

Remarking An Analisation Issues of Social Concern in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand

Abstract

Today even after 70 years of independence at least half of Indians are carrying the burdens of slavery in the name of caste system. Will the country ever get rid of this mindset? Will the government ever have the courage to abort the caste system? The problem of Untouchability still prevails in the society. Having been firmly planted in Indian society for thousands of years, untouchability has been one of the worst dehumanizing forms of social discrimination practiced in it. As a result, vast sections of the society are inhumanly segregated as outcastes, suppressed and condemned to live in poverty, immorality and degradation. Instead of encouraging and facilitating them, the system deprives them of all their potentialities to grow and develop.

Today we have reached in the 21st century and we talk of globalization, economic development and making India a Super Power and what not but the reality is different. The question is have we been able to eradicate such issues of social concern as untouchability, caste system, oppression, exploitation of the weak and the poor etc. from our society. The recent incident of the death of Rohit at Hyderabad university compels us to think over it.

Keywords: Slavery, Poverty, Caste, Class and Society Exploitation etc.

Introduction

Literature represents life and life is a social reality. A writer is a member of society and possesses certain social status and he receives some degree of social recognition and reward. De Bonald says, "Literature is an expression of society" (95). In every society, there are some sections of people deprived of socio-economic opportunities for their sustenance and they are victims of social, cultural, and political exclusion. They are marginalized communities who are poor, downtrodden, and belong to the scheduled castes. Mulla describes marginalization as "the need for recognizing that social problems are indeed connected with larger structures in society, causing various forms of oppression amongst individuals resulting in marginalization" (262).

The celebrated novel *Untouchable*, written by the Indo-English writer Mulk Raj Anand, has a simple but very painful and depressing plot. It deals with the social curse of untouchability in Pre-Independence India. It narrates the sufferings and humiliations of an 18-year-old boy, Bakha, born in a low-caste and serving as a toilet-sweeper. Operating at different levels of the society and causing wide-spread unease, Bakha exposes and critiques the hypocritical status of our Indian society. The novel is historical in the sense that it touches upon the caste system, which gave rise to the practice of Untouchability that was much prevalent in the Indian society. It not only shows what happened in India in pre-independent era but forces us to think whether our modern India is free from such evils or not.

Aim of the Study

The objective of this study will be to examine such issues of social concern as untouchability, class, caste and creed etc which divide our society with special reference to Mulk Raj Anand's novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie*.

The novel gives us an account of events happening in a single day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper-boy, and brings out the impact on him of the various events which take place. It exposes the harsh life and struggles of the so-called Untouchables. Bakha is eighteen year old son of Jamadar, Lakha who gets a pair of breeches from an English soldier, and tries to be in 'fassun'. Bakha does not like to do toilet cleaning. He wants to study and become a learned man. But his day begins with his work of

Geeta Phogat

Assistant Professor,
Deptt.of English,
BPSMV,
Khanpur Kalan,
Sonapat, Haryana

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toilet-cleaning. He is steady and efficient in his work. Much of the novel's success lies in the revolutionary idea of education for the Untouchables. The outcasts were not allowed to draw water from wells, enter temples or basically touch anything, as it was believed that their touch would make everything impure and corrupt. As the Brahmins associate sweepers with filth and contamination, they seemed to pollute whatever they touched. It is against this oppressive ideology of caste and purity that Bakha aspires to become a 'sahib'. He tries to dress-up like an English soldier imitating their mannerisms, hoping to learn and speak English and become like one of them someday. Sometimes the bare, graphic, descriptions of filth and pollution are offset by a sense of nobility and sincerity with which Bakha works. Even though he lives in filth, he is described as 'relatively clean', never making himself dirty by the work he does. The sordid conditions of Bakha's work has a moral implication. Nevertheless, while the Brahminical narrative represents outcastes as dirty, both morally and physically, Bakha resists this kind of representation.

The text reflects the most modern tradition in that it foregrounds the interior workings of the character's mind. The caste conflict is represented in Bakha's thoughts. Because he is alienated from society, his experiences are always inflected by caste politics. He is also mentally and physically tortured and abused by the upper caste Hindus. Bakha's experiences depict the horrors of the caste system and the squalid conditions, the so-called outcastes were forced to live in. By making a sweeper the protagonist of the novel and by focusing him at the centre of the plot the author has tried to give a voice and space to the untouchables who are poor and weak and our social system denies them their basic fundamental rights .

The hypocrisy of the pundits and the upper caste Hindus is also exposed to a great extent. When Bakha's sister Sohini goes to village-well to fetch water; Kalinath, the priest of the temple out of the special favour draws water to fill Sohini pail, and feels attracted to her beautiful body, and driving away the others suggests her to come to his house later in the day to clean the courtyard. When she goes to his house, he makes improper suggestions to her, but when she starts screaming, he shouts 'polluted, polluted', and a crowd of people gather. Bakha reaches at that spot, after suffering at the village temple, and a Hindu whom he touched by chance, and finds Sohini standing with her face-downward, attacked by Hindus who takes the side of Kalinath. Bakha, analyses the situation, he is black with anger, he knows the truth but controls himself, keeping in mind the thousands-year old slavery. Pandits, or the upper-caste Hindus, are hypocrites as one of them actually tried to touch Sohini's breasts but claims to have been defiled when touched accidentally by an 'Untouchable'. Sending away Sohini, he goes from door to door to collect food but there also he is humiliated and insulted as people throw loaves of bread towards him treating him as a dog.

When he comes home, he tells his father, "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt" (p.70) In the afternoon, Bakha attends the marriage of his friend Ram Charan's sister, a washerman by profession; another friend, Chota, a leather-worker's son and Bakha forgets about the existing caste system and shares sugar-plums. They plan to play hockey in the evening. Then, Bakha goes to Havildar Charat Singh, Who unmindful of Bakha's caste treats him affectionately, and gives him a new hockey-stick. The hockey-match results into a free-fight in which a little boy is injured and bleeds. Bakha carries the child in his arms, but the child's mother, instead of thanking Bakha rebukes and abuses him for having polluted her child "Oh ! you eater of your masters what have you done? Give me my child. You have defiled the house, besides wounding my son"(106) Bakha is completely heart broken. He is mentally and physically abused by the upper caste Hindus. He meets col. Hutchinson, a Christian missionary, who takes him home and treats him affectionately and tells him about Jesus Christ, the Saviour. Bakha also goes to the 'Gole Maidan' and listens to Gandhiji's speech, who talks about various social reforms as solution to the problems created by untouchability and other social evils. Bakha is much encouraged by the soothing words of Gandhiji. Bakha was deeply moved by this political rally of Gandhiji, where many activists and intellectuals expressed their desire to improve the condition of the poor, the weak and the untouchables. They wished to bring a social change and wanted to make the society free from all kinds of social evils. They talked of the emancipation of the untouchables or the weaker sections of the society. After attending this rally, Bakha returns home with the hope of a better future, where modernity eradicates all caste distinctions. Bakha happens to listen to a poet, Iqbal Nath that the problem of untouchability can be solved if the modern flush-system toilets are introduced. M. K. Naik too comments about the conclusion of the novel, "In the end it suggests three alternative solutions to his problem :- a missionary tries to persuade him to embrace Christianity; he listens to Gandhiji who advocates social reform; and he also hears of mechanised sanitation, as the only answer possible." (155)

So, Mulk Raj Anand, in a way provides three solutions to the problem. Bakha is offered to accept Christianity that has no caste system, and so in this way he will no longer be an outcast. But Bakha is afraid of this kind of religious change, even if that means equal treatment and opportunity to visit a church. After that Mahatma Gandhi comes to Bakha's village and educates everyone on Untouchability. Bakha loves to hear someone talking on behalf of people of his caste. In the concluding paragraphs, a person randomly comes into the scene and informs everyone about mechanized sanitation and thus ending manual collection of excreta. Bakha thinks that this will be a solution to all his problems.

Untouchable deals with various social evils of the Hindu society of pre-independent era. The

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Untouchables lived a poor life in kutcha houses made of mud-walls having single multi-purpose room which was used as kitchen, bed room, living room, and for placing baskets, brooms and other things of daily use. (all in one) The drainage system was not proper and there was stinking smell everywhere. Since they were economically weak, they were ill-fed, ill-clothed and suffered from various diseases. We cannot deny the fact that Bakha's mother died due to lack of proper medical treatment, and his father suffered from acute asthma.

They were humiliated, exploited and subjected to great hardships by the callous Hindu society. They were always at the mercy of the rich, the Brahmins and the Hindus even for the fulfillment of their basic needs. The untouchables were not even allowed to draw water from the village-well without their permission. Even the shadow of an untouchable should not fall upon the Hindus. It was customary for the untouchables to announce their arrival when they moved through the bazaar - 'posh, posh, sweeper coming' (57). Sohini, Gulabo and other women had to wait for hours for a pitcher of water and that too out of generosity of the Hindus. They had to depend upon them for their daily food. Bakha's powers and place in society are not determined by his ability but his birth in a subaltern or 'dalit' family.

The use of irony makes argument of the author in the novel more successful. M. K. Naik is of the opinion that Untouchable is a scathing indictment of Hindu Society and irony is the weapon of this indictment. The irony lies in the fact that the Hindus want to keep themselves away even from the shadow of the untouchable, but of all persons, the priest Kali Nath treats Sohini like a Juice morsel of girlhood to be molested with impunity. It is also ironical that shunned by the Hindus, Bakha gets help and sympathy from Muslims, Christians and other sub-caste people like washerman's son and Charat Singh. Bakha is offered a puff at hubble-bubble by a Muslim. When a man started abusing Bakha for touching him just by chance in the market, a Muslim tonga-wallah shows sympathy and helps him. Bakha is ill-treated and slapped for the only reason that, he belongs to a low caste and he feels "I should have seen the high-caste people in the street. That man! That he should have hit me! (58)... For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (58-59).

E.M. Forester wrote that The book seems to him indescribably clean.... It has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it. Anand is aware that justice is not meted out in life. However, he is quite optimistic and positive and has firm faith in human values- goodness, righteousness, kindness and morality. *Untouchable* is the most controversial novel that represents a stark picture of the horrible realities of the caste system of India.

Coolie is Mulk Raj Anand's second novel published in 1936 and gave wide recognition to the writer. It is somewhat different from *Untouchable* in the sense that it gives us a broad picture of our callous society through the lives of coolies. *Coolie* is a

novel about the lowest class showing the tragic situation of millions of coolies who are without land and has run away from hunger and starvation. It is because of their poor condition that they become coolies and labourers and fall prey to forces of oppression in society. Afterwards they die somewhere in a corner, unknown and unwept.

The central theme of the novel is the exploitation of the weak and poor who are deprived of their fundamental rights to live with happiness on earth. The novel reflects the varied nature of human beings, the power of money and brutal suppression. It forces us to think about the pathetic life of the poor Indian people who are exploited and suppressed. The novelist suggest that there is a need for reestablishment of kindness, of moral and social values in the world which is lost in materialism, capitalism and colonialism.

It is the story of an orphan boy, Munoo who is the central character of the novel. He is always exploited and suppressed wherever he goes and his future reflects the future of millions who suffer silently. Munoo universally symbolizes the suffering of the oppressed and those taken advantage of. Munoo life is full of problems. Munoo is a child labour who runs to avoid every place of cruelty in search of happiness but all in vain. He is only fifteen years old, does various jobs at Daulatpur, Bombay and Simla and in the end he dies of tuberculosis because of poverty. He creates pity in our minds not fear. C. D. Narsimha is of the view that death has ceased to frighten the poor, they are past fright, it is the life that is threat, and death is a release. Here, Anand does not idealize the character or the situation but renders the societal issues of catastrophe, such as, capitalism and colonialism, as they are prevalent in our modern society making it highly insensitive towards humanity. The novel is an epic misery of modern India and explores various themes and ideas that make it a masterpiece.

Coolie is a pathetic account of painful life and death of a coolie, Munoo, over a duration of two years. Mulk Raj Anand besides being a realist, is a reformer of the society and he preaches for the welfare of humanity specially for poor and weak people like Munoo. Munoo's tragedy is Anand's fervent plea to bring change in the mindset of the people of this insensitive society. The author expresses through typical situations and characters that Humanity is not only the need of the hour but also the only solution to this existing menace in the society. Through *Coolie*, Anand expresses his belief in the dignity of man whether he is rich or poor. Munoo's life is full of pain and sufferings and in the very beginning of the novel itself we can find hints of how his aunt Gujri ill-treats him when she says, "Munoo ohe Munoo!" she called again, exasperated and raising her voice, this time, to the highest pitch to which, in her anger and hate, she could carry it: 'Where have you died? Where have you gone, you ominous orphan? Come back and begone!' The piercing soprano resounded through the valley and

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fell on Munoo's ears with the dreadening effect of all its bitter content. (Coolie 1)

Perhaps if his aunt Gujri and Uttam Kaur had not treated him so badly his life would have been different. Anand is of the opinion that Munoo suffers and meets his tragic end because of the callous and insensitive attitude of the people towards him in the modern society and not because of his fate. During the course of the novel, Munoo happens to meet not only cruel but kind people too such as Prabha Dayal and his wife in Daulatpur, Chota Babu in Sham Nagar and Ratan in Bombay. Prabha Dayal's goodness is very well reflected when Munoo met Dayal the latter ignored Ganesh's advice, patted Munoo on his back and said: 'Come, come now, be a brave lad. Wipe your eyes. We will take care of you. Look, we are almost nearing Daulatpur!' (Coolie 64)

Unlike Bakha, Munoo belongs to high caste but the society does not accept him a because of his poor living conditions. Munoo does not enjoy any economic independence or prosperity so he is victimized by forces such as capitalism and industrialism which are quite powerful and more important than any individual. His hunger and poverty makes him surrender and he is exploited and oppressed. The increasing indebtedness and unemployment insecurity and uncertainty of employment compels Munoo to come to Bombay in search of better employment but here also the situation is not different at all. In the Daulatpur market, he is shocked to see the wild competition. Munoo's tragedy is the tragedy of the poor and the situation is same all over the world. *Coolie* is a kind of social protest or a severe complaint against our faulty social system. Anand's rage in the description of Munoo's pathetic situation is a direct expression of love for humanity and mankind which is the basic principle of humanism and here he behaves like a true proletarian humanist.

Conclusion

Anand has an idealistic vision of the world. He is a great humanist and writes with a mission for the betterment and development of the oppressed people of the society. He writes for the sake of man, for making him pure and noble and for the welfare of the entire humanity. His concern for humanism is the crucial point of his fiction. He is a great social reformer like Dickens. The central characters of his novels—a sweeper, a coolie, a labourer, a villager, etc. are the people who belong to the lowest class of the society in India. His works reveal that his aim is to bring forth the different social problems of Indian society which he wanted to eradicate. As a social realist and a critic, he is against any kind of injustice done to humanity. He speaks for the unlucky people. His novels mostly portray the tragedy of those free from moral wrongs under external and wicked forces. He openly reacted to various kind of suppression which had created problems in the lives of the peoples.

Mulk Raj Anand's novels are an eye-opener to our community. Being the champion of the suppressed, he understood the pain and suffering of

his fellowmen. He fought for the good and the betterment of the poor, the weak and the suppressed. His writings demand respect and generate pity and love for the downtrodden and the underprivileged. Anand portrays the intense struggle of the weak, the poor and the outcaste through his novels. Bakha and Munoo represent the excluded but undefeated outcastes or the untouchables that could be found in most of Anand's novels. The misery and unhappiness of the poor and their efforts to lead a better life are clearly visible in *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. The pathetic and bitter experiences of the lives of Munoo and Bakha arouse the conscience of the educated Indians to the economic and social injustices in India.

Mulk Raj Anand supports the scientific and technological development because he believes that it can solve our socio-economic problems to a great extent. Munoo thinks of railways as a wonderful thing. In *Untouchable*, the problem of untouchability is sought in machines as it creates new labour system and destroys the caste system where there is no equality and poor people are suppressed and exploited. The sociological concern of poverty, suppression and corruption are shown in *Coolie* and *Untouchable*. *Untouchable* represents the problem of untouchability and *Coolie* represents the pathetic life of the coolies in our society.

Most of the heroes in the works of Anand belong to the poor and the weaker sections of the society. They are the real sufferers. Characters belonging to the middle and upper class do appear in his works but they are the object of his social satire, the suppressed persons like Bakha and Munoo actually win the sympathy of the readers. The sweeper, the peasant, the plantation labourer, the city drudge, the sepoy—all come out alive in his works but they are anguished and hungry. Through these characters, Mulk Raj Anand gives voice to the voiceless who are suppressed and exploited because they are poor, weak and outcaste and our social system denies them their rights to live happily with peace and dignity.

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