

## Caste and Class Conflict in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable and Coolie*

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### ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand is a stalwart of Indian English literature. He is a novelist par excellence. Translated into many languages in India and abroad, he has been universally acclaimed as a progressive writer. One of the important features of Mulk Raj Anand's writing is the truthful portrayal of the Indian society – a society which is sandwiched between and fractured by so many evils and corruptions. Some of these are superstitions, untouchability, political upheavals and merciless persecution of underprivileged and the deserted. His characters are always in constant search for their identity in adverse society. He deals with the burning social problems. He portrays the sufferings of the downtrodden and Dalits at the hand of the so-called high caste or high class people. He brings out the plight of the Dalits in the very adverse situation of caste discrimination, cruelties and atrocities. Although he was not a Dalit by birth, he had very compassionate and humane sympathy for the Dalits. His novels propound a battle against enemies of humanism, equality and justice. They indicate a move suggesting the need to eradicate the social maladies following the footsteps of the great leaders like Gandhi and Ambedkar. The present paper leads a discussion about the acute misery of untouchables and the inhumanity of upper castes on them.

### Introduction

The nineteen thirties was the seed-time of modern independent India. During the decade, none the other, but Mulk Raj Anand only chose to write realistic and naturalistic novels. He chose the way to focus and deal with poor and underdogs, low of the lower class. As K. R. S. Iyengar observes, "In writing of the pariahs and the bottom dogs rather than of the elect and the sophisticated, he had ventured into territory that had been largely ignored till then by Indian writers." (333)

Mulk Raj Anand is the champion of the cause of the downtrodden. It was he who first realistically presented the cause of lower class people and children. His novels depict casteism, capitalism, imperialism, inhumanity, discrimination, injustice, inequality etc as barriers of communication; and reveal the inhumanity inflicted on the oppressed section of the society. Anand has to his credit a corpus of creating realistic novels, the chief among them being *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. He has realistically depicted the very sensitive issue of the Dalits' atrocities particularly of pre-independent India. Anand has written on sweepers of Bulandshar now in Utter Pradesh. *Untouchable* is not a caste but a group of untouchable castes where sweeper is at the lowest rung.

Indian society is a caste-based group where the upper caste exploits the lower caste. Caste played very significant role in every aspect of Indian life. It has powerfully impressed the Indian society. Dr. Ambedkar has written about its function:

Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. Virtue has become caste ridden and morality has become caste bound. There is no

charity but it begins with caste and ends with caste. There is sympathy but not for other caste. (37)

This was the crude reality of Indian society even at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Untouchable and Coolie: A Study in Content*

*Untouchable* (1935) is not only Mulk Raj Anand's first novel but it is his most popular, and most compact and well-knit novel. It is a slim but powerful novel which is about the life of underdog and downtrodden. As C. J. George rightly observes: "With his first novel, *Untouchable*, Anand in fact, inaugurated the literature of the underdog." (vii)

The novel deals with caste and class oppression an age-old ideology of untouchability, which has deep roots the Hindu hierarchy. It centers on an outcaste, a sweeper. He is a victim of the societal discrimination caused by the caste hierarchy. The marginalized finds central place of the protagonist in Anand's novels. The novel depicts a day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy and brings out the impact on him of the various events. Bakha, the protagonist is a sensitive, innocent, poor sweeper boy in the town of Bulanshahar. He is the eighteen years old boy, son of Lakha who is the Jamadar of sweepers of the town and cantonment.

The novel brings out a realistic portrayal of the colony of sweepers, which is entirely unfit for human habitation, and an uncongenial place to live in. The public latrines are situated about it, and the ramparts of human and animal refuse lay on the outskirts of this little colony. It is therefore, full of dirt, filth, ugliness, squalor and misery.

Bakha lives with his father, Lakha, his younger brother, Rakha and his young attractive sister, Sohini in the dirty colony

in his very small, dark and dank mud-walled coughing and abusing his children, wants as a typical old Indian father, to place all his responsibilities on his eldest son. Hence, Bakha, even at eighteen, is burdened with the strenuous routine of a sweeper. He has to work in all weathers, from early in the morning till late in the evening. He has indignation to it, to endure all humiliation as resolved in the novel, so frequently inflicted on weepers in the caste-ridden Hindu society.

In a fashionable dress, he starts cleaning latrines at daybreak. When he happens to touch a caste Hindu accidentally, he is slapped by Lalla, which makes him shout his approach, "Posh, posh, sweeper coming." (Anand, *Untouchable* ... 57) His sister, Sohini goes to the village well to fetch water. Kalinath, the priest of the temple invites her at his house and tries to molest her. Sohini starts screaming, he shouts, "Polluted! Polluted!" (69) Having swept the streets and latrines, Bakha returns home.

In the afternoon, Bakha attends the marriage of his friend Ram Charan's sister – the girl of higher caste whom he couldn't marry. He plays hockey. He scores goal. Free fight starts. A little boy gets injured and Bakha lifts him. The boy's mother blames Bakha for polluting him. Then Bakha goes to meet Colonel Hutchinson. His wife shouts at him and Bakha runs away in fear. In the evening, he goes to *Gol Maidan* and hears a speech of Gandhi. He listens about the machine that clear dung without anyone having to handle it. He feels encouraged also and returns home.

Thus, Bakha is uncommon in the sense that unlike other weepers, Lakha and Rakha, he resents and gets a thought to struggle against the caste-ridden Hindu society. He would if he could, like to be in the fashion of the Englishmen. But the caste structure fixed his job. With the day dawns, he has to start work of latrine cleaning. Though he does not feel well, he has to jump from his bed and start working early in the morning, as Havildar Charat Singh abuses him and shouts outside:

Ohe, Bakhaya! Ohe Bakhya! Ohe scoundrel of a sweeper's son, come and clean a latrine for me! (15)

Anand's *Coolie* (1936) is another great epic of misery. It is "remarkable for its humanism." (Khan 77) It is built on a vast scale. With this novel the range and scope of Anand's fiction has widened and his canvas has been expanded. It focuses on the lot of another class of the underprivileged, labourers and coolies. It narrates the miserable life of a labourer and Coolie, Munoo.

The novel deals with the labour problem of textile mills and the pitiable condition of domestic servants. It describes the economic exploitation and oppression of factory workers, Coolies and servants. It offers a realistic portrayal of Munoo, an innocent poor orphan and his life at various places. The action of the novel moves from village to city. Each of the chapters of the novel narrates Munoo's life at a different place. The opening of the novel portrays Munoo, the orphan of dispossessed parents, as an innocent little boy, hardly fifteen years old living with his uncle Daya Ram in the village of Bilaspur in the Kangra hills. He is then taken to the town of

Sham Nagar and employed as a domestic servant by Babu Nathoo Ram at Rupees three per month. He is ill treated there by Babu's family members. Having suffered so much, Munoo quits the place in disgust and escapes from this cruel house by taking refuge in a train to the unknown.

The third chapter of the novel deals with his experiences in the feudal city, Daulatpur as a worker in a small pickle factory and as a coolie fighting for work in the city market and at the station. A gentleman, Seth Prabhu Dayal, the owner of a pickle-making factory at Daulatpur, who was himself a coolie and orphan like Munoo, finds Munoo lying under the bunk in the train, takes him to his house. There he is employed in Prabhu's pickle factory where Munoo has to work very hard in the dark suffocating atmosphere in the primitive factory. It is a wretched place where the labourers "worked from day to day in the dark underworld full of intense heat of blazing furnaces and the dense malodorous smell ... They worked long hours, from dawn to past midnight, so mechanically that they never noticed the moments of their own or each other's hands." (Anand, *Coolie* 110)

Ganpat, the partner of Prabhu beats Munoo frequently along with the other workers. Things become worse when he is rendered jobless since the factory gets closed down because of Ganpat's treachery in business. Creditors attack Prabhu and the police arrest him and beat him most ruthlessly. Prabhu cannot bear this shock and fell ill. Then Munoo has to work hard as a coolie in the market. He is left alone in the world, when Prabhu returned to his native village. He also tries to work as a coolie at the Railway Station, but a Police Constable humiliates him and turns him away.

By accident he makes acquaintances of an elephant driver in a circus and with his help Munoo reaches Bombay. In Bombay, saving the life of Harihar's child from the dangerous road accident Munoo comes closer to Hari, who gets Munoo employment in the Sir George white Cotton Mill. Bombay, far from being the land of his heart's desire, appears to him nightmarish. He is disappointed; the poverty and suffering in the city streets appall him. He comes to realize the truth of the statement: "The Bigger a city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adam . . . you have to pay even for the breath you breathe." (177)

There Munoo has to live life on the pavements and slums and then in a very small dingy room which is nothing short of a living hell. He finds himself one of the cheated and victimized by the English owner of the Mill. He stands for the harsh lives of workers living in the squalor of the Bombay slums and their exploitation by the moneylenders. The wages they get are quite inadequate. They are deprived of even the bare amenities. The foreman ruthlessly exploits them by taking commission out of wages.

When the workers on strike meeting converts into communal riot and when people start running away halter-skelter to escape the angry rioters, Munoo runs and runs, and gets knocked down by a motorcar, which belongs to Mrs. Mainwaring, an Anglo-Indian lady. She takes him in her car to Shimla. Being a woman of no morals, she makes Munoo her

rickshaw puller and domestic servant. Working so hard as a servant as well as a rickshaw-puller in the hilly tracks of Simla, Munoo gets weaker and weaker and dies of consumption at the age of sixteen.

Thus, *Coolie* offers a narrative of the miserable life and tragedy of a coolie, Munoo over a period of two years. It's a great social tragedy that touches the pathetic and sublime areas of human experience. Society is the great destroyer that kills Munoo and his like. The tragedy of Munoo is an indictment of the evils of capitalism. It certainly arouses the conscience of humanity against the ruthless exploitation of the weaker sections of society. Munoo becomes a universal, larger than life figure symbolizing the suffering and misery of the downtrodden and exploited masses of India. The social forces, which are at work in bringing the tragedy of Munoo, are beyond of his control. He drifts aimlessly and has no choice. The social milieu victimizes him. It is so horrifying that "usually the coolie is just taken for granted as if he were but a shadow, a cheap and useful machine an uncomplaining target for abuses and indignities." (Iyengar 340)

### Oppressed and Oppressors

In both the novels, Anand has presented two types of characters through which there is a focus on exploitation, oppressed and oppressors. The exploiters are rich high caste people who exploit the poor low caste/class people. Major characters like Bakha and Lakha are untouchables; they are sweepers; whereas Munoo from *Coolie* represents poor and weaker section of Indian society. There is interesting variety of characters in terms of the class to which they belong. The very names of the characters: Lakha, Sohini, Rakha, Gujabo etc. in *Untouchable* are indicative of the lower caste communities. Pandit Kalinath, Haviladar Charat Singh etc. are the high caste people. Low class characters in *Coolie* are Daya Ram, Mohan, Hari and Prabha. Rich men of upper class society are Ganpat, Toddar Mal, and Mrs. Mainwaring. All of these characters can be grouped under the titles, oppressed and oppressors. The author's compassion is for the exploited and the downtrodden. It is pure and intense. The exploitation of the underdog fires the novelist's imagination and the result is a splendid artistic achievement. Objectivity, balance, and realism characterize Anand's treatment of the issue of exploitation and injustice.

### Weaker and Powerful

What Anand claims that he tried to "stir the suppressed yearning for freedom" (State... 6) In both of his novels, *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, the conflict between the weaker and powerful has gained prominence. The protagonists are from the weaker sections of the society. They are poor labourers. Work given to the both the heroes is not a work of dignity. For example, Bakha lives in a dark, dingy one roomed mud cottage. He is a sweeper boy. Even at eighteen, he is burdened with the strenuous routine of a sweeper. He has to work in all weathers, from early morning till late in the evening. In addition to it, he has to endure all humiliation so frequently inflicted on sweepers in the caste ridden Hindu society. He has to pick up broom and basket to get his everyday livelihood. The Caste Hindus are his superiors. They abuse Bakha even though he is efficient in his work. A Caste Hindu, Lalla slaps him, Pandit Kalinath tries to molest Sohini for they have been

given lower position in the ladder of caste hierarchy. There is desire of revolt in him, but the caste-ridden social order for ages made them weaker. No doubt, Bakha's anger against the powerful is seen, but it doesn't come to the surface level. In *Coolie*, the root cause of Munoo's tragedy is poverty which made him to appear weak. He is exploited right at the age of 14. He is the victim of rich men's greed and selfishness. His search for labour start from village to different cities of India—from his village Bilaspur of Himachal Pradesh to Sham Nagar, Daulatpur, Bombay and Simla. His dreams fade in the prime of his youth when he dies of tuberculosis because of hard work, drudgery and cruelty of human life.

### Protest against Suppression

Anand's protagonist has "the upward thrust". (Mishra 2) Bakha in *Untouchable* has a touch of the uncommon about him. Those who abuse his services admit that he is a bit superior to his job. He is pictured as a sort of male God. His anger, sense of indignation and revolt against suppression shines in his eyes. Still he is a superb specimen of humanity. He is a tiger but tiger at bay. He has the physical strength to resist oppression and comes very near to retaliating on wrong doers. On slapped by Lalla and molestation of Sohini by Pandit Kalinath the fire is seen burning in his soul. Anand writes, "The accumulated strength of his giant body glistened in him the desire for revenge while horror, rage, indignation swept over his frame." (55) He wants to rise in protest against the tyranny of the caste Hindus and that of his own father. He resents but fails to translate his resentment into action only because the wits of helpless and oppressed boy are powerless in the face of the combined might, tyranny and age-old exploitation. The so-called caste Hindus are, in most cases, more depraved and mentally dirty than a sweeper boy like Bakha who given the opportunity, could have risen to great heights. Like *Untouchable*, *Coolie* too, is "a novel of social protest." (Ramesh 123) Anand has portrayed Munoo's suffering and exploitation through his anger. He is psychologically strong enough to endure and stand against every toiling and problem he faces.

### Self-realization and Search for Identity

Anand's protagonists are Dalits. They are in search of their identity. The oppression, exploitation, discrimination, inhumanity and injustice they are subjected to make them know their place in the society. Bakha does his work efficiently and remains clean even though he has to clean dirt and dung. He likes English clothes and the English way of life. The 'touch-scene' in *Untouchable* suddenly makes Bakha know his real position in social order. On touching a caste Hindu, Lalla accidentally, Bakha is slapped mercilessly. It's a moment of self-realization for him, which instigates him a search for identity. "For them I am a sweeper, Sweeper-Untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (59) Though his job was dirty, he is comparatively clean. He does his job efficiently and wants to be like a Sahib. So, Tommies are closer to him. Although Munoo confronts a new situation of cruelties and atrocities every time, he has zest and curiosity for life. Being poor and orphan, he realizes his position in the class-oriented social order. He wants to raise high in life. His wandering from place to place is indicative of his search for identity. He is torn from his moorings; he feels nostalgic for his lost world and "through

the tears, he could see the high rocks, the great granite hills, grey in the blaze of the sun and the silver line of the bees.”(24) Both Bakha and Munoo dream and struggle for better life.

### Struggle against Discrimination

Both the novels of Anand bring forth its protagonists' continuous struggle against social discrimination, hypocrisy, cruelty, deceit, injustice and inhumanity. Bakha gets a sense of interrogation when the high caste Hindu, Pandit Kalinath tries to molest his sister, Sohini. All of sudden his eyes turn red with anger and he wants to over throw the orthodoxy built for ages. He wishes to struggle for the emancipation of untouchables. He goes to attend his high caste friend's sister's marriage which indicates his attempts for equality. Munoo in *Coolie* too, struggles a lot first as a domestic servant in the house of the bank Sub-Accountant, Nathu Ram; then in the pickle factory at Daulatpur. In the White Cotton Mills in Bombay, he struggles for happiness in the company of the workers there. He hopes to find prospects serving Mrs. Mainwairing and then pulling rickshaw in Simla where he risks at death. Till the end of his life he struggle a lot hoping happiness and change in his life. His struggles, suffering and death unnoticed at the very tender age of sixteen signify social protest.

### Hope for Change

Concerning the ideology of change, Anand's novels appear in the similar line of the Dalit literature. They are with reform zeal and suggest the ways and means to put an end to the age-old practices in the society based on caste hierarchy. Towards the end of his novel *Untouchable*, Bakha gets three possible solutions to the problem of untouchability – first from a missionary that of conversion to Christianity; second from Mahatma Gandhi that to fight out untouchability; and third from a young poet that of the introduction of the flush system. Bakha is found “thinking of everything he has heard, though he could

not understand it all.”(133) While coming home from the Gol Maidan, he carries a strong sense of hope for change, self-awareness and self-appropriation. The third solution fascinates his mind. The ending move brings a concrete solution hoping for change. Like Bakha, Munoo too hopes for change. He passes through five centers in his quest for happiness and freedom. He runs from place to place in search of hopeful change. But everywhere he is exploited and threatened by the high class society.

### Conclusion

Anand's fiction is steeped in humanism. His *Untouchable* and *Coolie* offer a very touching and moving account of the plight and wretchedness of the life of the Dalits. *Untouchable* deals with realistic depiction of the life of the untouchables. Bakha, being a central character is a boy of 18 who protests against injustice and exploitation of untouchables. It exposes hypocrisy and callousness of caste Hindus. Caste has been the main concern of the novel. Introduction of dung cleaning machine by a young poet is an encouragement for untouchable. The novel ends with a note of hope for Bakha. Anand's *Coolie* is based on class struggle, social injustice and psychological conflict of the rich and the poor. It focuses on the pathetic condition of the poor, Munoo and the heartlessness of the rich. It deals with denial of the right to happiness to a simple landless orphan, Munoo, exploitation of the underprivileged, the impact of capitalism, social and sexual degradation of human mind. Both Bakha and Munoo search for their identity; their heart is filled with indignant hatred at the oppressors; they struggle for freedom, and hope for change. Thus, both the novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie* mark compassion for the underdog and indignation at the oppression and exploitation of the masses in the name of caste, class and race.

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