

Casteism in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

Anisha.Y, Nisha.G

M.Phil Scholar Department of English Nanjil Catholic College of Arts and Science Kaliyakkavilai Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* (1935) concerned with the evil of violation of childrights in Indian society. It is a sociological novel which seeks to stress the evil of untouchability by focusing attention on the miserable plight, sufferings, poverty and degradation of a large section of Indian society. It brings to light the sorrows and sufferings that high caste Hindus inflicted on the untouchables. He strongly believes that the downtrodden in not born but made. His novel *Untouchable* centers around a sweeper boy, Bakha. The eighteen year boy, Bakha, son of Lakha, the jamadar of sweepers is a child of the twentieth century and the impact of new influences reverberates within him. The present paper aims at how the downtrodden suffer during the period of pre-independence India, socially as well as economically in the light of the characters of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*.

KEYWORDS: Untouchable, Casteism, Violation, Suffering.

Dalit literature in India over the past many decades has emerged as a separate and important category of literature in many Indian languages. It has provided a new voice and identity to the communities that have experienced discrimination, exploitation and marginalization due to hierarchical caste system. Dalit literature has also made a forceful case for human dignity and social equality. Many of the Dalit writings have been translated into English and published as part of the anthologies of Dalit writings. The movement for Dalit literature has later spread to other languages like Gujarati, Punjabi, Hindi, Malayalam and Bengali. Dalit literature has used all literary forms – poetry, short stories, novels, plays and autobiographies in various languages. According to Bama; “Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings”(116).

Mulk Raj Anand was an Indian writer in English, notable for his depiction of the lives of the poorer castes in traditional Indian society. He is admired for his novels and short stories, which have acquired the status of being classic works of modern Indian English Literature. His works include:*The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters*(1939), *The Sword and the Sickle*(1942) and *Coolie*(1936).*Untouchable* (1935) was inspired by his aunt's experience when she had a meal with a Muslim woman and was treated as an outcast by his family. The plot of this book revolves around the argument for eradicating the caste system.

Mulk Raj Anand's commitment to reveal the deep-rooted social malice in the Indian society made him to create Bakha. He wanted to show the youth's unique sensitiveness as against the people of the upper caste who thought merely touching him is degradation. Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometime weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive, he has broad intelligent face. Anand with his remarkable skill portrays Bakha's helpless, frustration,

anxiety and agony to the degree that he has become embodiment of his own creation or in other words the creator and the creator co-mingle at one point. Through the character Bakha in *Untouchable*, Anand highlight the condition of inhumanity faced by them in the society. The untouchable covers the event of a single day in the life of the low caste boy Bakha, in the town of Bulashah.

Bakha had very strong desire to study. He often sat in the spare time and tried to feel how it felt to read. But his self education did not goes beyond the alphabet. While going to sweep the market road and temple courtyard on the way, he buys four annas worth of cheap sweetmeat after much speculation: "Eight annas my pocket...dare I buy some sweets. If my father comes to know that I spend all the money on sweets... but come, I have only one life to live... Let me taste of the sweets; who knows, tomorrow I may be no more"(46).

Mulk Raj Anand successfully had shown how untouchable are not accepted in society and ill-treated by other people of other castes. Bakha being an untouchable, to avoid pollution by touch the confectioner throws the packet of jalebis, like a cricket ball for Bakha to catch: "Keep to the side of the road, oh low-caste vermin! ... Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cockeyed son of a bowlegged scorpion! Now I have to go and take a bath to purify myself, and it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning"(48). His senses were paralyzed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear of humility and servility. But he had seldom been taken so unawares.

The lalla who is 'polluted' continues to bombard abuses on Bakha. Soon he is encircled by men who had gathered to know what the uproar was all about. The crowd which presses round him, is without a shadow of pity for him. When the lalla is tired of shouting at Bakha, he gives a sharp, clear slap at him as a punishment for his damned impudence, and he runs away, like a dog with the tail between his legs. Bakha recognises with a shock his social position. It illuminates the inner walls of his mind. He realizes that though he possesses like any human being, head and heart, and flesh and blood, he is in the eyes of the world an untouchable. He realizes the wickedness of the society in which he is placed, which considers touching a human being like him as a male diction and touching a dirty bull like the one he has seen just then had a benediction.

After the excruciating experience of touching in the market, Bakha went to sweep the temple courtyard. He was filled with the fear of some unknown and mysterious effect on him as he entered the courtyard of the temple. Anand has also highlighted in the faith of Indian People in God, through Bakha, also mentioned that untouchable are not allowed to enter in the premises of temple. Bakha surveys the heap of dust and leaves which he had come to clear. He threw the bucket and the broom on the ground and was ready to begin his job. He saw a miniature 'temple' with the beautiful polished image of a snake enclosed. He was slightly afraid of the snake but his fear ceased when he saw the devotes worshipping it. He shouted his call of caution to avoid the repetition of the disaster of the morning.

The orthodox crowd of worshippers was conscious of his evil presence. He was in a fix and did not know what the worshippers were chanting "Ram, Ram, Sri, Hari, Narayan, Sri Krishna, Hey Hanuman jodha, Kali Mai"(53). He had faint idea about some of them and did not know anything about the rest. He was obsessed with

the desire on seeing the images of gods and goddesses. But he had no courage to go up. He knew that "an untouchable going into a temple polluted it past purification"(64). As his curiosity become more and more acute, he dismissed his conflicting thoughts and moved towards the stairs looking here and there. He climbed up a few stairs but soon fear returned and he came back to the place from which he had started: "he became the humble oppressed underdog that he was by birth, afraid of everything creeping slowly up in a curiously hesitant, cringing movement...With his broom he began to collect the litter"(61).

Again his curiosity propelled him to go up the stairs. He strengthened himself and climbed up a few more stairs and from a safe distance he saw the spectacle of the worshippers, priest and the sanctuary which had so far been a secret, a hidden mystery to him. He was wonder struck at the sight of beautiful brass images.

Bakha saw that the morning service had begun. Devout worshippers stood singing Arti in a chorus. Bakha was profoundly moved by the song. He unconsciously joined his hand in the worship of the unknown god. Anand also exposed the double standard of society where on one hand people are polluted by the shadow of untouchable on the other hand they don't hesitate to try to molest the untouchable girl. According to Basu: "The exclusion of Dalit from the mainstream is not such a bad thing after all: it has caused them to start building their own identity"(145). Through the character of priest Anand described the incident where temple priest tries to molest Bakha's sister and when they revolved, she was blamed to pollute him. All of a sudden he heard a loud cry "polluted, polluted, and polluted"(66). He was perplexed, He knew what is meant. He saw a little man - a priest of the temple, stumbling, falling and crying, "Polluted, polluted, polluted" (66).He also saw the figure of a woman Sohini, behind the polluting priest. The crowd of devotees began to run helter-skelter. All of them were in a terrible orgy of excitement.

One of them angrily shouted at Bakha and charged him of defiling their whole service. Bakha ran down the steps and went to his sister Sohini. The little priest was angrily shrieking;

You people have only been polluted from a distance. I have been defiled by contact... The crowd felt that the priest had suffered terribly. All worshippers sympathized to with him but they did not ask about the way he had been polluted. When Bakha know from Sohini that the priest tried to outrage her modesty, he felt a wild desire to retaliate. This made his blood boil.(78)

The real irony lies in Bakha's high resolve to take revenge being thwarted by futility written on his face, because the caste men had erected barriers of convention to protect their excesses from being questioned. The writer conceives of Bakha as a tiger, but a tiger at bay. Bakha's had much love and care for his sister Sohini. When he knows that Pandit Kali Nath tried to modest her, he is worried about her. In the Sadhu incident, the housewife attends dotingly near a sadhu. But when Bakha asks for a piece of bread, she gives it to him after long entreaty, and that too after seasoning it with abuse and rebuke.

At the Hockey match incident when Bakha saves a small boy from being crushed in a stampede in a hockey match and takes him to his home, the child's mother instead of thanking him for this admirable job, scolds him and says that it is he

who must have been the root of the trouble. That is to say, fault or no fault, the untouchables had to receive the abuse and rebuke of the caste men as daily food.

In the end of the novel Mulk Raj Anand is successful in showing that problem of untouchable can be removed. When the dusk approaches he find three solution's to his problems. He may become Christian with the help of Hutchinson, the Salvation Army missionary. He has been happy to hear from Hutchinson that Christ receives all men and Jessuh Messih makes no difference between the Brahmin and the Bhangi. But the missionaries talking of 'sin' and 'confession' and his failure to clearly tell who his Christ is, confuses the mind of Bakha. He has respect for his person as well as for his nation. Perhaps he knows the difference between the two kinds of servitude, and prefers the native to the alien.

The second solution is that he may take comfort in Gandhiji's chastisement of the caste Hindus and wait till the social conscience of people is roused. Hard upon this comes the third solution. He may put his faith in the water- closet about which the positivist poet had talked: It is prosaic, straightforward, and considered in the light of what has gone before in the book, it is convincing. No god is needed to rescue the untouchables no vows of self- sacrifice and a bugation on the part of more fortunate Indians but simply and solely – the flush system. Introduce water-closets and main drainage throughout India and all this wicked rubbish about untouchability will disappear.

Anand concludes the novel with a note of faith and idealism. As Bakha returns his mind is raised with the hope that soon the flush system would come to the sweepers and people like him: "Can be free from stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society" (91). Bakha fervently hopes for the dawn to his nature of work and his relevance in the society without the label of an untouchable. Anand meticulously brings out the inner life of Bakha. It was growing concern for metaphoric untouchable in all cultures and walks of life.

Premila Paul remarks: "The novel, indeed, presents Anand's attempt at distilling a social metaphor which takes in its sweep a whole range of postulates of Hindu culture. It is a kind of dialectical work centered on as exploration of the possibilities of achieving synthesis or spiritual restoration" (26). Thus in *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand's handling the problem of untouchability through Bakha shows that he hopes to have a casteless Indian society in which untouchability has no place.

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