

Mulk Raj Anand, A Gandhain Variant ; A Close Study of his 'Untouchable'

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Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' Published in 1935 provided the most comprehensive outlook on the problem of untouchability. Anand can rightfully claim uniqueness for introducing "into creative narrative...whole new people who have seldom entered the realm of literature in India"[Anand,79]. He is conscious of the need to help raise the untouchable, the peasants, the serfs, the coolies and the other suppressed members of the society, to human dignity and self awareness"[Anand,93]. The novel came out in the period in which the untouchables had emerged as a potent political force and Gandhiji was trying to win them over. Anand stayed with Gandhiji in Sabarmati Ashram in 1932, where he prepared an early draft of the novel. In 1933 he revised the novel in England and submitted it to nineteen publishers, one after another, only to be rejected. It was only when E.M. Forster wrote a preface to protect it against being called dirty because it dealt with human excreta that Wishart Books published it. Forster says in the preface.

Untouchable could only have written by an Indian and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity. Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position ---he has just the right mixture of insight and detachment, and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth.[Forster,6]

Surely Anand was not the only person (witness Premchand on Anand's own submission) in India dealing with the lowest dregs of society and I should think his feeling for the underdog was not all of it the outcome of impact of Western tradition on him. But he is plainly outspoken about the social function of his novel when he says:

Untouchable was, in its sources, a ballad born of the freedom I had tried to win for truth against the age-old lies of the Hindus by which they upheld discrimination.[Anand,28]

In his social outlook Anand came under the spell of Gandhi's love of the outcaste and he went to his Ashram at Sabarmati and himself cleaned latrines. This helped him develop "the Idea of work as worship and imbibed in him an integral outlook towards all labour as a kind of creativity".[Anand,24] He says:

After beginning to do this kind of work, I found that in redrafting my novel in Gandhiji's Ashram, I could make the very act of cleaning latrines by "Bakha" seem no better and no worse than any other work. In this sense, the exploitation of his person for doing his work, on a very small pay, began to be important and the dirty aspect of the job seemed not so much to be his attitude towards cleaning commodes but part of the anal-arotic complex of the Hindus through which they condemned a whole caste of people who cleaned their dung pots.[Anand,24]

It would be wrong to think that these reactions were those of a Westernized intellectual contemptuous of India its culture and its people. No novelist can judge or portray a society and its people without a feeling of kinship and sympathy. Anand's stay at Gandhi's Ashram had an impact on him he writes.

I was myself somewhat transformed from the Bloomsbury intellectual, which I became in London to a more emphatically self conscious Indian¹⁴. [Anand,25]

In writing *Untouchable* Anand had to face many problems. Untouchability in India is a socio-economic problem and a popular subject for such research. Gandhi had advised him to write a tract on the problem as the idea of writing a novel did not appeal to him. Anand had experienced the feelings of the untouchables by understanding them and sharing their job of cleaning. But this experience in the raw by itself could not be shaped into a novel.

The title of **Untouchable** has no article. C.D. Narasimhaiah takes special note of it and rightly comments, "Bakha fights to seek his identity. Anand suggests it in the choice of his incisive title without the definite article"[Narsimhaiah,iii]. The struggle of the untouchables during the 30s underlined a search for communal identity as well as the assertion of a particular untouchable's individuality. Anand is aware of this duality and Bakha is in fact an individual

as much as an ideal type. By making an untouchable his hero Anand is sharply reacting reacting against the age old concept of caste which symbolizes that inhuman classification of the people of which “Bakha” is an innocent victim.

The choice of subject shows the author’s awareness of the social, economic and political developments of the period. The struggle for independence called for a close, critical scrutiny of caste and class barriers and their removal wherever possible. Ambedkar’s leadership threatened to break the untouchable away as a separate force and further underlined the political necessity of winning their confidence. Western egalitarian ideologies had also been at work but the political dimension of the idea of a fair deal to the Harijan had an urgency that could not be ignored.

This picture of the outcastes’ colony is not merely naturalistic but is related to the novel’s theme and action. The colony is “outside” and “separate” from the traditional town of Nagar or the modern army cantonment. The “dung” and “refuse” of the animals and men are an integral part of this kind of existence and the stink is a projection of human degradation and social cruelty. Anand is neither sentimental nor escapist, hence the reference to “The absence of drainage system” symbolically ‘places’ the problem and hints at some sort of a definite solution that admits of administration. But Anand is a novelist and not a journalist, therefore, he emphasized the “uncongeniality” that is the alienation discussed earlier, through the exploration of the hero’s consciousness and not from his own point of view. He creates the background with all its sordid details, and in the second paragraph of the novel he introduces the protagonist:

At least so thought Bakha, a Young man of eighteen strong and able-bodied, the son of Lakha, the Jemadar of all sweepers in the town and the cantonment and officially in-charge of the three rows of public latrines, which lined the extremest end of the colony by the brook side.[Untouchable,1]

At least so thought Bakha’ the squalor, the alienation, the uncongenial ness and even the drainage system, are all mediated through Bakha’s consciousness, and in these words an important aspect of Bakha’s character is established. In spite of the fact that he had to work as a common scavenger, Bakha was uncommon because he could think for himself and find his surroundings uncongenial. He could rise above his people as he had come in contact with a

force which was bringing about the disintegration to the orthodox, feudal structure of Indian economy and society.

Anand's view of the interaction between age old beliefs and social change is rational whereas ritualistic orthodoxy is based on irrational attitudes. But an analytical and empirical approach would have produced a mere catalogue of the untouchables' miseries and the novel would have been shaped into predetermined schematic patterns. The life of Bakha is disturbed as he is a child of modern India. He stands in an unconventional position historically and has a sense of his own place in the social order. This awareness is accentuated when he listens to his old father's experienced and grimly realistic advice, "You should try and get to know them. You have got to work for them all your life, my son, after I die." [Untouchable,61]

This goes deep into Bakha and the response "No, no," his mind seemed to say 'never' shows that he is not ready to reconcile himself to beastly indignities and serf's predicament. He is in an ironic and peculiarly alienated position. If he clings to his roots he is to be condemned for ever as he is betrayed by the fatalism of his own people. He hates the entire structure in which education is denied to him. His worldly wise father had told him "schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers." [Untouchable,27] He has bitterly learnt that, "these old Hindus were cruel" [Untouchable,27] he wants to read and is ready to pay "an anna per lesson." [Untouchable,28] This natural enthusiasm and curiosity to know and learn plays an important part in shaping his complex personality.

The town provides the scene of the second phase of his experience and adds a new dimension to his predicament. Bakha stops at the shop of a betel-leaf seller, in order to buy a packet of 'Red Lamp' cigarettes. When he puts an anna on the board, the shopkeeper sprinkles water on the coin and throws it into the counter. Then he throws the packet of cigarettes at the untouchable "as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing around the corner of his shop." [Untouchable,46] The sensitive Bakha realizes his position and subsequent humiliation created by this episode. The coin of an untouchable can carry the seed of cancer disease, this seems to be the belief of the high-caste society. In the main street Bakha proceeds and he desires to purchase jilebis from a Bengali sweetmeat stall. There also, his coin is washed in water and the packet is simply thrown to him without any respect.

Bakha's over-enthusiasm in eating the Jilebis makes him forget himself, and he in an unguarded moment hits against a Lalaji inadvertently. For an untouchable like Bakha to touch

a Lalaji is a sign of deadly sin, all the holy waters of the river Ganges cannot purify this sin of pollution by touch. What is to be noticed is the reaction of the crowd. A group of caste-Hindus who gather there shower the most abusive epithets on him calling him a dirty dog and son of a bitch. Bakha realises his unintentional mistake and begs Lalaji's pardon. Lalaji gives him a slap on his cheeks.

Bakha has a dual instinct to show in this incident. Had he wanted he could have easily thrashed him. But centuries of submission to the caste –Hindus paralyses his feelings. One may refer to the passage where Anand explains Bakha's hesitation which springs from a moral ground.

But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulder would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the Hindu merchants but a moral one. [Untouchable,35]

Bakha reviews his own life and realizes that a person who touches dung and cleans latrines has no right to touch others.

Anand himself has given us an account of the various books that influenced him and conditioned his art. He told us that it was;

The reading of Tolstoy's war and peace, during a short term in jail that awakened me to the possibilities of the epic novel Later I read Dostoevsky's. The possessed and was overwhelmed during those years I had also been reading the epic-satirical novel, fasana-I-Azad, written by an urdu writer, Ratan Nath Sarshar. The fact that Tolstoy had influenced Gandhi, to whose ideas I had been converted, made the influence of Tolstoy very real. In 1924. I read victor Hygo's short novel of the French revolution and this stirred me also because of revelation that direct political events could also be the theme of a novel.' [As quoted by Tilak,26]

Of all his novels 'Untouchable' is the most compact and "artistically satisfying." [Iyengar,335] Untouchable is the shortest of the novels and the most revealing and rewarding of the lot. The unities are admirably preserved as in classical pattern for **Untouchable** It covers the events of a single day in the life of the low-caste boy. **Untouchable** is also remarkable for its Dalit Perspective Anand had used the human and non-

human symbols which are merged with each other Untouchable also translated in thirty eight languages of the world so far, is of all Anand's novels, "the most revealing and rewarding of the lot." [Iyengar,336] It is also a favourite of the novelist, who called it, "a compact short, symbolic work. In short, Anand had given us a faithful picture of the exploitation of the underprivileged and the misery which was the lot of the poor people in India. The characterization in Coolie is melodramatic. Almost all the characters are either good or evil. The good characters like Prabha, Parbati, Chota Abu, Ratan, are virtuous dummies of melodrama and the wicked one remain so throughout the novel. Daya Ram, Bibi Uttam Kaur, Ganpat and Jimmy Thomas are wicked characters. So far as a villain is concerned, society itself appears as villain in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand.

In Coolie, Anand shows that suffering and pain are inevitable features of human existence but man can control pain and erode suffering by universal brotherhood, Love, compassion and equality. Had Bibi Uttam Kaur treated Munoo with little compassion and Kindness, his tragedy might have been avoided. Infact Munoo represents a class, the poor class struggling to earn its living. Probably Munoo is only an inconsequential waif in the eyes of the world, but for Anand he is as important as any other human being in flesh and blood, and he brings to bear such profound pity on the boy that the novel gives the impression that his death implies the death of all that is good at the altar of cruelty.

The rejection of fatalism is a prominent feature of humanism. Munoo suffers not because of Fate or chance. He is a victim of circumstances and forces that are made by men. They are social forces. Neither Munoo nor fate is responsible; it is society which causes his tragedy. Anand was a 'humanist' because he rightly thought that, since most of our problems have been created by man, they can also be solved by man. Superstition, caste class, capitalism, exploitation, over population, tyranny - since man is responsible for all these, man can now fight and undo them too.

If he had the vision doubled with the requisite will. Anand's Dalit sophisms made him use his art for the service of humanity. Caste and national barriers have no significance for him and he regards all mankind as one. Anand's treatment of these themes in Coolie presents a fair picture of the evils of modern capitalistic and industrial civilization of which Munoo is a passive victim. It is the extreme form of dehumanization. But Anand's approach was not negative. He gave a message also. Munoo's death is Mr. Anand's plea for change in the order of society. Mulk Raj Anand's suggestion was that consideration of man as man or equality

will remove the class – consciousness society and its cruelty and injustice, Humanism is the essence of society. Anand's message in the novel in the robot minded callous society is to be reformed through a change of heart, Anand had shown his sympathy for the poor.

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