

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: Writing for Reformation

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Abstract: Mulk Raj Anand is a writer of the poor and downtrodden sections of society. In his works he depicts realistic and true to life characters. His works provide revolutionary and humanistic insights into social settings they are based upon. He depicts the true reality that he finds worth writing about. The suffering of the poor and the outcaste in a society is what he portrays in *Untouchable* and he wants a place of respect for them. The inhuman treatment meted out to the workers on the tea plantations of Assam in *Two Leaves and a Bud* serves the same purpose of elevating the human condition by exposing it. Anand is a man for whom art has the same purpose as it has for writers like Prem Chand and Charles Dickens. His works, however, lose the artistic flavour that differentiates his art from the work of an historian. The present paper will analyse how Anand goes straight to the heart of things and builds a forceful narrative against the menace untochability.

Key words: *Untouchable*, Outcaste, Stigma, Dalit, Realism, Reformation

Anand gave the Indian English novel a purpose, to speak of those who can't speak and bring the change by changing mindsets and perceptions. He brought the Indo-Anglican novel out from the domains of romance and imbibed into it the much needed elements of realism and reformation. He is passionate to present things as they really are. He is a great observer and examiner of human personality; human beings smothered under the weight of an inhuman social structure.

Untouchable was published in 1935 and established Mulk Raj Anand as a leading Indian writer in English. The novel builds a strong case against the menace of untochability prevalent in the Indian society. It forcefully depicts, in a single day's life of its protagonist, what it is to be an untouchable. K. R. S. Iyengar rightly says about the novel, "photographic fidelity that convinces at once, though it overwhelms us by its cumulative ferocity of detail." (Iyengar 260)

Anand is one of the first Indian English writers who achieved an international readership. Mulk Raj Anand is a writer of the poor and the downtrodden sections of society. All the time he shows a sense of sincerity as for him it is an obligation to give voice to the voiceless. Hence all his novels belong to the genre social realism. The novels like *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and A Bud* (1936), *The Village* (1939), and *The Big Heart* (1945) show Anand as an outright spokesperson of the unprivileged and the unacknowledged lot.

Untouchability is being practiced since times immemorial. Although, Indian constitution has a provision for its abolition under article 17, it still exists in one way or the other. Untouchability, in general, puts a person or a group outside the mainstream on grounds like criminality, lawlessness, nonconformity to mainstream ideas, customs or traditions or simply being born in a lower class as Bakha is. It was a daring effort by the novelist to bring a Dalit as a hero “into creative narrative...whole new people who have seldom entered the realms of literature in India,”(Anand 79) Anand is so powerful a writer that whatever he portrays comes alive before the readers’ eyes. He goes straight into the heart of the matter. He pictures what has never been pictured as such. The novel is a result of a meaningful discourse between Anand and Gandhi. It serves its purpose and the writer has maintained a fine balance between what he has to say and what art demands from its artist. Forster says: *Untouchable* could only have been written by an Indian and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self pity. Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position...he has just the right mixture of insight and detachment and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth.” (Forster VI)

In order to portray the plight of the untouchables, Anand takes recourse to the mode of Social Realism of the first half of the 20th century. Social Realism was a reaction against Idealism and focused on depicting the ugly realities in the society. It speaks about the social structures that are responsible for the miserable condition of people particularly the poor. It speaks against the evil and, as the famous social realist Ilya Repin said, “all the monstrosities of

our vile society". Untouchable belongs to this mode of writing. It set the course of the Indian English novel into the proper direction of social realism.

The novel depicts a sweeper boy but through him all the down trodden and neglected people tell their stories. He is a symbol; a representation of all those suffering individuals who share a common destiny of absolute denial and rejection. The story of Bakha, a Dalit and the central character touches the heart of the reader. The novel is set in the pre-Independence India. Bakha and the other characters in the novel suffer because of their being members of a lower caste. They are the people who are by profession scavengers, leather workers, washer men, barbers and grass-cutters living in mud-walled cottages. They are but all outcastes. Bakha emerges as a universal figure whose suffering exposes the hypocrisy, oppression, injustice, humiliation these outcastes are subjected to. He doesn't represent his own class only but all the underdogs and outcastes.

Mulk Raj Anand is not simply there to highlight the problems of the people living at the margin in a society but to change their lot by proposing a social reformation. He is a painter of everything, social, political and economic problems that contribute to the problems of children, deplorable conditions of prisoners, slavery, delay in the administration of justice, the gap between the 'haves and have-nots' and the evils of dowry, maladjustment in marriage, helplessness of widows, prostitution, untouchability, bribery, money lending, corrupt police force, impact of western education and materialism, breaking up of joint family system. Poorly paid teachers, writers, journalists and the women who are the worst sufferers of a vicious social system populate his novels.

Through Bakha's character, Anand depicts how an inhuman society makes it impossible for an idealistic man to live happily and in peace. He is an idealist and follows the set tradition unable to go against it. He lives at the margins of a conventional but inhuman society. The realism in Anand directly comes from his first hand life experiences. He gives a fictional rendering of a childhood episode when his companion, the untouchable sweeper boy, brought a bleeding Anand home after being hit by a stone and his mother abused him for 'polluting' her child. The outcaste is hated for his caste and for his work. For the upper caste Hindus he is just a

latrine cleaner and not a human being. Bakha endures all the hardships and sufferings that the society inflicts on him. His day starts with his father offering a volley of abuses: “Get up, oye, you, Bakhya, ohe son of pig!...Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten”. (Untouchable 5) Bakha is a very hardworking and skillful worker. But he will have to remain confined to the job of cleaning public latrines. Though he wants to go to school but he can't as the high class Hindus will not allow him for the fear their children getting polluted if Bakha touches them. The untouchables are not allowed to take water from the same well from which the upper castes take. Once Bakha curiosity takes him to a local temple and he peers through the windows. He is chased out from there and the priest shouts at him “polluted! Polluted!”. The people get too much offended and angry. “Get off the steps you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our all service!(Untouchable 53)

The realistic description is so perfect in Anand that the colony where the untouchables and other outcaste people live vividly comes alive before the eyes of the reader. The powerful descriptions set a mirror rolling to record the things as they are and the events as they happen:

“Bakha thought of the uncongeniality of his of his home as he lay half awake in the morning of an autumn day, covered by a worn-out, greasy blanket, on a faded blue carpet which was spread on the floor in a corner of the cave like, dingy, dank, one-roomed mud house. His sister slept on a cot next to him and his father and brother snored from under a patched, ocher-colored quilt, on a broken string bed, on the other side.” (Untouchable 3)

Art for the realists is a way of mirroring the actualities that take place in the society and by exposing the aim is to elevate the situation. These works speak about change and help the struggling human being get a better life. They sensitize people about crucial problems that need to be thought over and solved. “Proponents of this school are Dickens and Bernard Shaw in English literature; Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Harriet Beacher Stowe, Upton Sinclair and John Steinbeck in American literature; Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert and Victor Hugo in French; Goethe, Schiller and Enrich Maria Remarque in German; Cervantes in Spanish; Tolstoy, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Gorky in Russian; Premchand and Kabir in Hindi; Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyaya and Kazi Nazrul Islam in Bengali, and Nazir, Faiz, Josh, and Manto in Urdu. (Markandey). We can add the name of Mulk Raj Anand for being among the first Indian writers

in English to write about the problems of the unprivileged classes of the society only to make a point in their favour and for the society to embrace a change for the benefit of all.

Anand has been called as the true representative of his age with a definite purpose of bringing a change of heart. In all his novels he emerges as a true commentator on the social, political and economical problems of early 20th century rural and urban India. *Untouchable* is a powerful social tract wherein the novelist shows the technical craftsmanship in bringing out the spiritual crisis going of the protagonist in a single day of his life as Forster writes about the novel that “It has gone straight to the heart of it subject and purified it.” The stigma of being an untouchable has strongly etched its ugly story on the Bakha’s psyche. He is in so much hurry to inform his community members about the arrival of a latrine cleaning system towards the end of the novel. He hopes the day will come when he will be emancipated. This is quite symbolic in that a new set of values and a ‘change of heart’ is going to end the menace of untouchability in future.

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