Though Untouchable is dominated by a Hindu population, considerable space is given to the *Muslims*. This segment of the population is unconscious of the Hindu bias against the outcastes as Islam treats all human beings equally and therefore, has no practice similar to untouchability. The Hindus, both the upper-classes and the untouchables, do not have a clear idea about Islam and its culture. It is due to this

ignorance that they *consider Muslims* inferior to them and treat them not less than the untouchables. Bakha, on the contrary, has a close affinity with the *Muslims* and in their company he feels comfortable and worth full. This realisation comes to the readers through a series of scenes in which Bakha interacts with them. For instance, while the Hindu betel-leaf seller flings a packet of cigarettes at Bakha, as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop, the Muslim barber asks him to bend down and light his cigarette from his hookah. The abuses which the upper-class Hindu showers on helpless Bakha in the market place is counterpointed by the compassionate response of the tonga-wallah who, being a Mohammedan and also an untouchable from the orthodox Hindu point of view, shared the outcaste's resentments to a certain degree. Bakha's response to the event is in keeping with his original empathy towards the Muslims. ***'The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Mohammedan. They do not mind touching us, the Mohammedans and the Sahibs'*** (Untouchable, p.47).

Besides presenting religiously ignorant Ali, the kind-hearted tonga-wallah Jahangir, the irritable Mohammedan keeper of cloth Stall, the armourer's sons Naimat and Asmat, the tailor-master's son Ibrahim, the band master's sons Ali Abdulla; Hassan and Hussein, the Kashmiri Mohammedan from the local Carpet factory and the fierce looking red cheeked Pathans; followers of Abdul Gaffar Khan, Mulk Raj Anand has, in *Untouchable*, portrayed a character R.N. Bashir also, who is a Barrister-at-law and who loves wearing English clothes and insists on drinking 'Soda Water'. His mind is stuffed with the ideas of Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham and John Stuart Mill and according to him Gandhi is a humbug, a fool, a man of the fourth century B.C. Through R.N. Bashir, the author has brought home a typical character that admires the English and flatters them. Actually, he is a caricature of the Indian sycophants of the British.

The action of *Untouchable* moves forward unfolding pathetic and heart-touching scenes which arouse our sympathy for the untouchables who are the victims of age old exploitation and oppression on part of the caste Hindu. A series of events take place one after the other. After ***'the early morning scene'*** where Bakha has to vigorously and continuously clean a row of latrines, we encounter ***'The well scene'*** which brings out the true nature of Pundit Kali Nath and the jealousies and rivalries that prevail among the untouchables (Sohini and Gulabo). Then we have ***'the pollution scene'*** which brings forth the hypocrisy and hydra-headedness of Pundit Kali Nath. In ***'The chapatti throwing scene'*** we come across some nameless minor characters whose only business is to destroy Bakha's peace of mind. They try to throttle Bakha and make it clear to him that though he is

in the society, he does not belong to it, **'He is in the midst of a humanity, which includes him in its folds and gets debarred from entering into a sentient living snapping contact with it'** (Untouchable, p. 155). There was an inseparable barrier between himself and the upper caste Hindu which he strongly felt with every move of survival.

In a single day so many incidents of humiliation and torture occur in Bakha's life that it snatches the peace of mind of the readers. Mulk Raj Anand is a master of emotions and he has painted a vivid description of the pathetic life of the untouchables through a single character Bakha and brought live to the fore the cultural divide prevalent in pre-independent Indian society through his novel '*Untouchable*'.

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