

Mulk Raj Anand: Touching the Untouched

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on Mulk Raj Anand as a pioneer fictionist with a blazing social consciousness as he could dare to choose for this first novel – a theme that is in perfect consonance with his humanistic concern for man as man, irrespective of his social status. *Untouchable* is the first and the most famous novel by Anand. The theme of the novel evolves from the problem of the disposal of human excreta and dealing with such a topic is not an easy game either for the Indians or the English. The novel presents before us the stark reality of Indian society. It explains not only the lower strata of society (sweepers) but also the bottom scale of morality. Though *Untouchable* is a minor classic, published about seven decades ago, it has continued to attract critical attention; for the problems cited in it, still have to be solved and still have relevance. The fact that even after the passing of the Untouchability Offences Act in 1955, the evil of untouchability persists in the country, reflects a deep-rooted prejudice, which affects human behaviour and poses an intractable problem. To have chosen a mere untouchable adolescent as his protagonist, to project the pathetic predicament of a vast segment of Indian society, which has for centuries been the victim of cruel contempt and heartless exploitation at the hands of hypocritical society, is a daring act which establishes Anand, as a fictionist, indeed a step ahead of his illustrious predecessors and contemporaries such as Sarat Chandra, Tagore and Premchand.

KEYWORDS

Mulk Raj Anand; Untouchability; Social consciousness.

The works of Mulk Raj Anand have drawn worldwide attention. Anand (1905-2004) is one of those novelists of India who have established their prominence in the annals of Indo-Anglican literature during their lifetime. He has posed fundamental social questions related to the present day Indian society and has sought to awaken his countrymen to various injustices, prejudices and irrationalities, that, like a dead weight lie on India's soul and hinder her march to progress. Anand does not believe in the principle of "Art for art's sake". On the other hand, like other progressive writers, he believes in the dictum of "Art for the

sake of humanity". Anand's fiction necessitates consideration of Anand's intentions, attitudes and themes. He intended to depart from the upper and middle section fiction of Tagore. Anand combines in his novels Tagore's humanism, Bankim's romanticism, Premchand's sympathy for the poor and the afflicted and Sarat Chandra's boundless human sympathy. The theme of his fiction is -"the whole man and the whole gamut of human relationship." Anand writes:

My conversion to truth in Sabarmati Ashram was not a conversion to Gandhiji's

proposition, God is truth. I had been converted to the truth, which I saw in human relations, when he said, "God is Truth"; I said, "God is Love". I wanted to reveal beyond the spent up, redundant systems and categories of the philosophers and beyond organised religions, the intricate, contradictory emotions, feelings, moods and events, so that the experience of my characters may represent some part of the totality of life. I felt that, only, in fiction, which is the transformation through the imagination of the concrete life in words, sounds and vibrations, one may probe into the many layers of human beings to grow or contrariwise their inability to develop. The tragi-comedy may, thus, help one to achieve Karuna or compassion for one's fellow beings or the understanding of life. And one may pile up insights, sidelights and hunches which may make one more truly human (Anand1979:6-7).

Anand observes life closely and keenly and presents its naked reality in his fiction. As an artist, he changes the direction of his reader's thoughts in realizing that something positive needs to be done for the downtrodden, the low-caste and class people who are suffering. After all, they are also human beings, but people belonging to the upper classes and castes have kept themselves distant as if they existed only to serve them. The inhuman practices prick Anand's conscience and he feels it his duty to attempt to amend these wrongs. Anand's fiction aims at giving a jolt to people's fixed and passive modes of thinking and compelling them to start thinking for themselves.

Anand's best novels are deliberate attempts to expose the distress of the

lower castes and classes of India. They are undisguised in their plea for social change and are motivated by intense anger and pity. He has written about the emotional problems of human beings who are perhaps non-entities in the eyes of society because he is convinced that it is these people who have the necessary potential to grow to the highest consciousness, without the help or support of any mentor. But unfortunately, owing to the social barriers of caste, class, religion etc., their potential remains unrealized, unutilized and is ultimately suppressed.

Anand criticises the society around him in his novels because it became the repository of his nausea against the lowness, small-mindedness and meanness of the people. Having shared the joys and sorrows of the lowest class, Anand detached himself, storing safely in his memory what he had known and transforming it by the fire of his soul. Anand, in his various articles, has given us the description of the incident, which is deeply rooted in his subconscious mind:

The cruelty of God made an order (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Outcastes) come home to me when Bakha, a sweeper boy brought me home bruised in the head by an accidental stone. My mother abused him for carrying me. And she bathed me even though I was bleeding. This little incident was to remain in my conscious - unconscious and became a passion for justice against the old fixtures of non-human discrimination against untouchables (Anand: 1983:5-6).

This episode is dramatically utilised in *Untouchable*, the first and the most famous novel by Anand. The theme of the novel evolves from the problem of the disposal of human excreta and dealing with such a topic is not an easy game either for the Indians or the English. The novel presents before us the stark reality of Indian society. It explains not only the lower strata of society (sweepers) but also

the bottom scale of morality. *Untouchable* exposes the inhuman and unjust authority of caste Hindus over the untouchables. Though *Untouchable* is a minor classic published about seven decades ago yet it has continued to attract critical attention for the problems cited in it still have to be solved and still have relevance. The fact that even after the passing of the Untouchability Offences Act in 1955, the evil of untouchability persists in the country, reflects a deep-rooted prejudice, which affects human behaviour and poses an intractable problem.

Anand presents the existential situation brought by social discrimination and separation and thus, draws attention to an aspect of the human situation which has a tragic effect since it sets at nought such liberal concepts and ideals as the brotherhood of man or the community of humanity. In portraying Bakha, the protagonist of *Untouchable* as a marginal man, Anand has drawn a fictional character that is relevant to the understanding of the difficult position of the contemporary man. Through Bakha, Anand shows how we have been treating humans as ritually unclean and physically unpleasant. Society is of the view that touching the sweeper, whom it considers an outcast, will bring impurity to blood and thereby the fall of dignity. Anand gives a glimpse of the attitude of the upper Hindu caste people towards the sweeper boy belonging to the lowest of the low caste. One day while walking on the market street Bakha forgets to call out, "posh, posh...posh sweeper coming" and accidentally touches a Hindu, he receives many cases of abuse and slapping from the man whom he has polluted. Again seeing a boy injured in a hockey game, Bakha brings him to his house. Instead of praising and appreciating his efforts to assist an injured boy, Bakha not only is assaulted and debarred but is also charged with defiling the injured boy. Even the betel-leaf seller, from whom

Bakha buys cigarettes, flings the packet at the untouchable "as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing around the corner of his shop"(Anand1981:30). It is symbolic of the injustice and tyranny perpetrated by the upper caste people in general on the unfortunate class of people of the country. What is ironic and, therefore, shocking is the fact that they do not mind casteism when they perform immoral deeds on the miserable and helpless low caste people. In a scene from the novel Pt. Kali Nath asks Sohini, Bakha's sister, to come home to his house to clean the courtyard. When she goes to clean the courtyard, he tries to molest her. When she repels his advances, Pt. Kali Nath having no option accuses her of polluting him and collects the crowd of the high caste people. In the meanwhile, Bakha also comes there, sends Sohini back home to avoid her humiliation and himself listens to the abuses of Kali Nath. Sohini comes back home and says bitterly to her father, "we are merely dirt because we clean their dirt" (Anand 1981:28). The attitude of the upper castes against the sweepers leads us to think that, had the air the sweepers breathe been in control of the people belonging to the upper castes they would have withheld the supply of it.

Bakha, the protagonist, cannot understand why people are so unfair and tyrannical to those born in low-caste families; why they do not realize that the low-caste people, too, are made of flesh and blood as are their fellow creatures and, therefore, should be treated as human beings. He understands that he does some useful work for society, so he is a part of society. He performs his duty well, a duty that everyone cannot do. Still, he is a neglected person in society. The sweepers, whose job is to clean the place for others, live in a locality that has never known hygiene or sanitation. Bakha is even denied the opportunity of an education. Anand writes:

His father told him that schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers...the masters wouldn't teach the outcastes, lest their fingers which guided the students across the text should touch the leaves of the outcastes' book and they are polluted (Anand 1981:27).

Thus the theme of *Untouchable* is concerned with the evil of untouchability. The novelist's main aim is to expose the hypocrisy of the high caste Hindus and to arouse the readers' sympathy for the poor and downtrodden.

Although there are several competing centres of attention identifiable with his thematic concerns- the caste system, class system, religion, education etc. constitute more or less the principal foci of thematic significance since they provide the premises underlying Anand's fictional structures. The caste system,

though seemingly related to the Indian milieu or the Hindu community, has a universal dimension, which needs to be recognized. It is, therefore, surprising that barring Anand no other Indo-Anglican writer has highlighted it in any significant terms. Anand deserves credit for his thematic choice for his very first novel- a choice that is in perfect consonance with his humanistic concern for man as man, irrespective of his social status. To have chosen a mere untouchable adolescent as his protagonist to project the pathetic predicament of a vast segment of Indian society, which has for centuries been the victim of cruel contempt and heartless exploitation at the hands of hypocritical society, is a daring act which established Anand as a pioneer fictionist with a burning social consciousness, indeed a step ahead of his illustrious predecessors and contemporaries such as Sarat Chandra, Tagore and Premchand.

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