

The Awakening of Subaltern Consciousness in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

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Abstract: Anand lays strain on the demands of the present; he refuses to be bound by fusty convention and orthodoxy. In fact, Anand's novels convey emotional truths as well as social realities and the beauty of his art of fiction is well realized by way of analysis and interpretation of social problems and of corrupt practices. However social life in India has been entirely revolutionized since then, one cannot say with confidence that casteism is fully wiped off in all the states of India. *Untouchable* gives a voice to the predicament of the mute humanity in vicious conditions. The agony is not caused by fate but by fellow human and the social ambience from which the sufferer still have great and enduring hopes for betterment of life. *Untouchable* is the saga of suffering of the protagonist – Bakha. This paper focuses on the awakening of subaltern consciousness in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* through the protagonist Bakha.

Keywords: casteism, predicament, literary avant-garde, social responsibilities, awakening.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the major voices of Modern India. His work anticipates some of the seminal developments in postcolonial theory and practice and as such has important implications for postcolonial studies. Mulk Raj Anand presents the chronicle of India's struggle for independence not through the conventional bourgeois discourse, but from an alternative perspective foregrounding worker's struggle over and against the gradualism of Anglophile leaders. Re-reading Mulk Anand's work which more than six decades especially at the threshold of twenty-first century, one is really struck not only by the degree and scope of the author's literary achievements, but also the simultaneous historicity and contemporaneity that his works exhibit. It is this rich diversity and rare resilience of his works that allows and demands multiple and newer approaches from time to time.

II. THE LITERARY AVANT-GARDE

One of the earliest among Mulk Raj Anand's critics, Jack Lindsay places Mulk Raj Anand within the literary avant-garde of the 1930s and studies the protest in Mulk Raj Anand's fiction in his famous book. *The Elephant and Lotus: A study of the novels of Mulk Raj Anand* published in 1965. Dieter Riemenschneider analyses Mulk Raj Anand's concept of man in the book *The ideal of Man in Mulk Raj Anand's novels*. Margaret Berry uses a biographical approach to study the emerging connection between Mulk Raj Anand the man and Mulk Raj Anand the writer in *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist*.

Balaram Gupta in 1972, Saros Cowasjee in 1975, Alister Nivn in 1978, Premila Paul in 1983 have undertaken thematic studies and focusing on Mulk Raj Anand's humanism, his concern with freedom, compassion and social commitment respectively. Krishnanandan Sinha in 1972 and M.K.Naik in 1975 attempted an assessment of Mulk Raj Anand's achievement as a creative writer. Marience Fisher analysed the philosophy of life of Mulk Raj Anand's works and concluded that despite his commitment to idealistic social goals of Marxism, Mulk Raj Anand's purpose is neither chiefly propagandist nor political. Besides, there have been innumerable articles on different aspects of Mulk Raj Anand's fictional oeuvre.

The general critical neglect Mulk Raj Anand suffered in recent postcolonial studies appears to be due to a shift of focus to diasporic writers. The slant in post colonial theory needs to be set right and a systematic rereading of the work produced at home must be undertaken. Post-colonial discourse springs from the specific socio-cultural dynamic created in ex-colonies following colonial encounters. The present study on Mulk Raj Anand's select fictions places Mulk Raj Anand's within the larger context and attempts a reading of Mulk Raj Anand's novels as part of the discursive formations of post-colonial discourse.

Growing up during the high day of the colonial rule, writing as a colonial and post-colonial, Mulk Raj Anand stays close to the multifarious manifestations of this historical encounter. The colonial experience is a live experience to him, and his writing is therefore linked to this theme directly or indirectly. He writes out of an acute social consciousness which is virtually concerned with politics and society with the function of power in a given society and its effects on the moral, social, cultural and even aesthetic values of the people in that society. He is convinced of the social obligations of a creative writer and holds that art cannot be divorced from its social functions.

The social responsibilities of an artist

Mulk Raj Anand firmly believes that a writer in an emerging society has multiple roles to play. A writer should become a teacher, guide, mentor, reformer and conscious-keeper of the race. The most urgent task a writer in colonial society must address is the restoration of human dignity. Mulk Raj Anand sincerely felt that a writer in an ex-colonial society should help to exalt men to the full heights of their dignity to equip them with necessary spirit to tackle the task before them. Mulk Raj Anand clearly states the social responsibilities of an artist in the present age in his Apology for Heroism.

One of the first things to be done in the modern world is To educate people to place the vast accumulation of Knowledge collected in the researches of the past at the disposal of everyone. So that man can thoroughly learn to recognize the fundamental; principle of human living and exercise vigilance in regard to the real enemies of freedom and socialism.... (91)

It is important to note in this context that Mulk Raj Anand's programme for de-colonization does not stop with the achievement of political independence for the state, but insists on complete realization of individual autonomy in social, religious, cultural and psychological terms.

The awakening of subaltern consciousness

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction typically presents the complexity of the warring elements in contemporary society. In his work, the conflicts are not resolved decisively, but the possibility of a solution in future is hinted at. Any conflict involves two groups or institutions. So also in Mulk Raj Anand's novels two polarities are introduced and all the characters fall into either of the groups. In *Untouchable* the conflict is between the caste Hindus and the untouchables; *Coolie* presents a class struggle between the haves and the have-not; *Two Leaves and a Bud* deals with the confrontation between British plantation owners and the Indian labourers; *Lalu Trilogy* portrays different stages in the Indian struggle for freedom. The *Big Heart* fictionalizes the conflict between capitalists and industrial labourers; *Gauri* elaborates female protest against male domination and so on. However, the conflict in all these novels is not a clash between the equals; it takes the form of exploitation of a less fortunate and less privileged group by a more powerful and privileged set of individuals. The two groups involved, therefore, turn into victims and victimizers, and the writer's sympathy for the former becomes obvious.

Mulk Raj Anand's first novel *Untouchable* deals with a hegemonic structure peculiar to India-caste. The target of Mulk Raj Anand's attack in this novel is the bigotry of Hindu orthodoxy and the contestation is launched from the subject-position of a member of the exploited group – the untouchables. Mulk Raj Anand throws open a heterogeneous field where different kinds of exploitations are at work and different systems of dominations such as caste, class, gender and denial operate in criss-cross manner.

Bakha occupies a position of subalternity in more than one scheme of exploitations such as cast, class and colonial subjugation. Mulk Raj Anand conceptualizes the entire complexity of the colonial by describing a day in the life of Bakha. R.T. Robertson has made a commendable observation in this regard in his article, 'Untouchable as Archetypal novel':

The greater effect of the novel is in its archetypal presentation of the colonial situation.....(5)

Through the events of the day, Bakha grows aware of his own subject-position and that of his community. He is also convinced of the need to act and urge for a change. This change in Bakha symbolizes the awakening of subaltern consciousness.

It was with *untouchable* that Mulk Raj Anand made his debut as a major novelist. As such, he knew that only by maximum effort in the utilization of one's inherent artistic gift one could achieve greatness and therefore he directed his head and heart towards it. The novel is the result of several inchoate and wild urges that present the mind of Mulk Raj Anand which he reflects thus:

..... The vanity of youth wanting recognition, the Departure from abstract philosophical theories towards the search for philosophical insights faced on the lives of the human beings whom he knew the flesh and the blood: the urge to express oneself at all costs in an absolutist manner so as to explore the ugliness of death in life by deliberately dramatizing even through distortion, the non-human realities which impinged on one from all sides....(6)

The novel describes one day in Bakha's life in Autumn. It begins in the early hours of the day and by the time dusk approaches, the author has been able to create round his hero, an eighteen year old sweeper boy named Bakha, a spiritual crisis of such proportion that it seems to seize the whole Indian subcontinent.

Bakha is a young man of eighteen, strong and able-bodied, the son of Lakha, the Jemadar of sweepers in the town and the cantonments and officially incharge of the three rows of public latrines located in the extreme end of the colony by the brook-side. He has a strange fascination and respect for English men and life because Bakha feels that they respect him. In this regard Mulk Raj Anand describes:

..... But then he had been working in the barracks of a British regiment for some years on probation with a Remote uncle, and had been caught by the glamour of The 'White man's life. This Tommies had treated him As a human being and he had learnt to think of himself As superior to his fellow-outcastes. Otherwise, the rest Of the outcastes (with the possible exception of Chota, The leather-worker's son, who oiled his hair profusely, And parted it like the Englishmen on one side, wore a Pair of shots at hockey and smoked cigarettes like Them and Ram, Charan, the washerman's son who Aped Chota and Bakha in turn) were content with their Lot (The Story, 12-13)

Bakha starts the work just out of the bed without even having a little hot water to warm his throat. Hence after completing five rounds of cleaning the latrines, he returns home with the hope of getting something hot to drink. But there is no tea and even water. Hence his sister Sohini takes a pitcher and goes in search of water.

Bakha observed her as she walked along swaying. She was beautiful. He was proud of her with a pride not altogether that of a brother for a sister. The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor, were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. They had no well of their own because it cost lot money to dig a well in such a hilly town as Bulandshahr. Perforce they had to collect at the foot of the caste Hindu's well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. More often than not there was no caste Hindu present. Most of them were rich enough to get the water-carriers to supply them with plenty of fresh water every morning for their baths and kitchens, and only those came to the well who were either found of an open-air bath or too poor to pay for the water-carriers' services. So the outcastes had to wait for chance to bring some caste Hindu to the well, for luck to decide that he was kind, for Fate to ordain that he had time-to get their pitchers filled with water. They crowded round the well, congested the space below its high brick platform, morning, noon and night, joining their hands in service humility to every passer-by; cursing their fate, and bemoaning their lot, if they were refused the help they wanted; praying, beseeching and blessing, if some generous soul condescended to listen to them, or to help them..... (Untouchable, 26-27)

On that morning, Sohini has been "Lucky" enough to return home without waiting for a long time. Soon the mixture of tea-leaves, water, milk and sugar is prepared. Bakha feels very happy. The sharp, warm taste of the liquid sends forth a strange stimulus spreading into his flesh. He is soon out again to sweep the market road and the temple courtyard. On the way, he buys four annas worth of cheap sweetmeat after much speculation:

.....Eight annas in my pocket, 'he said to himself, 'dare I buy some sweets? If my father comes to know that I spend all my money on sweets,' he thought and hesitated, 'but come, I have only one life to live, 'he said to himself, 'let me taste of the sweets; who knows, tomorrow I may be no more'. Standing in a corner, he stole a glance at the shop to see which the cheapest thing he could buy was. His eyes scanned the array of good things; rasgulas, gulabjamans and ludus. They were all so lushly, expensively smothered in syrup, that he knew they certainly could not be cheap, certainly not for him, because the shopkeepers always deceived the sweepers and the poor people; charging them much bigger prices, as if to compensate themselves for the pollution they courted by dealing with the outcastes. He caught sight of jalebies. He knew they were cheap. He had bought them before. He knew the rate at which they were sold, a rupee a seer.

'Four annas' worth of jalebies,' Bakha said in a low voice, as he courageously advanced from the corner where he had stood. His head was bent. He was vaguely ashamed and self-conscious at being seen buying sweets.

The confectioner yawned and smiled faintly at the sweeper's taste, for jalebies are rather coarse strut and no one save a greedy low-caste man would ever buy Four annas, worth of them. But he was a shopkeeper. He affected a casual manner and, picking up his scales abruptly, began to put the sweets in one pan against bits of stone and some black, round iron weights which he threw into the other. The alacrity, with which he lifted the little string attached to the middle of the rod, balanced the scales for the shortest possible space of time and threw the sweets into a piece torn off an old. Daily Mail, was as amazing as it was baffling to poor Bakha, who knew he had been cheated, but dared not complain. He caught the jalebies which the confectioner threw at him like a cricket ball, placed four nickel coins on the shoe-board for the confectioner's assistant who stood ready to splash some water on them, and walked away, embarrassed yet happy (Untouchable, 51-52)

Bakha being an untouchable, to avoid pollution by touch, the confectioner throws the packet of jalebies, like a cricket ball, for Bakha to catch. He catches it. He then places four nickel coins on a shock-board near which the confectioner's assistant has been standing ready with some water to sprinkle and remove the pollution and then he walks away.

Bakha becomes currently happy with the sweetmeat in his hand. He opens the packet with alacrity and puts a piece quickly into his mouth. The taste of the warm and sweet syrup gives him satisfaction and delight. He attacks the packer again and again with great excitement and continues to walk along the road, munching and looking at all the sights. This makes him forge to call out. "Posh, posh, sweeper coming", and he suddenly bears someone shouting at him.

"Keep to the side of the road, he low-caste vermin!" he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. "Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!"

Bakha stood amazed embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility. He was used to being spoken to roughly. But he had seldom been taken so unawares. The curious smile of humility, which always hovered on his lips in the presence of high-caste men, now became more pronounced. He lifted his face to the man opposite him, though his were bent down. Then he stole a hurried glance at the man. The fellow's eyes were flaming.

'Swie, dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach!' he shouted as he met Bakha's eyes. 'Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!'.....(Untouchable, 52-53)

The Lalla who is 'polluted' continues to bombard abuses on Bakha. Soon he is encircled by men who have gathered to know what the uproar is about. The crowd which presses round him, is without a shadow of pity for him. When the Lalla is tired of shouting at the defenseless Bakha, he gives a sharp, clear slap at him as a punishment for his 'damned impudence,' and 'ran-way, like a dog with the tail between his leg'.

Bakha recognizes 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. Then conscious of his position without failing he shouts aloud the warning words to announce his approach: 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming' He pace quickens.

As he continues to walk he sees something strange in contrast to what has happened to him.A Huge, Big-Humped, Small-Horned, Spotted old brahminee bull was ruminating with half-closed 'eyes near him. The stink from its mouth as it belched, strangely unlike any odour which had assaulted Bakha's nostrils that day, was nauseating. And the liquid dung which the bull had excreted and which Bakha knew it was his duty to sweep off sickened him. But presently he saw a well-dressed, wrinkled old Hindu, wearing, like a rich man, a muslin scarf over his left shoulder, advance to the place where the bull was enjoying its siesta and touched the animal with his forefingers...(Untouchable,60)

Immediately he realizes the wickedness of the society in which he is placed, which considers touching a human being like him as a malediction and touching a dirty bull like the one he has seen just then as benediction. He pauses for a few seconds and again resumes his steps shouting: 'Posh, post, sweeper coming!' Within a short time he reaches the temple courtyard. He begins to sweep the area. He becomes suddenly curious to see what is happening inside the temple. The unflinching sense of direction of his inner impulse leads him through the temple steps toward the entrance door of the temple. Just then he hears a thundering sound:

....'Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the pacificatory ceremony, Get down, get away, dog!"

Bakha ran down the steps, past the priest below him, to his sister. He had two impulses, that of fear for him, for the crime he knew he had committed another of fear for his sister, for the crime she may have committed, since she stood there speechless.

"You people have only been polluted from a distance," Bakha heard the little priest shriek. "I have been defiled by contact'.

'The distance, the distance' the worshippers from the top of the steps were shouting. 'A temple can be polluted according to the Holy books by a low-caste man coming within sixty -nine yards of it, and here he was actually on the steps, at the door. We are ruined. We will need to have a sacrificial fire in order to purify ourselves and our shrine'.

'But I I.....'shouted the lanky priest histrionically and never finished his sentence.

The crowd on the temple steps believed that he had suffered most grievously, and sympathized. They had seen the sweeper-boy rush past him. They didn't know the story that Sohini told Bakha at the door of the courtyard with sobs and tears.

'That man, than man', she said, "that man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled'.

Bakha rushed back to the middle of the courtyard, dragging his sister behind him, and he searched for the figure of the priest in the crowd. The man was no longer to be seen, and even the surging crowd seemed to show in heels as it saw the giant stride of the sweeper advance frighteningly towards the temple. Bakha stopped still in his determined advance when he saw the crowd fly back. His fist was clenched. His eyes flared wild and red, and his teeth ground between them to challenge: 'I could show you what the Brahmin dog has done!

He felt he could kill them all. He looked ruthless, deadly pale and livid with anger and rage. A similar incident he had dared about rose to his mind in a flash. A young rustic had teased a friend's sister as she was coming home through the fields after collecting fuel. Her brother had gone straight to the fields with an axe in his hand and murdered the fellow. 'Such an insult!' he thought, "That he should attack a young and innocent girl. And then the hypocrisy of it! This man, a Brahmin, he lies and accuses me of polluting him, after – father of fathers, I hope he didn't violate my sister'. A suspicion stole into his mind that he might have. He was stung to the quick when he suddenly felt that he too had looked at her with desire.

"Tell me, tell me, that he didn't do anything to you!"

Sohini was weeping. She shook her head in negation. She couldn't speak.

Bakha was reassured a bit. 'But no, the attempt!' he thought. 'The man must have made indecent suggestions to her. I wonder what he did. Father of fathers! I could kill that man. I could kill that man!' He was being tormented with the anxiety to know what had really happened, and yet he hesitated to question his sister again lest she should begin in cry. But his doubts and misgivings about her were too much for him.

"Tell me, Sohini," he said, turning fiercely at his sister, 'how far did he go?'

She sobbed and didn't reply.

'Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if.....' he shouted.

'He-e-e-just teased me, 'she at last yielded. 'And then when I was bending down to work, he came and held me by my breasts'.

'Brahmin dog!' Bakha exclaimed, "I will go and kill him". And he rushed blindly towards the courtyard.

'No,no, Come back. Let's go away', called Sohini after him, arresting his progress by dragging hard at the lapel of his overcoat. (Untouchable,69-71)

These incidents make his blood boil. He feels a wild desire to retaliate. And yet there is a futility written on his face. He knows that he will not be able to over-step the walls which the conventions of his superiors have built up to protect their weakness against him. The incident of "touching" along with the attempt of the temple priest to induce his sister Sohini to surrender her chastity poisons all that happens subsequently, even such pleasant episodes as a hockey match, a country walk and a wedding. When the dusk approaches he finds three solutions to his problems.

He may become a Christian with the help of Hutchinson that Christ receives all men and that Yessuh Messih makes no difference between the Brahmin and the Bhangi. But the missionary's talking of 'sin' and 'confession' and his failure to clearly tell who Christ is, confuses the mind of Bakha. 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 that he may put his faith in the water-closet. It is worth quoting here the historic statement made by E.M.Forster in this regard in his preface to *Untouchable*:

..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 abnegation 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.....(10)

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 and what a clever poet said about the flush system.

III. CONCLUSION

In this sensitive portrayal of an individual, Mulk Raj Anand displays his penetrating thought and humane attitude in understanding the grim realities of the social life in India. It is a revolutionary novel in the sense that it has an outcaste as its protagonist. Mulk Raj Anand's turning to the evil of caste system even at the very start of his writing career is understandable because it answers to his need to create in readers an urgent awareness of the dehumanizing social evil, to stir the springs of tenderness in them and to rally them for the removal of these evils in order that a desirable or a just social order that a desirable or a just social order may come into being. It is significant that this Indian novel in English first appeared at a time when social reformers in India were engaged in an earnest effort to remove casteism and untouchability. It is more than half-century, since the novel first appeared. Though social life in India has been completely revolutionized since then, one cannot say with confidence that casteism is fully wiped off. It is in this context Mulk Raj Anand's *untouchable* assumes contemporary relevance and strength. This paper 'the awakening of subaltern consciousness in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*' would certainly create a change one that still needs courage and confidence to get rid of superstitious beliefs and customs from subaltern ideologies which currently prevails in our society.

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