

Review Article

Mulk Raj Anand's Novels : A Study

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OVERVIEW

Mulk Raj Anand(1905-2004) is one of the greatest novelists in Indian Writing in English. He is also attributed to constitute the much talked about and referred to 'trio' in Indian Writing in English, the other two being R.k.Narayan and Raja Rao. Indian literature including that in English indulged before the advent of Munshi Premchand (in Hindi) and the trio in Indian Writing in English in mere imagination. Hence, India was looked upon as being a land of forests, jugglers and snakes by Europeans. Indian literature prior to these litterateurs pre-occupied in history and romance only. It was way too far removed from reality and the people living in the Indian society. The trio endeavoured to eradicate Indian literature in English from being called literature of fairy tales and fantasy.

R.K.Narayan,Raja Rao, Tagore tried, through literature, to voice the suffering and coercion against the Indian subject in the British Raj, trying thus to bring a tinge of realism to the literature. But, be it as it may, Mulk Raj Anand was a little different from them. He was profoundly influenced by Gandhiji, his ethics and his way of life. One thing remains to be seen that there is a decided difference of view between R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. The former essentially projects in his novels the middle class ; whereas the latter attempts to expose the age – old agony and anguish of the downtrodden and the aggrieved section in the Indian society.

Mahatma Gandhiji once said that untouchability and casteism are the most indelible stigmas on Hinduism. It is a truism that evils like casteism and untouchability which have survived in the Indian society have fraught and marred it. Even though efforts by social reformers, over the years and centuries, were made, the evils could not be obliterated. Mulk Raj Anand arrived on the literary horizon in India in the nineteen thirties .The nineteen thirties in India were politically hectic. Mahatma Gandhiji launched

the Satyagraha Movements in nineteen thirty. Then, there were the three Round Table Conferences. The entire nation was stirred and moved by the conferences. There then was the passing of the Government of India Act of nineteen thirty five. The Gandhian movements for the redemption and amelioration of the untouchables whom he called 'Harijan – children of God' subsequently transpired. India, in the year nineteen thirty six, witnessed elections to the State Assemblies in terms of the nineteen thirty five Government of India Act. In a nutshell, India, in the nineteen thirties, was a 'melting pot'. He observed the rampant discrimination against these most unfortunate sections of the Indian society by the caste touchables. The untouchables were not entitled even to the minium human requirements, let alone other civic amenities. Mulk Raj Anand, though born in a high caste in the hierarchy of the Hindu social order, keenly saw and felt the atrocities and suppression to which these sub – humans were subjected for ages together . He himself recognizes in his preface to *Two Leaves* and *a Bud* (1937) that all the heroes and heroines in his literary ventures are dear to him because they are reflections of real people and that he had known them in his childhood and youth. He further goes onto say that they are the flesh of his flesh and the blood of his blood.

He was thoroughly obsessed with these people in the society. His literary projection is of the people whose life is damnably tied with pain, social injustice, humiliation, affront and insult from womb to tomb. The untouchables, who lived in a 'ghetto', had pain and woe as their destiny. Mulk Raj Anand observed the milieu, the plight and the predicament of the untouchables and reflected them in totto in his novelistic adventures. However, it has to be conceded with remorse that this anathema of casteism and untouchability has not obliterated to the fullest. The present paper endeavours to thematically study

Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936) and The Road (1961) with regard to the suppression against the untouchables and the marginalized in the Indian society by the so-called upper caste touchables even in today's context.

Untouchable, Mulk Raj Anand's debut novel and magnum opus, is a unique novel. It, in the Joycean 'stream of consciousness' technique, describes the events in a single day in the life of Bakha, the protagonist in the novel, in the town of Balushah. Bakha, an untouchable boy, is a victim of the caste-ridden society. He belongs to the sweeper community. He has a hefty physique and muscles - "Each muscle of body, had as a rock when it came to play, seemed to shine forth like glass. What a dexterous workman! The onlooker would have said. And though his job was dirty, he remained comparatively clean". But, he is reluctant to perform what he is supposed and compelled to. He has to clean toilets and bring about sanitation at the cost of his own hygiene. Every now and then he is disparaged and called "defiled and polluted". He is only a beast of burden in the eyes of the highly prejudiced society. His sister, too, has to dance attendance to the houses of the touchable for chores and return humiliated. In utter desperation and exasperation, he tells his father - "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt". The society is not at all considerate to him even if he offers a helping hand to it. On an occasion, Bakha is playing hockey. A little boy is injured and as Bakha lifts the boy up, his indignant mother screams - "Polluted, polluted". He is utterly despaired. He envisages a ray of hope when Mahatma Gandhi ji visits the place and calls upon people to regard the untouchables as 'Harijan- man of God'. The Mahatma also exhorts people not to observe the social evils in their lives. There are many occasions in the novel which reveal the stark and naked realities in the society. One such occasion is when the untouchables are victimized, ravished and their morale shattered into pieces. The 'Well Incident' in the novel poignantly describes how these ill-fated people are usurped by the so-called high class touchables. Bakha's sister once goes to the village well for fetching water. She waits to be given a little water from the well, as she is not allowed, being untouchable, to touch anything there. Ultimately, the village priest does the needful and asks her to come to his house for cleaning. But, seeing nobody around, when she goes to his house, he tries to molest her. The priest tries to fish in the troubled waters. The crueler think is when people gather, the priest impenitently indicts the innocent girl that she has defiled his religion. If we view the incident from a humanitarian perspective, we must say that might is right. The untouchables, being weak, have no justice. The priest is supposed to preach the gospel of truth, humanity and morality. But, he turns out to be a victimizer, a tyrant. On many occasions, Bakha and his family are

subjected to humiliating treatment. The 'Bazar-Incident' is also equally convincing and touching. Bakha has to undergo every insult that comes in his stride. His only crime is that he casually and naively touches a caste Hindu in the market. For it, he is ill-treated in the words - 'swine dog', 'dirty dog', 'you brute'. Bakha is unable to retaliate and has to listen and bend down his head, mumbling something. We commiserate with Bakha when the man says - "This dirty dog bumped right into me". Likewise, the 'Temple Incident' is also equally moving and begets our sympathy for the sufferer. Bakha is a type and an individual as well. He is characteristic of the repressed, depressed and underprivileged class. He is one of many unlucky ones whose fate is pain and is destined to undergo affronts, humiliation and mortification by the touchables. These untouchable people find themselves out of place, out of society and remain damnable somewhere or other even today. Coolie is the second novel which Mulk Raj Anand penned in nineteen thirty six. It is a sequel to Untouchable. Coolie is acclaimed to be a folk epic of modern India. The protagonist in the novel, like Bakha, is an untouchable boy, Munoo. Coolie is a contemptuous word in India, like the word untouchable.

It mars human dignity. The novel is ramified into five chapters. It is an exhaustive saga which details on how Munoo, right from his childhood, is entangled into hardships unless he precipitates and eventually succumbs to consumption. Munoo is an orphan boy living with his unloving and uncaring uncle and aunt. He is made to be a page to dance attendance to his employer Baboo Nathoo Ram. At the very outset, he is admonished - "You are their servant and they are big people". He is reproached for bringing in rustic manners. Being denied the flushing lavatory, he relieves in open for which he is highly repentant. He leaves the house and joins a pickle factory at Daulatapur. He is a little relieved here, when he says - "I want to live, I want to know, I want to work, to work this machine". But, unfortunately, his benefactor becomes bankrupt. He, eventually, becomes a coolie in the market yard and a porter at the station. There is a sharp sense of pathos in the lines below, indicating the mental thralldom of the menials: "The bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered garbs. Someone curled up in knots, others lay faced downwards on folded arms, others were flat on their chests, pillowing their heads on their bundles or boxes, others crouched into corners talking, others still huddled together at the doors steps, or lay on the boards in a sleep which looked like death, but that it was broken by deep sighs". Munoo's life gradually becomes episodic. He joins a depraved Yogi for sometime to earn his livelihood. He encounters an elephant trainer in a circus. With the help of the elephant trainer, he reaches Bombay. However, he gets coiled in hardships everywhere. He turns out to be an object of perennial exploitation. That is why, he is given a

warning –"The bigger a city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adam". An innocent lad like Munoo, who frolicked on the hills with a taste for the joy of life, has to experience life on pavements and in slums. But, he is not a boy to give in so easily. He has to work in Sir George White Cotton Mills. He is involved in the activities there. The strike of labourers takes a serious communal twist and riots escalate. With a view to escaping a possible police action, he runs up the hills and is knocked down by a car. The owner of the car is an unscrupulous lady. She harnesses Munoo as her rickshaw-puller and page. Exhausted with the struggle for existence, he is seriously afflicted with consumption. Eventually, he succumbs to the malady. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly comments –"India depicted in coolie is a dismal, superficial, terrifying India – the India that western impact on the orient has laboured to evolve, the life of labourers within and without their factories, the spectacle of men and women sleeping on the pavements of a Bombay street, the tragedy of Hindu – Muslim differences, something of all this is vigorously portrayed by Anand".

Munoo's exploitation is symbolically the exploitation of the poor. Munoo's predicament is characteristically that of the proletariat. In the fond hope of survival, he moves from village to town, from town to city, from city to Bombay and finally from Bombay to Shimla. At the same time, he comes across a score of people. The action of internalization and indoctrination takes place in the case of Munoo. It is the given self of Munoo which overpowers his inner and innate self. It is not his consciousness that determines the course of his action. Rather, it is the social reality that gives effect to and moulds his consciousness. He eventually turns out to be a creature of circumstance.

Mulk Raj Anand's *The Road*, written in 1961, also deals with the theme of untouchability. Bhikhu, the protagonist in the novel, is a revelation of Bakha of *Untouchable*. Bhikhu is a road worker, thus helping sort out the difficulty of transportation. The work in progress is done under the patronage of Dhooli Singh, a caste Hindu from the Govardhan village. He shows sympathy for the untouchables. The landlord is jealous of the untouchables for the prosperity they are making. The houses of the untouchables are set on fire. Bhiku leaves the village and goes along the road to Delhi. It is a transformed and transmuted world with a conflict between tradition and modernity. Road symbolizes progress. Bhiku's departure from his village stands for the fragmentation of the village community and the agrarian society.

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