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REVIEW ARTICLE

**THE FLAWED REPRESENTATION OF THE DALIT
IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE**

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The Flawed Representation of the Dalit in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

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"There have been many Mahatmas in India whose sole object was to remove Untouchability and to elevate and absorb the Depressed Classes, but every one of them has failed in his mission. Mahatmas have come and Mahatmas have gone. But the Untouchables have remained as Untouchables."

- B.R.Ambedkar

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a landmark position in Indian writing in English as a novelist who engaged with the socio-economic problems with which the country has been engaging. Issues concerned with the downtrodden are the foremost concern in all his works. Having authored a major body of successful work containing sixteen novels, twelve collections of short stories along with an impressive record of various books on art and numerous articles on the urgent need for social and economic order, he established a unique reputation as a social reformer championing the causes of the suffering in his time.

Mulk Raj Anand began his literary career with the publication of his short novel

Untouchable (1935). The novel deals with the issue of untouchability and the inhumanity of the caste system. In spite of many publications to his credit that deal with a wide range of issues concerning the fortunate, Anand's work shows a constant preoccupation with the caste system. The novel is a peep into a day in the life of a sweeper boy, Bakha. It begins early in the morning with his father's reprimands, ordering Bakha to go out and clean the toilets before the day breaks. The novel progresses by narrating the incidents and experiences Bakha encounters through the day. The novel ends with an encounter between Bakha and Gandhi and, finally, with a realization on Bakha's part that the Gandhian path is the solution to all his problems.

No novel is created out of a vacuum and no artist is independent of society. Novels are, in most cases, a refraction of the society from the author's perspective. Each author wishes to enshrine a period of the society in his/her writing. Hence, novels can be read as tracing

the development of the social consciousness of a particular period. It is impossible to discuss the writings of any author segregating it from the backdrop of the society or era into which the characters are moulded. The nationalist movement is braided tightly into Anand's intellectual make-up and, consequently, his evaluation as a writer. The movement is similar to the skeletal structure of the fish which on removal would make it edible but, on its own, leaves it spineless, shapeless, and even grotesque.

Beginning with the first decade of the twentieth century, India was in the throes of political turmoil until the nationalist movement bore fruit in the form of India independence. The period between the great wars of world was the period in which the nationalist achieved its peak. The agitation kicked off with World War I in which the Muslims and Hindus joined forces to fight in the Khilafat movement. A series of incidents such as the Hindu-Muslim union in 1919 for the Khilafat movement, the launch of first Satyagraha movement in 1919, the Poona Pact with Dr.B.R.Ambedkar in 1920, the transformation of Congress from an elite organization to one of the masses, the launch of *Purna Swaraj* in 1929, the Salt March and the Civil Disobedience movements of the 1930s facilitated by Gandhi transformed him from a leader no greater than any national leaders of the time to the poster face of the nationalist movement. Consequently, the great political and cultural awakening enveloping India at this time provided the novelists of the era with the necessary raw material to work on. The period also witnessed an unprecedented spurt in novel writing with authors in both regional languages and English venturing to capture this historic movement in their work. The novelists of this era, in trying to capture these moments in history, consciously or otherwise, become historians in one sense.

India has been diagnosed with an alarming illiteracy rate for a long time. The condition was critical in the pre-independence years. The bloating population of the middle class with its recent literacy baggage was

miniscule when compared to masses of populace untouched by the magic wand of literacy. When Gandhi launched the first Satyagraha movement in 1919, he urged the Indian intelligentsia to resign from government services, refuse to pay taxes and quit all British educational institutions. On his call, a lot of youngsters quit their respective colleges to join the freedom movement. These youngsters were drawn into the political awakening the country. Most of them joined the ranks of the Congress and donned the role of spreading awareness amongst the vast number of illiterate Indians. This generation took on the task of uncovering the ignorance in which India was blanketed. Anand was no exception. Although he did not quit studying in British educational institutions, he keenly followed the political battle in which his motherland was caught. As a novelist, he saw his vocation as educating his people through his writings. His writings were essentially born out of a necessity of educating his people; they were also aimed to acquaint western readership with the happenings in India. On reading *Untouchable*, one notices jarring instances of elaborate or unwarranted descriptions designed for the convenience of a western audience. Commenting on Sohini's act of poisoning the pitcher of water on her hand, Anand adds:

How a round base can be adjusted on a round top, how a sphere can rest on a sphere is a problem which may be of interest to those who think like Euclid or Archimedes (Anand, 38).

Describing Lachman's advances towards Sohini, he writes, "And he was, as he said, in a language characteristic of the Indian lover, 'dead over her.'" (Anand, 22) The intended audience of Anand's novel is made amply clear. Anand makes it point to describe the 'Indian' way of life to an unacquainted reader. In a scene where Bakha is humiliated in the road by the upper caste passer-by, he stresses the unavailability of a policeman nearby. He writes: "...there are seldom any policemen about in Indian streets." (Anand, 39) The recurring word 'Indian' is an indication of Anand's desire to introduce non-Indians to an experience particular to India. While describing Mrs. Colonel Hutchinson, he uses words such as 'Eton -cropped hair', 'pince-nez glasses', etc. and on the Colonel he writes that the man is an 'image of Eugene Sandow now'. Clearly, he had already chosen his audience.

The novel achieved international recognition as it was refreshingly different and fiercely frank compared to novels churned out earlier by authors writing in English. The novel was a pioneer of sorts as it unashamedly dealt with socio-economic problems engulfing the country. Another feather in its cap was the introduction of a never-before-discussed social reality i.e. Untouchability, being a 'hideous nightmare unknown to the west' aroused the western curiosity. Caste and the caste system can never be excluded from Indian social space. It is so deeply entrenched into the Indian psyche that it goes unacknowledged; almost like age-old furniture in a warehouse. Many

authors, especially upper caste, have dealt with the caste problem in their works. But these remain authors who wrote in regional languages. The most famous of them is Premchand, the Hindi novelist. His novels *Mandir* (1927), *Karmabhoomi* (1932), *Thakur ka kaun* (1932) and *Kafan* (1936) deal with the problems hounding the untouchables. Caste has found little visibility in Indian writing in English. Even after a century, the problems of Dalits feature very little in Indian writing in English partly because of the class-specific nature of this writing.

Untouchable, being the first of its kind, becomes the milestone through which the western audience unacquainted with the system understand it. Being an 'outsider' and an 'upper caste', Anand's portrayal of Bakha is a source of great controversy. In addition to that, Anand's *Untouchable* is a concocted mixture prepared to vaccinate the west and to an extent even Dalits from viewing the degree of oppression they (Dalits) are subjected to all their lives. The book, as E.M.Forster describes, is 'simply planned'. Keeping in mind the high incidence of religious conversions, the need for assimilating the Dalits into the Hindu fold to increase the movement by the strength of numbers and the growing threat from the Dalit leaders, especially B.R.Ambedkar, under whose leadership Dalits began to emerge as a force to reckon with, to the national integrity, Anand etched his characters and incidents into a setting that exhibited national unity both to the incipient nation and to an international front. In the light of the above observations, Anand's novel becomes highly problematic in spite of its valorization by many critics as an epic of human socialism.

The novel *Untouchable* deals with one of the most heinous crimes ever committed on humanity i.e. the caste system. The novel does not talk of the system per se in great detail but exposes the plight of the victims of Hindu oppression. Anand speaks of the novel's autobiographical origins:

"I had known the untouchables in the squalid followers lane of the cantonments, where my father's regiment was stationed. Being much despised for the dirty work they did for the caste Hindu sepoys, one of the sweeper boys, a handsome young man called Bakha, had saved my life when I was accidentally hit by a stone on the head during a boys' quarrel. My mother had abused him for polluting me by carrying me home.

This episode had left an indelible mark on my native child's mind. And Bakha had endeared himself to me by the fact that he was a shining hero to us boys, good hockey player...who sang Punjabi songs in a melodious voice. One day he was insulted by an upper caste Hindu, as he was walking in the bazaar to go and clean latrines. He had accidentally touched a caste Hindu who slapped him on the face. He told us boys this story that day and I had wept to see him sad and crying. And I wrote this story of the insult to Bakha." (Cawasjee, 40)

Most protagonists of Anand are drawn from his experiences with the downtrodden. He even credits them for his work. In the Preface to his work *Two Leaves And A Bud*, he writes:

“All the heroes, as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories were dear to me, because they were reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth. And I was only repaying the debt of gratitude I owed them for much of the inspiration they had given.” (Anand, 41)

In order to understand the scorn *Untouchable* evokes in many Dalit scholars, a careful examination of the historical-sociological context in which the novel was woven needs to be elaborated upon. Anand has accomplished the task of letting the untouchables leave their footprints as opposed to other Brahminical literature on which they leave no footprints. Indeed, *Untouchable* was historical and created history as he introduced “into creative narrative [...] whole new people who have seldom entered the realms of literature in India” (Anand, 42). Historical in the sense that it captured an era of the Indian independence struggle in it and characters such as Gandhi, Bakha and a whole lot of others were placed in this historical context. Given Anand’s social position in the caste system and his participation in the struggle for Indian independence which is entirely elitist, his view of the problems of the untouchables is entirely lopsided and prejudiced. *Untouchable* is undoubtedly a political novel written with a perspective from the above. As an elite, his initiative in writing this novel which is the first of its kind, contributes to the dominant historiography of India. It reinforces the view that “elitist historiography [...] represent(s) Indian nationalism as primarily as idealist venture in which the indigenous elite led the people from subjugation to freedom” (Guha, 43)

The author, in spite of moving portrayal of Bakha, does not emerge victorious in grasping the true nature of the oppression to which the untouchables are subjected to. Dalit critics perceive his understanding as shallow and his solutions impractical as Anand completely negates the existence of subaltern politics.

Anand’s *Untouchable* emerges as a text riddled with controversies. Bakha’s character is quite paradoxical. Anand, while introducing Bakha, paints the picture of a teenage sweeper boy who is shown to be different from other untouchables. His contact with the ‘Tommies’ enables him to develop a consciousness which Anand describes as uncommon in the people of his caste. The British have influenced his mind and apart from his desire to wear European clothing, Bakha exhibits disgust at certain practices of the Hindus. He hates the habit of gargling and spitting by emitting loud noises, the slurping sounds produced by his father while gulping his era. This aspect is a result

of his heightened consciousness which he acquired through close contact with the British.

Anand describes Bakha as an intelligent man who possessed “nobility, strangely in contrast with his filthy position and with the sub-human status to which he was condemned from birth.” (Anand, 12) In spite of this description, Bakha is reduced to a ‘pilpali-sahib’ with a huge weakness for European ways. Anand does not give his conscience room to grow. Even with his numerable self-reflections, Anand finally reduces Bakha to an individual incapable of knowing what’s best for him. Bakha loathes his job and hates the entire system and his father for being a part of it. Clearly, the turmoil he faces is known even to the reader. The work disgusts him. And Yet Anand states: “For, although he didn’t know it, to him work was a sort of intoxication which gave him a glowing health and plenty of easy sleep.” (Anand, 10)

The dismissals do not end here. His intelligence is put to test when he meets Colonel Hutchinson, the Padre of the Salvationist army. Bakha is seen as someone who is unable to make a choice of which religion is good for him but worse still, Anand does no justice to his intelligence and portrays Bakha as someone who fails to grasp the basic tenets of Christianity. Similarly, with Gandhi, Bakha understands that he would never be able to leave the profession of scavenging if he followed the Gandhian path of ‘work as worship’. This message disturbs him and even disappoints but in the very next instant, Bakha leaves his doubts aside and remarks that he indeed is going to work as Gandhi asked the scavengers to. Bakha’s intelligence is not put to use by Anand. This probably is because Gandhi and Anand recognize only a stereotyped image of a Dalit.

Anand had been a staunch supporter of Gandhi since his childhood days. Anand’s attraction to Gandhism started with Gandhi’s love for the outcastes/harajans. The love affair started in 1921 when Anand was a part of the Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience movement when he was a college student in Amritsar. Anand recalls: “I became vaguely interested in his ideas, particularly in the ethics of simple living that he was insisting on in the press. Spinning, weaving, and the wearing of home-spun, the campaign against untouchability, and the great doctrine of *Ahimsa*, non-violence as practiced in the liberation movement.”

The influence continued in most of his works. *Untouchable*, Anand’s debut novel, had a heavy dose of Gandhi kneaded into it. Although Anand is the writer, Gandhi seems to be the *sutradhar*. The entire novel – theme, message and treatment – save for the last few pages where he introduces the poet, are constructed entirely upon the ideals Gandhi advocates. For these reasons, Anand and Gandhi are interchangeable in certain sections of the chapter.

Gandhi had indeed shown attention to untouchables but for entirely the wrong reasons and for wrong ends. Gandhi wanted to incorporate the untouchables into the mainstream national movement as their segregation from the struggle would weaken the movement in terms of quantity. Gandhi segregated untouchability from caste system. He supported the varnashrama dharma. Gandhi wowed to engage with untouchability as long as it did not upset orthodox Hindus and disturb the caste lines. Gandhi, in a bid to portray that he was all for the Dalit cause, undertook reform movements to alleviate their conditions. This dichotomy is to help him secure the consensus of both the upper castes and the untouchables.

Gandhi mentored Anand in similar beliefs and consequently, Anand stifles Bakha from any growth. Bakha is surely a rebel in the very fact that he had developed a consciousness of his own and a self-reflexivity unidentifiable with a scavenger. But Anand does not allow Bakha to evolve. His mobility is stifled and even if there is any evolution, it happens within the confines of the structures designed by Gandhian principles. Even the most humiliating thing that could happen in the day is nothing more than a mere slap. It is difficult not to encounter caste violence in villages of India. Untouchables are subjected to much worse physical torture than a mere slap. Anand undoubtedly explores mental anguish the sweeper boy undergoes, but not to mention of the possible physical torture untouchables could be subjected to is to tone down the actual extent of oppression. This liberty that Anand takes in his novel is clearly an upper caste view, distorting Dalit experience. With every effort Bakha makes towards engaging in the difference, he is plunged two steps down by Anand who points out to his weakness for 'fashun' time and again and reduces Bakha to a puppet performing the Gandhian script to perfection.

Anand is definitely to be acknowledged as the person who has introduced the Dalit subject into the genre of Indian writing in English. Though his contribution is valuable, his portrayal of Bakha is in keeping with the upper caste view of the caste system. Anand's *Untouchable* fails at many levels. Anand portrays Bakha as nothing but an upper caste mouthpiece. Also, Anand fails to take note of the Dalit stalwart of the time, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. Dalit organizations during the nationalist movement crowned Ambedkar as their leader. Anand's glaring omission of Ambedkar and crowning Gandhi as the savior of untouchables, slots the novel into yet another attempt by the upper caste in conveniently hegemonising and taking charge of Dalit subject.

Anand's *Untouchable* is no more than a Gandhi and Congress manifesto on eradicating the problem of caste. Anand distorts the Dalit reality by engaging in ridiculing the closest causes of Dalits.

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