

Portrayal of Casteism in Mulk Raj Anand's, 'Untouchable'

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Abstract

"More than twenty years (more than seventy years in today's perspective) have passed since independence, how much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in temple, walk where I like." **Rohinton Mistry, A Fine Balance**

Using Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable', my paper is an attempt to explore the caste system and highlight the depth of evil to which the human mind can capitulate to power and supremacy. Mulk Raj Anand is known for his mythological fiction writing in the era when other writers mostly highlight contemporary family values, moral values, customs, cultures and many other aspects.

Through the novel, 'Untouchable' Anand tries to explore the various rules imposed on the lower caste, for example, walking with dhol or whistle so that they can produce sound to announce their arrival so that the people of upper caste could give them space to walk and to avoid themselves to being polluted. The untouchables must live outside the village. They don't have the right to take water from village well by their own hands. They have to attach a sweep at their back so that when they walk their footprints do remove from the earth. Because in that time it is believed that by the upper caste if the untouchable footprints remains on the earth, the earth will be polluted. It also reveals the hypocrisy of Hindu religion and shows the helplessness of the lower community.

This paper is based on the caste system as portrayed in the novel, 'Untouchable'. It is an attempt to explore their origin, nature, seriousness and destitution. The novel, 'Untouchable' discusses the maltreatment, oppression and discrimination of the lower caste peoples.

Keywords: Caste system, Discrimination, Oppression and Untouchable.

Introduction:

Literature is a tool that explores the openness and fight of oppressed people. Like other literature from different places of the world, Indian English literature writers have marked these oppressed issue and problems with special attention in their works. Mulk Raj Anand was usually regarded as the father of Indian English Novels. Anand raised his pen against the class and caste system that prevailed in 1930's. He was born on 12 December 1905 in Peshawar, the capital city of North West Frontier Province of India before the India's partition. He is universally regarded as an extraordinary novelist for his effort to represent the oppressed and deprived people who are struggling for their existence.

'*Untouchable*' (1935), is Mulk Raj Anand's first novel. It explore the miserable life of subalterns who attempted to change their existing life standard be entering the centre from the margin. But their efforts fall apart when it comes to face reality. The depiction of the untouchable people in this novel is the crucial subject to be analysed critically. In Indian cultural context, oppression occurs on the basis of caste, class and gender. The caste system brings great destruction in the growth of our country. The caste system is deep-rooted in India from the time immemorial. Untouchability, a social evil, is sub form of caste system. Many efforts were made time to time by many social reformer i.e. –Gandhi Ji, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, Swami Vivekanand. According to Swami Vivekanand:

“The caste system is opposed to the religion of Vedanta. Caste is a social custom and all our great preachers have tried to break it down. From Buddhism downwards, every section has preached against caste and every time it has only riveted the chains.”

(Vivekanand 1983:31)

“*Untouchable*' is a protest novel in which Mulk Raj Anand attacks on the caste system method that prevailed in the society on a huge level. Anand's objective behind the creation of '*Untouchable*' was as he himself states:

'*Untouchable*' was in its sources is a ballad form of the freedom in it I had tried to win for truth against the age-old lies of the Hindu by which they upheld discrimination. The profound thoughts of the upper orders in ancient India about caste were often noble. Someone in great Mahabhartar had cried, “Caste, Caste – there is no Caste!” and I wanted to repeat this

truth to the ‘dead souls.’ From the compassion of myself explanation in the various Hindu hells, in the hope that I would, myself come clean after I had been through sewer, as it were.

(George, 19)

‘*Untouchable*’ deals with Bakha, the central character, fourteen years old sweeper in the novel. The novel also explores the condition oppression of uppercaste on the lower caste people and their anger against the uppercaste society. The novel portrays the unopened and stressed relationships of Untouchables, Muslims, Christians and British Colonizers. The novel presents a remarkable opening for the Indian English writer to explain the new world of oppressed. The novel shows a hope for the untouchable Hindus by bringing the philosophy of Gandhi which tries to raise consciousness with the purpose of removing the caste system as well as hierarchical system of Hindu religion in India. Anand’s prime idea of writing this work is also eradication of caste system as it is considered as a heinous crime in Indian Constitution. Anand believed in humanism. In his answer to a questionnaire submitted to him by G.S. Balaram Gupta:

“I do not believe in institutionalised religion. And like Tolstoy, I would like to leave the beliefs of the people to their private conscience, collaborating with them for certain secular ends, without objecting to their pet religion.” (G.S. Balaram Gupta, P.21)

Anand’s childhood day friendship with a lower caste child stimulate him to create a novel that explores the condition of outcaste oppressed peoples condition among Hindu society. And Bakha as a fictional hero is the result of that friendship. Anand draws Bakha’s character as a kid of modern India even though he belongs to untouchable class. Bakha has not succumbed to his fate like his father Lakha. He is a child of modern India and impatient to adopt modern ways of dressing style as, “he has secured a pair of old breeches and from a sepoy a pair of old boots, he would, if he could, like to look the white foreigner and so be in the fashion”. (Iyenger 1973:336)

Bakha’s one day journey, as an untouchable starts with the warning call of his father Lakha for going to clean latrines for the upper-caste people. After completing his work of cleaning the latrines, he come back to home and thinks his work of cleaning the latrines, road sweeping and courtyard sweeping makes him lesser to high caste. He does not understand

how his Karma makes him inferior and separates him from high-caste people and how his community are contemplate as physically impure and untouchable although he and his community clean and pure society. He thinks his community people are able to clean the physical dirt of external environment but they are not able to clean the mind of upper class. The high caste Hindus (Brahmins) think that they are polluted being and don't like their touch. However, Muslim don't mind to touch them. He emotionally thinks and states, "It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-Untouchable! Untouchable! And only Untouchable! That's the world! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (Anand 2001:43)

Bakha's miseries and pains are just because he was born in a Dalit (Untouchable) family. In his daily life, Bakha faces a lot of oppression and humiliation by the upper caste society. Wherever he goes, he feels ashamed by listening the words like "Polluted" and "Untouchable". Bakha knows very well that his condition is not better than a street dog because a high caste house wife throws away chapattis at him as if she thrown at a street dog. When he returns back at his home with that chapattis his father, Lakha scolded him in spite of praising that he brings only few chapattis. Lakha, remembers his past time when he brought a lot of food from the marriages. Lakha is also dreamed a past incident how he begged for medicine at a Hakimji's threshold. It happened because Lakha belonged to untouchable caste and Dalit caste was not permissioned to enter any high caste family house and any religious place. Anand's humanistic approach is clear in the novel when Lakha recited the past experience as:-

"I tried to fall at the feet of the every passer-by and prayed them to tell the Sarkar, your honour that my child was suffering. But Sarkar this is the time of kindness, be compassionate at this time, another time you may take even my life. Only, save my child.

(Anand, 73)

Here, Anand portrays the curse of untouchability that is continuously running from generation to generation. It is so surprising thing that in this world of intellectuals I always think that what type of dilemma is it? We can change our religion but not caste. However religion has big region. In ancient times in India there was a common custom that lower caste people were not allowed to get water from common well. Because it was there mentality if untouchables will the take the water from the well the water get polluted by the touch of

their dirty hands. Same conditions is presented in the novel by the Anada. In the novel, the lower caste peoples are waiting at the platform of the well for getting water with the help of some upper caste Hindus: Anand describes it as:

“The outcaste were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw the water from it, the Hindus of the Three Upper Caste would consider the water polluted. (Anand 2001:14)

Untouchables were not allowed to enter into the temple. In the novel, there is a temple incident which brings tears in the eyes when we read it. The Bakha's sister Sohini is seduced by the temple Pujari. And when she tries to say something about the incident, Bakha and Sohini both are accused of polluting the temple. The calm and holy surrounding is suddenly disturbed by the cry, “Polluted! Polluted! Polluted!” (Anand: 68)

Bakha has been asked to get rid of the place by the gathering as:

“Get off the steps, scavenger! You have defiled our temple! Now we have to pay for the purification. Get down, get away beast, you dog! ... A temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it. ... We are ruined. We will need to have a sacrificial fire in order to purify ourselves and our shine.

(Anand: 69-70)

Conclusion:-

When we read this novel, this brings a strong emotion in our mind how it can be possible that a man is being polluted by the touch of another human being. A beast has permission to drink water in a brook but if an untouchable took a drop of water to satisfy his thirst he has to face a lot of charges. Mulk Raj Anand as a social critic tried to convey a very strong message through his novel ‘Untouchable’. Anand always raised a voice against the cast segregation in the Indian society. Although there is many laws in Indian constitution to abolish the practice of the untouchability by law but mental social and traditional outlook of people remained the same. India is still not completely free from the class system.

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