

The Voice of Protest in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract

Dalit literature has become a new genre. Mulk Raj Anand is the first writer to touch upon this genre in his novels. Anand's Untouchable is a story of the Bhangi, the lowest of the low caste. Bakha, the protagonist represents a Dalit character and a victim of social superstition of untouchability. Anand has given Bakha, the subaltern a voice, an identity and a speech which is denied to him by the upper communities in the caste ridden society. With a realistic portrayal of life, Anand has tried to show the tragedy of Bakha's deterministic existence and the protest in the stubborn order with a message for men to evolve higher consciousness.

In recent times Dalit literature has become a new genre. The writers of Dalit literature have started depiction of the tormenting experience of Dalits with their political, economic, educational and mental conditions. Mulk Raj Anand was the first writer to touch upon this genre of Dalit literature in his novels which were translated to different regional and world languages. At present the term Dalit has been expanded with reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those beings exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.

Untouchable is not a caste, but a group of castes where sweeper is at the lowest rung. Anand's Untouchable is a story of the Bhangi, the lowest of the low caste, was considered untouchable even among the untouchable caste. They are given the job of cleaning the

latrines and sweeping the streets. The dirty nature of the Bhangis' work fathers the view of them as impure. This novel was earlier rejected by nineteen publishers, but later on in 1935, it was published with E M Forster's preface to protect it against being called dirty. Earlier Hindu society has condemned Untouchables as dirt of the society with no consideration for them as human beings. Untouchable is a realistic novel of socially crushed protagonist Bakha. It is an attempt to project the humiliation and agony faced by a subaltern in Indian society. Anand has given the subaltern Bakha a voice, an identity and a speech which is denied to him by the upper communities in the caste ridden society.

It is a realistic portrayal of life without any modification. With unflinching realism Anand describes a single day in the life of an untouchable, Bakha in the town of Bulashan.

The novel begins with a realistic picture of the outcastes' colony. The local colour of the novel is evoked with the photographic realism and accuracy. Anand himself has seen and presented the realistic description as it is. Anand has painted the realistic colony where untouchables and other outcaste people stay and wait to be humiliated by other caste Hindus. From the description of the novel, it seems that Anand has spent a day with Bakha and observed him minutely.

Usually Bakha's day starts with his father Lakha, the jamadar of all the sweepers in the town and the cantonment scolding him. Bakha dreams to have everything like Britishers. But it was a dream and very far from the reality for Bakha. His day starts with the 'rude bullying order to get up from his father';

‘Get up, ohe you Bakhiya, ohe son of a pig!’ came his father's voice, sure as the daylight, from the midst of a broken, jarring, interrupted snore. Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoy will be angry. (p.15)

Anand has used such words which are Indian in tone, he wants to make it very realistic. Bakha is in duty to clean latrine officially, he is in charge of the three rows of public latrines which lined the extreme end of the colony. Bakha finishes his job and returns to his hut as he is thirsty and wants to drink water but found empty pitcher as there was no water.

The caste people keep physical distance with untouchable and treat them socially backward. The water episode is a heart rendering episode. Anand's powerful observation, use of local language, use of abuses and the naked picture of the curse-untouchability clearly indicts plight of untouchability.

Anand threw light on the hypocrisy and lustfulness of the upper castes. The so called priest by the character of Pt. Kalinath who believed to be polluted by the touch of untouchable has strong sexual desire with Sohini, an untouchable. This duality and hypocrisy is revealed by Anand in the novel. Pundit is 'dead over her'; he is "one of the priest in-charge of the temple in the town'. He is attracted by Sohini's 'fresh, young form whose full breast with their dark beads of nipples stood out so conspicuously under her muslin shirt'. It is his evil intention that urges him to ask Sohini to come to clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. Sohini innocently goes to do so, he catches her by her breast but she refuses his suggestions. He then raises an alarm of;

'Polluted, Polluted, Polluted!' shouted the
Brahmin below

Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our
whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to
pay for the purificatory ceremony. (p.53)

This is the height of the hypocrisy. It is the age old tyranny and injustice done to untouchable in India. Here Bakha is in extreme pain as he could not do anything to Pundit and angry on one hand and on other finds miserable to have such a beautiful sister. It is a curse to have beautiful sister as people look towards the lustfulness and he could not do anything. Anand makes an effective protest against the stigma of pollution attached to untouchables as observed by Prof. M.K.Naik;

"He exhibits a sure grasp of the psychology of both the caste Hindus
and untouchables..His picture of relationship between them is objective and
balanced." ¹

The ill-treatment with Bakha by the caste Hindu is very harsh. He passes through the 'inferno' created through the social hierarchy. Anand describes the misery and humiliation of Bakha by the words of utmost reality. He has to keep physical distance from Hindu and has to shout: Posh, Posh, sweeper coming so that they save themselves from defiled by the touch of untouchable. This ritual or tradition was age old in India. Bakha is slapped by a caste Hindu for "polluting" him. He failed to announce himself as usual and 'pollutes' a caste Hindu unconsciously though and in return receives the torrent of abuses;

"Swine, dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach! he shouted as he met Bakha's eyes. Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!" (p.69)

This incident wounds him psychologically and makes him ponder over the humiliating segregation of the man from man by the restrictive imperatives of a social order. He has the potential to hit back but his anger changes into an indifference and obedience as he becomes conscious of the fact that a vast majority of out-castes too are subjected to the same kind of dehumanization as he is. But two thousand years of continual suppression and intimidation of his race have not exhausted his humility, and he tries to suffer from these social humiliations with an exemplary tolerance that is not untypical of a tragic hero. The piteous plight of the untouchables reminds the readers of Arundhati Roy who represents a similar attitude in her debut novel *The God of Small Things* where Velutha like Bakha is not allowed to enter the houses of the upper caste. But the emotions full of rage do not find any place in the character of Velutha as in the case of Bakha. Anand has a remarkable sympathy for his hero who symbolizes the predicament of a miserable victim pitted against the forces of orthodoxy and conservatism. In one of the incidents when Bakha receives both abuses and pancakes thrown at him by a housewife from the house-top. Anand seems to get the better hold to lay bare the real inhumanity to which the untouchables are subjected; they are treated as subhuman species between humans and dogs;

'Vay, eater of your masters', she shouted, 'may the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence. May you perish and die! You have

defiled my house! Go! Get up, get up! Eater of your masters! Why don't you shout if you wanted food? Is this your father's house that you come and rest here?' (p.80)

At last she throws the bread to Bakha from the top of her house like someone throws breads to dogs from distance. She says: Vay Bakhiya, take this. Here's your bread coming down.' And she flung it at him.(p.81)

Anand narrates the humiliation is such a great quality that one can picture the existing form of the society. Anand has used real Indian words to make the novel real. But the final outburst came out from Bakha is heart compassionate. It looks like that Anand was waiting to write the outburst of Bakha; even 'Bakha burst out with an explosion more sudden than the manner in which he normally reacts.

They insulted me this morning; they abused me because as I was walking along a man happened to touch me. He gave me a blow.

And a crowd gathered round me, abusing and----'they think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt. That pundit in the temple tried to molest Sohini and then came shouting: "Polluted, polluted." The woman of the big house in the silversmith's gully threw the bread at me from the fourth storey. I won't go down to the town again. I have done with this job". (p.83)

For Bakha, these incidences make his blood boil. He feels a wild desire to retaliate. And yet there is a futility. He knows that he will not cross the boundaries drawn by the tradition. *Untouchable* is a novel with a purpose. Anand's purpose is "to analyse the existentialistic structure of the untouchables' predicament."²

The untouchables suffer from the abominable effects of "discrimination, deprivation and a kind of denaturalization of moral and other cherished values of a civilized society."The anguish of all untouchables is found in Bakha's words:-

"Unlucky! Unlucky day ! What have I done to deserve all this?"

Anand is social reformist and so in the novel he projects real theme, real problem and real solution. He has concern with downtrodden so he has raised the issues, realize the reader to have pity and compassion for untouchables and finally Anand provides solution to remove untouchability.

Bakha finds three solutions to his problems. He may become a Christian with the help of Hutchinson, the Salvation Army Missionary. He has been happy to hear from Hutchison that Christ receives all men and that Yessuh Messih makes no difference between the Brahmin and the Bhangi. But Bakha refused to leave the Hindu religion saying that “the religion which was good enough for his forefathers was good enough for him.” (p.138). The second solution is that he may take comfort in Gandhiji's Chastisement of the caste Hindus and wait till the social conscience of the people is roused. The third solution is offered by modernization through the introduction of the water - closet, which makes the task of the sweepers easy. He feels that machine will solve all problems. Bakha thinks of everything he has heard and returns to his mud-walled hut as an enlightened man, dreaming that the evil of unsociability will soon disappear.

Bakha's ignominious existence and his pain and suffering are the results of the ignobleness of his caste, the Dalit, the Harijan, into which Bakha is born. Anand himself tried to show this through the tragedy of Bakha's deterministic existence and the stubborn order that is responsible for the creation of the Bakhas of society. “We accept this civilisation”, says Anand “but with the will to change it so that qualities may arise above quantities and men may evolve higher consciousness.”³

E.M. Foster admires Anand in his preface to the novel recognizes the wider gamut of emotions assimilated into the novel;

He (Anand) has just the right mixture of insight and detachment and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth.

Anand has concern for untouchables. He avoids all sorts of overt propaganda and sees that the novel develops along with the character in action. His strict fidelity to the facts of life

and a variety of the social mores makes the novel at once a significant social document as well as a symbolic projection of the whole saga of human suffering. Anand's novel *Untouchable* is undoubtedly a masterly work because it evinces a happy harmony between his social preoccupations and artistic gifts. As Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar sums up the novel:

Untouchable strikes us as the picture of the place of a society, and the certain persons not easily to be forgotten; a picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy. As a novelist addressing himself to the task of exposing certain evils, Anand has been as effective as Dickens himself.⁴

Thus, Anand has exposed social evil in its myriad manifestations and has evocatively presented different layers of human experience in the fiction. He enables to view humanity at large in a proper perspective. His close association with the underdogs and his passionate recordation of their woes has given his novel a rare cogency and an intimate quality of felt life.

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All references of the text are from Mulk Raj Anand's <i>Untouchable</i> published by Arnold Publishers, New Delhi, 1981
