

Narrative Technique in *Untouchable*

Abstract

Indian novel has gone through a major transformation owing to the impact of the West, in the early decades of the twentieth century. This metamorphosis of content and form is evident in the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand who writes in the English language. Talking about the creative process at work in his novel *untouchable* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Anand says that these novels "bridge the gulf between the surviving recitalist narratives in the languages of India and the residual influences of modern techniques in the West." (Anand, 50) As a result, they take the novel from form the some what narrow provincial boundaries of Indian languages into the longer tradition of the international epic novel.

Keywords: *Untouchable*, Techniques, West, Enormous, Passion, Compassion, Fable, Music, Circumstances, Flashback.

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand has admitted that he was amply influenced by the technique of James Joyce. And he has unconsciously imbibed the lessons of style and construction of the contemporary novel. Anand defines the novel as "the transformation by imagination of human beings through their conflicts in a given time space continuum as against the recital which is rooted in the timeless narration of Eternity" (Anand 52). But Anand is very clear and declares eloquently that the influence exerted by European technique does not make his novel less Indian or inferior in any way. The richness of content, the idea and the action: of our struggle to be human, to remain alive and grow, in our Gandhian time keeps him unmistakably Indian and invests the narrative with 'aliveness' and 'intensity.'

About the form of the novel, Mulk Raj Anand says that he had begun writing a bardic realist narrative, under the influence, mainly, of the enormous feudal Urdu epic *Fasana-i-Azad* by Ratan Nath Sarshar, in the early twenties. This amorphous narrative seemed to be endless, protracted, "like a flood in the Ganga, arising from Shiva's head, in the Himalayas, which hoped someday to flow into the ocean of story." (Anand 53)

As Anand was thinking of the method for writing his works, he came across James Joyce's novels. After reading Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he felt constrained to rewrite his loose narrative as a self-conscious novel, from which he began to cut out the ballast, the outpourings, the long philosophisings, and the sermons, in order to reflect, from the constructed novel, the prismatic view of the characters, so that they would reflect their auras, radiances and atmosphere, without overt interpretation and personal comments.

As this task proceeded, he tried to take certain characters from his recital and began to work upon them in order to put them in compact long short stories. One such fundamental character in his endless narrative, who had been compelling attention, from the labyrinth depths of disaster, chaos and strife of India of that time was Bakha, the sweeper boy, whose tragi-comic life seemed to him symbolic of all *untouchables*. Anand wanted to transform the raw material of the conflict-torn rhythms of Bakha's existence into a narrative that would evoke response from the reader.

Also, Anand decided to create the atmosphere of the work-a-day world of his hero- antihero, who would be the very opposite of Joyce's lower middle class Jesuit intellectual, but would be integral to his own North village landscape.

Anand wanted to create the plot, characters and milieu of his novels on the sound base of 'social, political, cultural, realities.' Being the son of a clerk in the army, he had the knowledge of lived experiences of life in the British Indian cantonments and he creates a strong segment in Bakha's life in his attempts to copy the Tommies by acquiring the sola topi, trousers, blanket and the hockey stick. The novelist had also gone through the 'misery', pain and humiliation in the lives of the outcastes as the loyalty of their family to the Ismaili Aga Khan faith made them a sort of '*untouchables*' in the eyes of most of the orthodox Hindu brotherhood.



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Therefore, the pity for Bakha is aroused not so much from 'sympathy' but from 'understanding' of the degradation of outcastes, from sharing their pains, humiliations and inner aspirations. By maintaining 'distance' and 'objectivity', he was able to make his passion turn into compassion.

Anand's writings gained authenticity from his own awareness of the subhuman conditions. And he developed technical skill to communicate anger without bitterness. He was averse to creating a tragic character, for the life of Bakha would then be a tragedy. He therefore created Bakha as one of the first tragic-comic heroes of Indian fiction.

The stream-of-consciousness of the hero Bakha in *Untouchable* runs throughout the novel, with the undercurrents of reminiscence, reverie and intuition indicated in certain phrases, symbolic words and truncated thoughts. Anand puts into the middle of the day a dream sequence which was culled from the hero's imagination as a fable of his pilgrim's progress. Anand's own observation becomes very pertinent in this context as he writes:

The atmosphere of the reverie was to hint at the turbulent world of his broken unconscious. The presentiments of the unknown fate which inspired him to pursue his quest, and which would be balked by the taboo against him. The heart of his human enigma was placed here as a poem of his bodily movements, to indicate the movement of his soul. I wanted to show the monotony, the flatness, and the sameness of Bakha's life through which he would go, urged by the incurable urge of curiosity itself, but thwarted, desolate and derelict. (Anand 56)

At the end of the hero's reverie, in this strange haunted world, Bakha is not allowed to place an offering before the saint. And he finds himself among a swarm of monkeys. This is the novelist's way of keeping Bakha within the confines of his own hell. The images chosen are the images of the world around him: the bullock cart; the Sikh man, dressed in the uniform of the English army, blaring out discordant music; railway station with the goods train with an engine at each end, pulling both ways; himself getting on to a wagon, a sola topi on his head; a small village with narrow streets; sparrows on the heap of grain; crow pecking at the bruised neck of the bullock; a little girl outside a sweet shop; a silversmith fashioning

REMARKING : VOL-1 * ISSUE-8*January-2015
ornaments; an emaciated man on the steps of the ritually ornamented building; soldiers carrying him to a burning ground, where there were mounds of human bodies; holy men pouring the ashes of their dead into their hair; a white man smiling on the scene; an ascetic ten thousand years old performing a magic trick by which the white man was turned into a black dog; Bakha offering a gift and being disallowed; a swarm of monkeys jumping down.

Anand tries not to create these scenes through Bakha's eyes. As a novelist, he is looking on from the side so that he could see him during his pilgrim's progress, confronting his routine cosmogony. Says Anand, "Although I could see Bakha alone, a kind of expatriate, an exile, the outcaste, I wanted to put him into his own setting. And he was rendered in terms of his own human situations." (Anand 58) The most important thing for the novelist is to impart actuality to the scene through which the sap of his life flows, making everything into his felt experiences and not an abstract statement. The novel succeeds in giving a direct impression of the reality of Bakha's life, indicating the sources of his inner rhythms and vibrations.

Untouchable is essentially a contemporary novel. There is implicit in this novel the beginning of the free natural man of our era, enslaved by circumstances, and who is in revolt against the suppressions. The narrative techniques of flashback, reverie, reminiscence, instinctive awareness of reality, intuition, etc. coupled with symbolic images, words and phrases, truncated thoughts, and Mulk Raj Anand's conscious awareness of bringing about the objective correlative from a distance, make *Untouchable* a modern novel in the real sense of the term.

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