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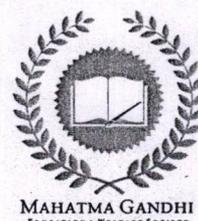
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Special Issue



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Gandhian Perspectives in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

Dr. S. N. Kadam

-Head, Department of English
ACS College, Gangakhed

Mulk Raj Anand is an admirer of humanistic philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawahar Lal Nehru. He owes much of his love for the down-trodden humanity to Mahatma Gandhi and his synthetic approach towards the ideologies of east and west to Rabindranath Tagore. He wants to strike a combination of Gandhian love for humanity and Marxian gospel of classless and casteless society. Mulk Raj Anand's first novel *Untouchable* is powerful novel exposing the dehumanising role of caste narrativised through a fine analysis of a day's activity of a sweeper boy. How the caste divided Indian society inflicts pains upon this poor Bakha has been photographically delineated by Mulk Raj Anand in this novel.

The destined life of a sweeper like Bakha is his karmic and hereditary obligation. Although Gandhi emphatically declares that untouchability is "the greatest blot on Hinduism" (*Untouchable* 146). His moral philosophy appears to be too idealistic to meet the immediate ends of social justice. Some of the legal and social programmes that the poet Sarshar suggests are also equally idealistic. But Forster is quick to identify the tangle to which the Hindus have unluckily chained themselves.

According to this tangle, those who clean dirt are designated as dirty, impure and hence, outcastes. And also Bakha believes that the frowning expression, "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt," should have been unconditionally subjoined to the following statement: "They think we are born as dirt; therefore we are destined to clean their dirt" (79). Obviously, the metaphor focuses on the metaphysics of evil and especially on the nature of the deterministic order: the soul is born into the lowest class because of its basic imperfection, in which case then the life of a sweeper becomes a mode of punishment, a penal servitude.

Bakha is conscious of being born in a family of sweepers, but he is unable to comprehend the complex problem of untouchability. He helps people clean their bodies, but he doesn't understand how his touch can pollute those who feign purity by birth. The fear of loss of inherited purity by intermingling with the low castes is quite evident. The drastic implications of the Freudian ideas of fear, estrangement and Oedipal impulse are demonstrably set in the metaphor of the untouchable. Ironically, Pundit Kali Nath, overpowered by his sexual desire for Bakha's sister Sohini, must have been utterly confused about the meaning of the words "purity" and "defilement." Evidently, Anand has placed the entire problem of the soul's purity and impurity in the midst of the modern discourse, eastern and western, on the nature of man, the origin of evil and class structure, firmly suggesting that British colonial attitudes by and large have endorsed such forms of human bondage.

In *Untouchable*, Anand declares, "I meant to recreate the lives of the millions of untouchables through a

single person" (qtd. in Rajan 102). Bakha is a representative of all untouchables. He is slapped on his face by an upper-caste Hindu for polluting him by his touch. Like all untouchables, he is insolently abused, humiliated and rebuked by the upper castes. Mention can be made of the abusive name-calling at the temple and also the baneful charge of defilement of the temple by the priest who tries to molest Sohini. But it is nothing but the slap on Bakha's face that immediately arouses in him the truth of the miserable and humiliating existence as a sweeper: "For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (*Untouchable* 52).

The two terms "sweeper" and "untouchable" are conjoined linguistically and metaphorically to arouse the feelings of shame and disgust. Does Bakha's work possess any real worth- social or economic? It can be said that Bakha's work of cleaning latrines falls under the category of estranged or "alienated labour" that is forced upon him, but most certainly it is devoid of any true pride, happiness or gratification. His work has no genuine economic productivity, nor can its economic value ever become negotiable. On the contrary, it develops feelings of mass anxiety and pain which is the outcome of humiliation and degradation of the nature of his work. But it is the mental identification of his low social status as an untouchable that intensifies the metaphorical importance of the word that categorizes him. One wonders if Bakha at this level of mental identification would turn into a radical mutineer. Evidently, the readers are gradually moving toward Anand's vision of progressive humanism.

"The sweeper", remarks Forster, "is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion" (*Untouchable* Preface, vi). It is the persistence and the irrevocability of the serfdom coupled with the resulting social hatred that defines the moral protest. The practice of untouchability that Anand depicts is, in fact, a matter of ostentatious religiosity and exploitation. With the help of a very judiciously selected technique of dramatic irony and by juxtaposing the plight of Sohini with that of Bakha, Anand has strengthened the representative character of the figure of the untouchable. Anand in *Untouchable* revealed the realism of social injustice in contemporary society. *Untouchable* is an inner conflict of an individual who is caught in the cobweb of an antiquated caste system. P. K. Rajan in his *Studies in Mulk Raj Anand* mentions:

It is the individual's quest for freedom in a social system of ruthless exploitation. Bakha as an untouchable seeks his freedom in the feudal society with its unquestionable faith in the infallibility of caste discrimination, with its hypocrisy, cruelty, deceit and inhumanity. We see him stand passive and bewildered at the immensity of horror, hoping for a

change. (15)

Although *Untouchable* deals with different types of exploitations such as social, economic, political, religious and sexual exploitation, social exploitation is at the root of all. The class discrimination on the basis of birth, which gives some castes undue favour over other castes, can be called social exploitation. Mulk Raj Anand also in his essay "The Source of Protest in my Novels", *The Indian Novel with a Social Purpose* is hopeful for a better future for the suffering people. He writes,

I have tried to look at the realities of life, hoping that each day might be a new day of happiness with a new sun, a new moon, with new people, who may inherit the good thoughts of the past, but may look to the future. This may have meant wandering through the labyrinths, but one can recognize one's own face and the faces of others not by groveling before fixed images but by living experience of men and women through a religion based on tenderness." (26)

The greatness of Anand lies in his bold stride both in the choice and treatment of themes. He fearlessly chooses his protagonists from the dregs of humanity and tries to identify them with the so called high-caste and high-class people. Anand's delineation and use of the sufferer and saviour characters is all his own, and to me, it seems to be a very important features of his fictional output, right from *untouchables*.

The major theme of his writing includes his empathy with the suppressed class. He portrays them as they are. Through his writings he wants us to fight against the exploitation of man by man. He is a crusader against all sorts of injustice. The real test of man is to treat him above the barriers of all kinds. Anand also makes us realize that every man has his own self, own individuality and freedom of choice. Boundaries of caste, creed and nationality seem to affect him. The traditional beliefs and the orthodox ideas stunt the growth of an individual.

Anand's writings portray social conditions of his age. Many critics call him a social historian also. But the social structure is a reality, which the artist cannot ignore. A work of art fails to attain its greatness if it does not bear the stamp of its milieu. The social paradigm is a kaleidoscope, which reflects all the hues and shades. Anand as an artist not only criticizes the social stigmas but he allows his characters to discover their real selves, their worth. Traditional beliefs and social bindings frustrate his characters. His protagonists are not prepared to accept 'what is and that is enough' in life. Social restrictions stupefy the growth of an individual. An individual is full of potentialities and possibilities. He has to fight to live. He has to carve a niche for himself. Most of the characters of Anand's fiction have a progression and they are existentialist. Perfection is a misnomer and a fully satisfying life a mirage. There is a suffering in human life and the notion to come out of it is an existential journey life has a meaning and the search for meaning in existentialism is the search for the self.

Anand has been shouldering several roles in his writing career. These roles confirm that he is a thinker, novelist, short-story writer, essayist, critic, connoisseur of art and educationist. But, all these roles also convey a converging and holistic view of Anand's vision of life. The essence of his social and moral vision of life consists of his philosophy of humanism. Gandhian and Marxist-humanistic thoughts do influence him in shaping his social and moral view of life. To elaborate further, as a social realist and critic, Anand attacks injustice of every type. Socio-politico-economic exploitation with its myriad ramifications in the realms of caste, religion, sex, colonialism, feudalism and industrial capitalism form the major content of Anand's perceptive investigation. The forces of prejudice, superstition and ignorance come under his critical scrutiny. Casteism, for instance, is attacked as an age-old lie, a heinous crime because it perpetuates advantage to some and injustice to many, and he rejects it outright. *Untouchable* illustrates his state of mind against the malady of caste. Influenced by Gandhian understanding of casteism as anachronism, Anand makes a scathing attack against the touch-me-not attitude of Caste Hindus that promotes a fiendish segregation of humanity. Class-consciousness based on money is defined and elaborated with reference to the exploitation of the poor and the innocent.

In *Untouchable* 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. 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. Hard upon this comes the third solution: the introduction of the water – closet, as promised by the poet, which makes the task of the sweepers easy. Bakha thinks of everything he has heard and returns to his mud-walled hut, with the desire to tell his father all what Gandhi said about them. Thus, the novel ends with a resounding note of optimism implied as it is Bakha's adolescent dreams, when he sees an apostle in Gandhi.

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