

## **Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* : A Study in Social Ethos**

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Mulk Raj Anand, one of the greatest Indian novelists is also regarded as the father of the Indo English literature. Almost all his novels deal with the theme of social picture and realism. He is known for the depiction of the lives of the underdogs in a very realistic and sympathetic manner and is often branded as a social propagandist. Though other writers prior to Anand had also attempted such themes but the work of Anand includes the suffering of the lowest caste – the ignored people and none of his contemporaries wrote about the life and suffering of such people like 'Bakha' of *Untouchable* and 'Munoo' of *Coolie*. In this context K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar has rightly observed about the theme of Anand's novels :

It was Anand's aim to stray lower still than ever Sarat Chandra or Premchand, to show to the west that there was more in the orient than could be inferred from Omar Khayyam, Tagore or Kipling and so he described a waif like Munoo in *Coolie* and untouchable like Bakha, and indentured labourer like Gangu and set them right at the centre of the scheme of cruelty and exploitation that India held in its vicious grip. (Iyengar 264)

Anand's first six novels *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *The Village*, *Across the Black Waters*, and *The Sword and the Sickle* – all draw our attention towards the miseries of the poor and their struggle for the better life. The present paper intends to study the various social aspects as represented by Anand in *Untouchable*.

*Untouchable* throws light on the life of the untouchables of the Hindu society. The Hindu society is divided into castes and sub castes, though this division was not meant to create breaches among various castes but to run the society easily and smoothly. But with passage of time this casteism became so strong and powerful that it became a curse for the people. One, born in a particular caste has to live in his caste and is forced to do the job of his own caste even if he can do other jobs better than it.

They had to live, eat, marry, and die within their caste. Anand in his very first book *Untouchable* took up this evil and made an attempt to eradicate this evil and to bring change in the society and also in the lives of the poor and the downtrodden.

*Untouchable* is a single day story of a young 18 year old boy named Bakha, who is the son of a sweeper. Anand has presented a very true and realistic picture of the surrounding in which the untouchable lived as he had personally seen the lives of the people in course of living with them in an Indian regiment with his father.

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 scavenger, the leather-worker, the washerman, the barbers, 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 animals 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)

Bakha is very hard working and responsible, for him work is like worship and his day begins with the following words of his father:

Get up, ohe you bakhiya, ohe son of pig!  
. . . Get up and attend to the latrines or the  
Sepoys will be angry. (15)

Anand has shown various ill effects of the caste system. They are treated as inhuman. It is the harsh irony of the society that the one who does the job of cleaning and keeping the society clean is treated as dirt and is called untouchable :

They think we are mere dirt because  
we clean their dirt. (89)

Moreover, Bakha is the victim of the caste conscious society. His place in the society is not determined by his duty, hard work and devotion but by his birth in lower class. The lives of the lower class are full of suffering and humiliation. They are humiliated at each and every stage of their life. The words like "defiled" and "polluted" are few of the adjectives with which they are called. They are treated worse than animals. The lives of these people are worse than those of animal, even animals get the love and care of their owner but these people can never dream of it. They had to even struggle to get the basic need of life like water. They were not allowed to touch even the brook or pound, as they would contaminate the stream. They had to wait for long hours beside the well and had to request the people of the upper caste to pour the water in their pitcher :

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the Platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindu of these upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. They had no well of their own . . . (26)

They had to wait long hours near the well for the mercy of some upper caste that they can pour water in their pitcher. Through this incident Anand has presented the true picture of the society and the suffering of these people.

Anand has revealed the duality and hypocrisy of the so - called highly prejudiced Hindu society. Bakha, being an untouchable is not even allowed to touch the steps of temple or not even allowed to enter the market place without giving warning of "posh, posh, sweeper coming". But Pandit Kalinath calls her sister, Sohini to clean his courtyard and makes an attempt to molest her chastity. And when exposed, he cries out, "polluted, polluted" and accuses her for defiling the platform and polluting him. Anand shows how the people belonging to the highest strata of society may be morally hollow. A priest forgets everything and attacks the modesty of the girl from oppressed section of the society. The girl belongs to that section of the society whose mere touch may pollute them, but he does not hesitate to embrace the sweeper girl to satisfy his lust. It is the duality of our society that if some wrong deeds are done by some educated or upper section of society like priest we do not accept their fault instead we find the fault of the people who belong to the lower strata of society. It seems

that the untouchables are made to suffer and only suffer and have no right to protest or express their emotions. Even their love and sympathy is not appreciated. In a hockey match when Bakha takes the wounded son of Barra babu to his house out of love and pity, the Bara babu's wife greets him with abuses for defiling her son:

Oh! You eater of your master, what have you done? Give me my child. You have defiled my House besides wounding my son. (37)

The suffering of Bakha is not his alone but actually he is the representative of all belonging to the lower section of society who are exploited, crushed and cramped just because of their birth in lowest class. The sufferings caused to these people are not their destiny or caused by fate but instead these are the suffering which are caused by the fellow human and the social surrounding. They are treated worse than animal, even they get some love but the life of these people is hell. Even, the loaves of the bread are thrown to them just like a butcher throws bone to dog to get rid of them :

Vay Bakhiya, take this here's your bread  
Coming down and she flung it at him. (83)

The story of Bakha reveals emotional truth as well as social reality, and it is the quality of the writer that he never let idealism to eclipse his vision of social reality. Anand is the writer of the common man as he has observed their plight and predicament very closely. He presents a real and a true picture of the life of these people. He exposes the agony and anguish of the downtrodden. Anand uses literature as a means to modify society. He himself says :

I feel that, only in fiction which is the transformation through the imagination of the concrete life, in words, sounds and vibration, one may probe into the many layers of human consciousness in its various phases. (Sharma 5)

The novel ends with inner conflict of Bakha. Being fed up with the humiliation of being untouchable he meets Hutchinson who advises him to change into Christianity as all are equal in the eye of Christ. The second option that comes to him is from the preaching of Gandhiji who calls them 'Harijan' and request people to end untouchability and caste system

and calls untouchability “the greatest blot on Hinduism.” The third option is to wait for the flush machine which “can clear dung without anyone having to handle it”. The author has put his feeling into the following words:

As the brief Indian twilight came and went a sudden impulse shot through the transformation of space and time, and gathered all the elements that were dispersed in the stream of his soul a tentative decision. I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us, he whispered to himself, and what that clever poet said perhaps I can find the poet on the way and ask him about his machine. (Anand 175-76)

*Untouchable* has the immediacy of the true voice of feeling and suffering of these people. The novel ends on a positive note that one day the discrimination made in Indian society regarding caste and creed will be removed. Anand has treated the novel not only from the social point of view but also from a humanistic view. Bakha is not an individual but a representative of all the weaker, oppressed, and depressed sections of society. Anand had made Bakha an untouchable boy, the hero of his novel and does not eliminate the ugly aspects of human nature from his picture of life and in this context E.M. Forster has rightly written in Preface :

The book seems to be indescribably clean . . . It has gone straight to heart, to the heart of its subject and purified it. (iv)

Anand hopes that one day India will be free from this social evil and will enjoy equality in all walks of life.

#### **Works Cited**

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