

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* : A Study in Dalit Vision

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Abstract: The word 'Dalit' has acquired a special meaning in the Indian society. They were the untouchables in the social set up, leading a life of penury and were worst exploited and oppressed by the upper caste. The word 'Dalit' has its existence from the Marathi word 'Dal' which means 'burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn asunder, destroyed and crushed'. Dalit literature struggles for total revolution and it is declaration of human rights. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Om Prakash Valmiki, Baby Kamble, Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy et al. presented the subaltern psyche in their writings. Mulk Raj Anand is one of the outstanding Indo-English novelists of our time. His novels describe the lowest among the lowly. Published in 1935, *Untouchable* is his first novel. The novel describes the events of a single day in the life of the hero Bakha, a 18 year young scavenger who goes through the daily work of cleaning dirt in Bulandshahar. He is a loveable, honest, noble and efficient boy but he has to suffer all kinds of insults and humiliation only because he is a subaltern. The present paper intends to study M.R.Anand's *Untouchable* in the light of Dalit vision.

Keywords : Dalit; subaltern; mincemeat; Proletarian humanism; morass, hypocrisy.

The word 'Dalit' has acquired a special meaning in the Indian society. The word is used for people who belong to the lowest rung of the social ladder. They were the untouchables in the social set up, leading a life of penury and were worst exploited and oppressed by the upper caste. Their exploitation assumed various shapes – social, physical and financial, moral as well as psychological. Etymologically speaking, the word derives its existence from the Marathi word 'Dal' meaning those who have been grounded or crushed or broken down. Thus the root word of the word 'Dalit' is 'Dal'. The adjective of 'Dal' is 'Dalit'. 'Dalit' is found in many Indian languages and even in the Dravidian language. The meaning of 'Dalit' is burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn asunder, destroyed and crushed. They are crushed and cramped and made mincemeat by the Hindu religion. That is why they are Dalit.

Dalit literature is a form of agitation. It centres round the common man who has been oppressed for thousands of years. Varnashram system of Hindus has divided Indian society into castes. The castes in which one takes birth is one's caste; he drinks and eats in his caste, marries within his caste and dies within his caste. Dalit literature wants to destroy this inhuman caste system, which enslaves not only dalits but also our democratic country. Dalit literature struggles for total

revolution and it is declaration of human rights. Mulk Raj Anand, Om Prakash Valmiki, Baby Kamble, Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy et al. try to represent the miserable condition of the downtrodden quite vividly.

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the outstanding Indo-Anglian novelists of 20th century. In Indian fiction he occupies a unique position. His novels describe the lowest among the lowly – a waif like Munoo in *Coolie* ; a pariah like Bakha in *Untouchable* and an indentured labourer like Gangu in *Two Leaves and a Bud*. No other Indian before Anand had taken such serious note of the underdogs of the society.

Published in 1935, *Untouchable* is the first novel of Anand. Less extensive in space and time than *Coolie*, less effective as a piece of implied indictment than *Two Leaves and a Bud*. *Untouchable* in the words of K.R.S. Iyenger, “the most compact and artistically satisfying of his works”. (433) Though the shortest of his novels, it is “the most revealing and rewarding of the lot. The unities are admirably preserved as in a classical play. The novel describes the events of a single day in the life of the hero. So, the book has no loose end and possesses a solid structure. Here Anand depicts the horrible living condition of the dalits during the pre-independence period. The novel opens with the vivid description of the dirtiest and unhygienic dwelling places of the people :

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate, from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barkers, the water-carriers, the grass cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society... The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive smell. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an untouchable place to live in. (Anand 11)

The novel is about how a young scavenger named Bakha goes through the daily work of cleaning dirt in Bulandshahar. The eighteen year old boy is one of the sons of Lakha, the jamadar of the sweepers of the town and the cantonment. From a Tommy he has secured a pair of breeches and from a sepoy a pair of old boots. As the day dawns his work of latrine cleaning also begins. He is a steady and efficient worker, each muscle of his body hard as rock, it shines forth like glass... and,

though his job was dirty, he remained clean. So, Bakha's attempt to remain clean shows his self confidence. Anand observes :

Bakha was the child of modern India. The clear cut style of European dress has impressed his naive mind... but Bakha looked at Tommies, stared at with wonders and amazement. So he tried to copy them in everything. (2)

Bakha's psyche portrayed by Anand is not a dream to be a caste Hindu but a white Sahib. His imagination sees himself at last :

Clad in superior military uniform cleaning the commodes of Shab's in the British barracks (69)

Bakha is dutiful yet the society heaps abuses on him because of his low origin. Wherever he goes, he is belittled with words as 'defiled' and 'polluted'. All these insults, injuries strengthen his body and stiffen his soul. Anand efficiently and pitifully expresses Bakha's feelings :

The cruel group, all of them abused, abused, abused.
Why are we always abused ? People always abuse us
Because we are sweepers because we touch dung.
I hate, too.(41)

Anand depicting the mental state of Bakha tries to underline the irony and pity of the situation that a loveable boy like Bakha, who is honest and, noble and efficient has to suffer all kinds of insults and humiliation only because he is a subaltern :

... his feelings rise spurts of smoke from a half smothered fire in fitful jerks when the recollection of abuse he suffered kindled a spark inside him. (42)

Bakha has to clean daily a row of latrines but those whom he serves think him to be of no account. For example, his sister Sohini finds it difficult to get a pail of water as untouchables were forbidden to draw water by themselves. The priest who obliges her tries to molest her. When she protests, he shouts "polluted" to show that the scavenger girl had wronged him. In the meantime, Bakha also comes upon the scene. When he emphatically asks, Sohini sobbing with tears opens her mouth:

'He-e-e just teased me,' she at last yielded, 'And then when I was bending down to work, he came and held me by my breasts'. (71)

The hypocrisy of the priest makes him furious, and he sends his sister home, Then he tries to collect bits of bread at the houses of the well-to-do. He shouts for bread at a house, but there is no response for quite sometime. So, he sits on the wooden platform and dozes. But, for this he is badly abused by the lady of the house :

May you perish and die ! You have defiled my house
! Go! Get up! Eater of your masters ! Why didn't
you shout if you wanted food ? Is this your father's
house that you come and rest here ? (80)

Bakha apologises and without getting anything he goes to another door. He comes back home with a single bread. He is totally upset and when asked by his father about the anguish of his heart he bursts into anger :

But, father, what is the use ? They would ill-treat us
even if we shouted. They think we are mere dirt
because we clean their dirt. (89)

Lakha, his father, tries to console him in vain. In the afternoon, Bakha attends the marriage of his friend Ramcharan's sister. Hawaldar Charat Singh treats him affectionately and gives him a new hockey stick. Then he plays hockey which develops into a free fight. A little boy is injured. Bakha lifts him up. But the boy's mother abuses him for having polluted her son. At home his father calls him an idler and drives him out.

Towards the end as a kind of epilogue the writer offers three solutions to the problem of Bakha and his like – The first solution is that of Hutchinson who wants to convert Bakha in the name of Christ. But mere change of religion cannot remove untouchability as mere change of cloth cannot heal a wound. So, the writer presents the missionary in a mocking manner. The man even bores Bakha. The second solution is offered by Gnadhi whose call for 'Harijans' impresses the young hero of the novel. But, the most striking was a meaningful dialogue between Iqbal Nath Sarashar, the young poet who edits 'Nawan Jung' and his friend Mr. R.N Bashir, a law graduate, which highlights the importance of the philosophy of Karma based on equality among all people. But it is the third solution – the flush system – that seems to click the issue. As a fit finale to the events of the whole day, a hope is born in the heart of Bakha :

Well, we must destroy caste ...as useful members
of a casteless and classless society ... He felt that
the poet would have been answering the most

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intimate questions in his soul if he had not used
such big words. That machine, he thought which
can remove dung without anyone having to handle
it, I wonder what it is like ? (173-174)

The novel concludes with a highly optimistic note. It appears as if Bakha got enlightenment like that of Lord Buddha, a panacea for all sufferings and returns home with great enthusiasm. *Untouchable* is thus a perfect novel. Its structure is neat, treatment dispassionate and message clear. The writer's sympathies are with the have-nots. Indeed, proletarian humanism of Mulk Raj Anand is a new thing in Indo – English fiction. But, happily, Anand never adopts in the novel any propagandist stance. That is to say, he just states facts and never vents his spleen. His manner is faintly reminiscent of such novelists as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. For, like the psychological novel, *Untouchable* too, vividly presents the stream of Bakha's consciousness. Still Anand avoids the morass of psychological mannerism. As the story proceeds we almost delve deep into the very soul of the hero. Besides that, the writer also presents and hits at social evils as effectively as Dickens.

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