



Research Paper

Exploitation and suffering: Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' and 'Coolie'

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is undoubtedly a great novelist who has dealt with socio-economic problems in his works. His interest lies in illustrating the contemporary India with its malpractices, issues related to untouchability, hunger, poverty, religion, superstitions, labour problems and economic insecurities. *Untouchable* is a narrative that has the impact of the Gandhian ideology about untouchability. It is a story of a boy named Bakha who suffers because of being a sweeper.

In *Coolie*, he has presented the story of Munoo who suffers endlessly due to class distinction and ultimately dies at the age of sixteen only. The novelist has shown that caste and class are the root cause of the hardships, sufferings and miseries of people like Bakha and Munoo. The age-old exploitation of the lower-class people and untouchables forms the core theme of both the novels.

Mulk Raj Anand, born in Peshawar, now in Pakistan, has been the recipient of The International Peace Prize, Padma Bhushan and Sahitya Academy award.

Keywords; *Untouchability, Exploitation, Scavenger, Coolie, Suffering, Miseries*

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the founding fathers of Indian English novels. He is the first English novelist who has presented an untouchable as a protagonist in his debut novel 'Untouchable'. This novel brought him name and fame. The 'Untouchable' presents a realistic picture of a lower caste boy Bakha, who suffers because of being a sweeper. Jha opines- "Anand is the first novelist to have depicted in the novel the stigma of this evil which isolates a man from his own society". (59) Anand is usually compared with Dickens for delineating the pitiable plight of the downtrodden in the society. All his novels are based on the theme of the social problems such as casteism and human sufferings that crop up due to political, economic, social and cultural factors. The creation of the Bhaka's character is based on novelist's childhood friend. Once his mother insulted his friend who was a sweeper. Anand admired him for his qualities. The insult and humiliation that were piled on him by his family left deep scars on his heart. He could never dismiss this incident from his mind. Later in his first novel, 'Untouchable' he created the character of Bhaka and raised voice against the evil of untouchability. In the preface 'Two leaves and a Bud', Anand writes, "All these heroes and the men and women were the reflection of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth.They were the flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood (Two Leaves and a Bud: 73). The novel unfolds the story of single day in Bakha's life. Bakha belongs to the scavenger caste, the lowest of low in the hierarchy of caste system. He is not an ordinary type of the sweeper. His skills of cleaning the roads and public latrines are admired even by the passersby. "He went forward with eager steps from job to job, a marvel of movement dancing through his work. Work was a sort of intoxication which gave him glowing health and plenty of easy sleep." (Untouchable:19). He starts his day with abuses of his father, Lakha, a Jamadar of the sweepers. "Get up, Ohe, you Bakhya, Ohe, son of pig.....are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten." (Untouchable: 5). But despite of all his skill and dedication for his work, he does not have an opportunity to move upward as he is born in a sweeper's family. It seems as if it is a curse to be born in a sweeper's family. He has been denied all the privileges that a child of an upper caste enjoys.

Education is the right of every child barring caste and creed. But being a boy from the family of an outcaste he is not able to get admission in the school because children from higher caste families will be contaminated with his touch. His caste supersedes his talent. His talent is not valued rather his caste is given priority. P.P Mehta mentions - "Dr. Anand in his novels emphasizes the fact that novelty and dignity are not the monopoly of the rich. Mute inglorious Miltons and Cromwells are not uncommon in the ranks of the poor" (27).

Bakha gets dazzled with the glamour of the English people and dreams to be like them in dressing up and in playing hockey. Unfortunately, he fails to realise his dreams due to limited means and circumstances. He has to face insults and live on the mercy of other people.

Life is not possible without water. It should be accessible to all. Unfortunately, people from lower caste are not supposed to fetch water from the well. They had to wait sometimes for many hours for the help of the people of upper caste to pull out water from the well. Bakha's sister, Sohini goes to take out water from the well but she has to hold back for someone from upper caste to draw water for her. This is a normal thing for Sohini.

Once Bakha out of curiosity tries to peep into the local temple through the window to know the inner world of the temple. But he is caught red handed by Pandit Kalinath. The Pandit shouts vehemently, "polluted!", "polluted!" The people hear the priest shouting. They come to the temple and looking at Bakha, say "Get off the steps, You scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service." (Untouchable: 53).

It is very ironical that people from upper caste get polluted even by the shadow of an untouchable but they don't have any objection in having physical relations with the girls of outcaste families. The sheer hypocrisy and the double standard that get reflected when the priest who can not tolerate even the presence of the sweeper on the staircase, wants to have relations with the sister of Bakha, who comes to clean the lavatory of the priest's house. Sohini resists the attempt the priest and shouts. Bakha hears his sister's shouting. He runs to the temple. The shrewd priest, to protect himself, says, "I have been defiled by the contact." (Untouchable: 54). On the other hand, Sohini sobbingly says, "That man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house and when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled." (Untouchable: 54). Bakha is in great rage. He is helpless. He cannot take action because he is from a downtrodden class. In desperation he says to his father, "They think we are near dirt because we clean their dirt." (Untouchable: 54).

In the city, he goes to see Gandhiji. During the speech Gandhiji reveals his desire to be born as an untouchable. He calls the untouchables 'harijans' and ask them to quit their bad habits and stop taking cooked food as remuneration for their work. Later Bakha listens to the people having discussion on Gandhian ideology and understands that untouchability can be eradicated by the use of machine and flush system.

Munoo, the protagonist, from the novel Coolie, is another example of exploitation of a man by another man. Munoo, the protagonist moves from one place to another in search of food and is exploited at every level and everywhere. He is a representative of his class. The novel illustrates the pitiable conditions of the coolies who suffer due to industrialisation at the same time. S.A. Khan has aptly mentioned: "He is among the millions of coolies.the story of Munoo is quite essentially the story of every exploited individual in India and the pattern of his life is intended to show the pitilessness that lies embedded in the lives of millions of people who are condemned to lead a life of unending saga of social deprivation". (Khan:30). Munoo is an orphan and is exploited as a domestic servant, worker, coolie, labourer at different places in his life. So long as Munoo remains at his native place, he is full of enthusiasm but poverty and hunger force him to move out of his village. It seems he is born to endure all the atrocities of the exploiters. As a matter of fact, exploitation is not something new to him. He has witnessed his father being exploited by the landlord who usurped his land. As Anand describes in the novel- "He had heard of how the landlord had seized his father's five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when the rains had been scanty and the harvest bad. And he knew how his father had died a slow death of bitterness and disappointment and left his mother a penniless beggar, to support a younger brother-in-law, Dayaram and child Munoo in her arms." (Coolie:11).

This is not the tragedy of Munoo only. People have to suffer from the tyrannies of the landlords. The death of his father is the beginning of his all sufferings and exploitations. First of all at home he grazes cattle. He is misbehaved and beaten by his aunt. But Munoo remains silent and happy. His sufferings get intensified when he along with uncle Dayaram, a peon in the Imperial Bank, comes to Sham Nagar in search of livelihood. Munoo's only ambition is to live and to work. As he utters later- "I want to live, I want to know, I want to work." (Coolie: 218).

In Sham Nagar he is employed as a servant in the house of Babu Ram, a sub-accountant, in the Imperial Bank. His wife Bibi Uttam Kaur subjects him to untold agonies. She nags him, beats him and insults him and above all she does not give him enough food. While working here Munoo realises - "He was to be slave, a servant who would do odd jobs, some are abused or to be beaten." (Rao: 33). He is like a rabbit in a trap. He is being dictated by Bibi Uttam Kaur. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar writes "And in his heart there was a lonely song, a melancholy veil, asking, not pointedly but in a vague uncertain rhythm, what life is this woman's house would prove" (Iyengar :341). Unable to bear all the sufferings he escapes to unknown destination. He catches a train. In the train Munoo meets Prabha, a Seth, running a pickle factory in the partnership of another Seth named Ganpath at Daulatpur. Prabha takes pity on him because he himself has passed through all these sufferings. He notices that Munoo's life resembles that of his own. He himself has been an orphan and a coolie. Munoo is comfortable with Prabha and his wife due to his kind nature. But he is afraid of Ganpath Seth because of his hellish behaviour with him and other workers. Munoo loses his job as the factory is closed down because of

Ganpath's dishonesty in business. Jobless as he is now, he goes to the railway station to be a coolie. At the railway platform he comes across with another kind of exploitation. He is driven out for not having a license to work on the station.

He moves to Bombay with the support of an elephant driver and meets Harihar who provides him help in searching work in Sir George White Cotton Mill. In the mill, he and the workers are being exploited. M.K. Naik mentions - "the factory is huge octopus with its numerous tentacles clutching the labourers in its deadly grasp, slowing, paralyzing and poisoning them." (Naik: 41). The dissatisfaction of the mill workers grows and they move on to a strike. Later this strike takes a turn of a communal riot in which many innocent people are killed. Through this novel, Anand has given the picture of industrial workers in 1930s. It was the time when workers were not given the basic amenities. Their wages were too low. Further they were bound to get commission from their bosses. Once again Munoo loses his job. He gets distressed. A weird thought flashes through his mind. He thinks that he is an ominous person who brings miseries and distraction to them to whom he gets associated. "I am really ominous! My father died when I was born and then my mother and I brought misfortune to Prabha and it seems that I brought misfortune to Hari now. If I am ominous, why don't I die!" (Coolie: 217).

This type of self-condemnations is the outcome of the sufferings, Munoo had undergone. This moving articulation of Munoo arouses pity in the readers.

While in Bombay, he is hit by the car of an Anglo-Indian lady, Mrs. Mainwaring, 'a woman of pretensions and no morals'. She takes him to Simla. Here he works as domestic servant and rickshaw puller of Mrs. Mainwaring and dies of tuberculosis only at the age of sixteen. When he is on death-bed he has a strong desire to live, to know, to work.

Munoo resigns to his fate. He does not raise voice against the exploitation of the upper caste and easily accepts the superiority of the rich people. Through the portrayed of Munoo's character, Anand gives vent to his own dissatisfaction against class distinction in the society. Munoo's right to lead a dignified life is denied by the caste and class ridden society. It is the poverty because of which he works at different places and is exploited. Had he not been poor, he would have averted this tragedy. He pays a heavy price. He loses his life at the tender age of sixteen. His story is the story of thousands of others who have been subjected to all types of untold miseries due to poverty.

Thus, both Bakha in 'Untouchable' and Munoo in 'Coolie' represent their caste and class. The truth is that it is class and caste that differentiate a man from man. It can be said that 'Untouchable' and 'Coolie' are the transcripts of life and Anand raises his voice for the people belonging to the poor class and lower caste.

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