

SOCIAL OSTRACISM IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is a pioneer Indian writer in English. He concentrates on the social reality of Indian society and humanism. Anand has brought a change in the field of literature by imbibing social realism in Indian writings in English. He uses literature as a tool to address the societal trauma undergone by people in the name of caste. Caste is a form of culture, which was rigid in pre-colonial and post-colonial India. People were segregated in the name of caste from the mainstream. The lower caste people were called untouchables, who were not even allowed to drink water from the same well. Anand in his novel *Untouchable* has addressed the oppression faced by the lower caste scavengers. The novel revolves around the character Bakha, who strives to liberate from his pitiful state. This paper is an attempt to trace the trauma faced by the oppressed people in the name of caste and elaborates on the social ostracism in the novel. The upper caste people take all liberty to exploit the lower caste and treat them as their subordinates. This caste-based oppression dates back to Vedic period and can also be felt in contemporary Indian society. This becomes the significance of the present study.

Keywords: Social Ostracism, Oppression, Caste, Trauma, Untouchable, Humanism.

Introduction:

Mulk Raj Anand is the most celebrated social realist. His novels are the depiction of harsh reality of Indian society based on caste. In India Caste is a form of culture, which is practiced from ancient time till date. Though there were many social reformers and revolutions happening to eradicate caste, it still has its effect over the masses to an extent. People are oppressed by people in the name of caste. Nesfield defines caste as “a class of the community which disowns any connection with any other class and can neither intermarry nor eat nor drink with any but persons of their own community” (Ambedkar 4).

Initially caste was segregated based on occupation, but the idea of pollution and exploitation was unbearable and irresolvable. Mulk Raj Anand has expressed his idea through his character Bakha in the novel *Untouchable*. The title of the novel suggests the reader that the novel is a voice of a voiceless people. “Mulk Raj Anand depicted the caste system and the problem of untouchability in his writings that was previously ignored by the writers or did not have courage to raise the problem of untouchables” (Kumar 97).

Among the trio of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K Narayan and Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand was a courageous person to depict the life of Untouchable. His writing has explained about the psychological trauma gone through by the lower caste people of India in pre-independence time. Anand was concerned to voice out about the discrimination happening to the people belonging to lower caste. “Anand is a humanist writer, a true democrat who believes in equal rights for men and women” (Nag a303).

This research paper is an exploration on the social ostracism expounded through the novel *Untouchable*. According to Cambridge Dictionary, the term Ostracism means “The action of intentionally not including someone in a social group or activity.” Social Ostracism together means the societal exclusion of a person or a group intentionally. In India people belonging to lower caste are socially ostracized. The upper caste people considered touching them or their presence in the mainstream as inauspicious. People are punished severely for entering into the mainstream or touching the upper caste people.

The novel *Untouchable* is a story about a lower caste Bakha, who works as a sweeper. This novel is considered as a masterpiece of social realism, as Anand pictures the scenario. His portrayal about the house of poor people subtly explains the physical trauma encountered by them. “The outcastes’ colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows under the shadow, both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them” (Anand 1).

Bakha unknowingly touches an upper caste man. This was not intentional yet he was punished. People of his kind need to go through psychological and physiological pain for no reason. They come to the extent of thinking that their existence itself is a curse and hate their life. “Keep to the side of the road you low-caste vermin! he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defied me, You cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!” (Anand 38).

The idea of pollution vanishes when the upper caste men exploit the lower caste women. “Caste discrimination exists in our society on the basis of purity but they maintain purity with the Dalit males only and Dalit females are touchable to them as suggested in the novel” (Kumar 100). They defy their system of belief. A Brahmin ill-treats Bakhsa’s sister Sohini. She opens up to his brother “. . . that man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled” (Anand 53). This behaviour of the fake holy man is a part of social exploitation only. “The priest is not ashamed of taking advantage of the lower social position of this girl and she is helpless. Her brother Bakha is also helpless to express his open resentment of the wound and insult inflicted to his sister, to his own self and to his caste too” (Tiwari 11).

People make it rigid and treat the fellow being the worst, according to the Shastras lower caste people are allowed inside the temple to a certain limit. But the upper caste people take this to the next level of not allowing them even near the temple gate. “A temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it, and here he was actually on the steps, at the door. We are ruined. We will need to have a sacrificial fire in order to purify ourselves and our shrine” (Anand 53). For standing in the steps, upper caste people state that Bakha has polluted the place and needs sanitation immediately. “Mulk Raj Anand has also made an attempt to show the untouchables’ condition to a worldly platform so that the people of the world can know the real condition of Dalits” (Kumar 97).

People humiliate their fellow beings. They treat humans worse than animals; this causes a psychological turmoil inside their mind. Wherever they go, they are being ostracized. “Bakha put his anna there. The betel-leaf-seller dashed some water over it from the jug with which he sprinkled the betel leaves now and again. Having thus purified it, he picked up the nickel piece and threw it into the counter. Then he flung a packet of ‘Red-Lamp’ cigarette at Bakha, as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop” (Anand 34).

Bakha is humiliated by the seller. The seller is not selling the cigarette for free or on discount, but according to the person whom he sells his treatment changes. The seller does not even touch the coin directly from Bakha’s hand and he also denies giving the cigarette from his hand, he threw it. “The Untouchables suffered humiliation because of their low position in the Hindu Society. The higher castes always treated the low castes with disrespect and insults and Inferiority” (Kumar 98-99).

The most traumatizing scene is, Bakha does not react to it, instead asserts it. This marks the consciousness of a Dalit, for whom such things have been normalized by the upper caste people. They accept such kind of treatment and are made to believe that’s how they are supposed to live. “Humiliation means, in simple words, disrespectful treatment to a human being by other human beings in which the individual dignity of the concerned is not respected” (Kumar 99).

Social Ostracism is marginalization of people belonging to a particular caste. Here the marginalization is expounded through Bakha's life. Mulk Raj Anand has explained about the various situations and struggles they go through. They are socially marginalized, culturally exploited and politically excluded. All the basic rights for human existence have been denied for them. "Marginalized are those people deprived of socio-economic opportunities for their sustenance and they are victims of social, cultural, and political exclusion. The downtrodden, the poor people are regarded as marginalized" (Sudhakar 26).

The exploitation and poor treatment of the upper caste over the lower caste creates a mental agony, which goes unexpressed. The lower caste members do not have any rights to question the injustices inflicted upon them or show anger towards the person who caused pain in them. They undergo psychological trauma like repressed emotions, which gets notified through such artistic production. Literature is always seen as a mirror of life. Similarly, Mulk Raj Anand has used novels as a way to unleash his repressed emotions about the life of Indian Dalits. "The marginalization of the people creates scars and mental agony and literature tries to resolve the crisis to sensitize the people for creating an atmosphere of justice and non-violence" (Bhattacharya 682).

The way to overcome such treatment has been delivered by Anand and made the readers realize the possible ways practiced in India to upgrade their life. The three ways are: one is to become a Christian, through the conversation between Bakha and Colonel Hutchinson, Anand has addressed the Christian missionaries who converted lower caste people into Christian. They state that everyone is similar in the eyes of God. "Yessuh Messih makes no difference between the Brahmin and myself . . . we are all alike in the eyes of Jesus" (Anand 120).

The second one is following Gandhian ideology, Gandhi addressed Untouchable as Harijans, he states that they should not accept rotten food from the upper caste people. "They should now cease to accept leavings from the plates of high-caste Hindus, however clean they may be represented to be. They should receive grains only –good, sound grain, not rotten grain -and that too, only if it is courteously offered. If they are able to do, all that I have asked them to do. They will secure their emancipation" (Anand 139). Emancipation should come from within as stated by Mahatma Gandhi.

The last one is the change of profession of a sweeper and flush system machines in order to keep themselves clean. "When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain untouchables . . . will be to introduce the machine which clears dung, without anyone having to handle it -the flush system. Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society" (Anand 146).

Anand has used literature to address societal issues and the ways to overcome those issues. He has also elaborated on the physiological and psychological trauma experienced by both men and women in Indian society. Towards the end Anand has made the readers know about the various possibilities available for an Untouchable to emancipate his life and people. "The quest for freedom, better conditions are presented in Indian literature which emerges as a new beginning to show the conflict of the natives in the post-colonial era and restoring their culture to the higher level for remarkable change that leads to an upsurge and reflects a revolutionary effort for collective freedom" (Bhattacharya 682).

Thus, societal ostracism in India has been eradicated to an extent. But still it needs to be completely done. Though people from the lower caste are evolving from their circle and mingling into the mainstream, many go through psychological trauma at the workplace. Therefore, as Gandhi suggests it should start from within, one should eliminate ostracism in his/her mind for complete freedom.

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