

Anand as a humanist : A study of his *Untouchable and Coolie*

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ABSTRACT

Anand is a committed writer. He is not an advocator of 'art for art's sake' theory. To him art is a means of expressing his humanistic view and making a plea for social change by way of improving the miserable lot of the underdogs and the marginalized. Unlike in the novels of his predecessors and contemporaries Anand raises low-caste individuals to the status of his fictional heroes and he depicts their miseries, wretchedness, social segregation and exploitation in such a poignant, sensitive and realistic way that he is found to be the champion of the downtrodden, oppressed, exploited and segregated. His Untouchable and Coolie besides his other novels show him to be a humanist in the true sense.

Introduction

Anand was a writer with a purpose. He may be compared to Charles Dickens. He is a lover of humanity and he feels for the socially and economically oppressed. A champion of the underdogs and under privileged Anand believes in the amelioration of their lot and effecting a heaven on the earth on socialistic line. Like most of the Indian English writers of 1930s Anand too came under the formative influence of Gandhiji who fought for the cause of the marginalized, the downtrodden and the oppressed and his novels are coloured by Gandhian ideology. The motive force behind writing his fiction was to highlight the miserable conditions and wretchedness of the underdogs exploited either by capitalists or by feudalists or by the impact of industrialization. A committed humanist Anand successfully uses novel as an instrument of expressing his vehement protest against all these and bringing about a radical change in society by way of uplifting the condition of the underdogs of the society. Thus he is a social reformer and all his novels are animated by his philosophy of humanism.

What is humanism :

humanism is the philosophy that places man at the centre of the world. It deals with love for and interest in all that is human. A corollary of the Italian Renaissance it asserts dignity and superiority of man and stressed the importance of worldly life as opposed to the medieval view of this life being a preparation for the life beyond. More specifically it deals with the study of human culture. It believes that man has potentialities enough for securing his happiness and he should not turn to God or Fate or religion for the same.

Anand as a humanist :

Mulk Raj Anand was a committed writer and humanist. His humanistic vision was moulded by Marxism and strengthened by Gandhian ideology. He was an ardent humanist believing in the innate goodness and dignity of man. To quote Saros Cowasjee : "one must not lose sight of close relationship between Marxism and humanism in Anand's mind---- a relationship that is better evident in his works than in the numerous protestations."

His love for mankind transcended all limitations of caste, creed, financial or social position as well as all cartographical

bounds of nations and this is the very basis of his philosophy that prompted all his activities besides his prolific writing. The very essence of his humanism may well be summed up in the expression "Man is the measure of all things." The 'art for art's sake' creed was an anathema to him. To him art is meant for man's sake. He believes that art exists for refining and elevating man, rousing the dormant wealth of his tenderness for his fellowmen and inspiring him to the welfare of mankind as a whole. It is this artistic creed that prompted Anand neither to spin fairy tales nor to fabricate escapist literature but to explore and glorify in art the essential dignity of man, the sensibilities of all human beings whether in factory, in the village square or in the drawing room, in so far as they have been affected by the iron Age," as well as to inspire compassion in human heart for the oppressed and downtrodden.

Anand himself defined what 'humanism' means. Boiled down to a sentence, it simply means belief in man's latent goodness which must triumph over evil given the right circumstances. According to Anand it is socialism which can ensure congenial circumstances for man's holistic development. So Marxism is the very foundation stone of humanism. For Anand it is a doctrine to fight against all corrosive social forces that subvert humanity. For him it is the ultimate remedy for all social evils. Upholding the dignity of man as man irrespective of his descent, social status, his caste and creed was the very essence of Anand's humanism. A belief in the supremacy of man rejection of divinity and fatalism, dignity of labour, work as worship, practicing love and compassion for human beings, the contribution of art and literature to the development of a complete man, rebellion against feudalism, fascism, imperialism, capitalism, casteism as well as against all that restricts man's freedom, belief in the brotherhood of man, liberty and equality etc are some of the chief features Anand's humanism. In short Anand's humanism envisages man in a heavenly state upon the earth. Let us have Dr. Iyenger's assessment of Anand as a humanist :

"He is a humanist because he rightly thinks that since most of our problems have been created by man, they can also be solved by man. Since man is the reason for the miseries of mankind, he should now become the power-house for

processing his own salvation. Superstition, bigotry, caste, class, capitalism, exploitation, over-population, tyranny, colonialism, fascism, atomic stock-piling, war, genocide since man is responsible for all these, man can now fight and undo them too, if he has the vision doubled with requisite will. And through Anand's writing, his preachings and the example of his own life, he has been trying to awaken man's slumbering conscience so that he may acquire the true vision and develop will to engage in the task of reconstructing humanity in India and the world."

Anand defines humanism as illumination or enlightenment in the interests of man. Anand was liberal humanist for his humanism is a comprehensive, an all-embracing concept and hence it prevented him from committing himself to a particular doctrine. In this respect it should be noted that he was a Marxist only in his belief and not certainly in his practice, and people suspect that he called himself a humanist only to avoid being called a Marxist and he himself described his humanism as a 'comprehensive historical humanism.' In his humanism we find a fusion of Hellenic idea of man, the Renaissance idea of man's holistic development, a belief in the possibility of a better world order, Lord Buddha's advocacy of compassion irrespective of caste and creed, an upholding of the noble principle of the brotherhood of man as preached by our saintly figures like Kabir and Nanak and recognising the untouchables as human beings and so on and so forth.

Anand has always regarded literature and art as the vehicle of expressing a writer's creed of humanism. He believes that the highest form of art illuminates life and fortifies us to confront life in all its aspects boldly and that it explores the dignity of human life and personality.

Anand may be called a revolutionary in terms of his humanistic view and idea of art. He began his career as a writer during the period when Indian bourgeois democratic revolution developed to a decisive state and Anand's art became an instrument to promote the cause of these revolution with its ideals of eradicating the imperialistic rule, combating all forms of feudalistic exploitation and oppression including the age-old evil social practices of casteism and untouchability and accepting the bourgeois leadership and above all, its yearning for elevating the conditions of the underdogs. In short, Anand through his art became an exponent of these revolution and he looks upon novel as an apt medium to give expression to a writer's humanistic concern illuminating human situation in a convincing and comprehensive manner. He was a novelist with a mission and he used novel as a medium of voicing his vehement protest against social segregation and social and economic exploitation practiced by the privileged class upon the under privileged and outcaste people and like a true messiah of the under dogs Anand wrote for the amelioration of their miseries. Thus he chose novel as a fitting medium to express his humanistic concern and wrote *Untouchable* first and *Coolie* later, both of which bear traits of the revolution of the period. Both the novels deal with the individual's quests for freedom in a ruthlessly exploitative social system.

A study of Untouchable and Coolie:

The central theme of the *Untouchable* is the social malady of untouchability practiced by the caste Hindus upon their lower class people. By making a scavenger boy the hero of the piece Anand has reflected his humanistic outlook in the choice of the central character of his novel. The novel unfolds harrowing experiences of Bakha, an eighteen year old sweeper boy, an intelligent and sensitive adolescent, during a single day and thereby the novelist has portrayed the miseries and wretchedness of the outcastes of the Indian society during the colonial period and the novel becomes a mirror of contemporary Indian society depicting the social conditions of India during nineteen thirties. Thus the novel is a tragic tale of an outcaste, a sweeper boy caught in the mesh of caste system. The novel reflects Bakha's emotional crises during single day in an absolutely realistic manner. In other words the novel gives us a peep into Bakha's psyche where terrible crises have been created by a series of insults and humiliations Bakha received from the caste Hindus. With the help of the stream of consciousness technique the novelist brings before us the workings of Bakha's mind and his reactions to the circumstances he finds himself in.

Through a series incidents the novelist shows how Bakha suffers indignities and humiliations in a single day mainly because he is a scavenger boy. In a mood of delight while relishing jalebies Bakha walks into the town in a carefree manner and in the process a Lalaji gets touched. As a consequence all hell was wreaked loose upon him. Bakha's 'defiling' touch so enrages Lalaji that he hurls torrents of abuses at him in foul terms like 'offspring of a pig', 'dirty dog', 'son of a bitch' and slaps Bakha smartly venting his spleen upon him, giving a fig for Bakha's apologising and begging for pardon. Bakha's jalebies fall scattered on to the dust. Bakha regrets his folly and feels utterly humiliated. The poor boy's joy in eating delicacy was thus spoiled. Rage smoulders in Bakha: 'Why was all this fuss?', 'Why was I so humble?' could have struck him.' Gradually recognition of his social position dawns upon him: 'For them I am a sweeper, sweeper---untouchable!'

In the temple episode the priest tries to seduce Bakha's fair looking sister and makes indecent advances. Sohini does not oblige the priest and she cries out in fear. In order to hoodwink the worshippers in attendance upon the morning Arti, the priest makes a loud allegation of his being disgraced by the dirty touch of Sohini. Coming to learn of the real incident Bakha flares with anger and burns with a spirit of revenge and makes a violent advance to teach the offender a fitting lesson. But Sohini disarms him with her timely reminder and warning of the dreadful consequence the joint power of the high caste people. He feels like a tiger at bay. In spite of his resolve to do something by way of revenge he finds that he cannot overstep the magic circle protecting a priest from the onslaught specially by a low caste man.

In the Chapati throwing episode Bakha receives abuses from the woman in return of his begging 'bread for the sweeper' for the 'guilt' of sitting at her door steps and 'polluting' her house thereby. The woman throws the bread into the dust and Bakha has to pick it up. Bakha's indignation burns with in

him. It is a fresh addition to all the accumulated fury of the morning.

In the Hockey-match episode we have the same note of humiliation and disgrace. Bakha receives abuses and scolding from the mother of the small boy for his generosity of saving the boy from being crushed in the stamped, and carrying him home. The mother of the boy alleges that Bakha has defiled her house besides killing her son. Bakha is stunned at this reception and he thinks that he only gets abuses and derision wherever he goes he regrets that he does nothing but pollutes people wherever he goes and does something.

Thus Anand's *Untouchable* brings out the pathos of the deplorable lot of the untouchables in India during the colonial era. Through the agency of Bakha the novelist has brought to focus the injustices, ill-treatment and cruelties perpetrated by the caste Hindus upon the low-caste people in India during the colonial period as well as in the subsequent decades. The way Anand realistically portrays their miseries shows his deep compassion for the underdogs. Really speaking, Anand has used novel as the instrument of expressing his humanistic ideals.

Anand's *Coolie* is a "painful saga of suffering" of Munoo, a hill boy of Kangra valley. A messiah of the underdogs and a humanist Anand once again shows his distinction as a novelist by choosing as the hero his novel an investing him with dignity "to create a boy ...in all his humanness as against the fantastic *Kim*." Here Anand the humanist gets the better of Anand the artist, and the novel may be regarded as a proletarian document bringing to focus the predicament of the underprivileged in a capitalistic social structure where money plays the key-role in all spheres of life. Here Anand makes an exposure of the social forces in work behind a tragedy— i.e., capitalism, industrialism and communalism, and the novelist's realistic and sensitive treatment of the inhuman social forces of poverty and exploitation makes the piece a social tragedy of universal significance.

Initially Munoo was an intelligent, sensitive and highly spirited adolescent full of zest for life. But his life in the idyllic village setting of Kangra valley was cut short by hunger and poverty, and he was forced to fend for himself and face the world at the age of fourteen. Hence forward his innocence will be overshadowed by grim experiences of poverty stricken life in a capitalistic social set up. The is a tragic tale of Munoo's inglorious odyssey as he was forced to pass through a series of tormenting situations---as a domestic servant in Shamnagar, as a worker in a small pickle factory, as a coolie in the city market of Daulatpur as a labourer in cotton mill in Bombay and as a rickshaw puller of a promiscuous lady in Shimla. On the whole Anand here creates a convincing situation and revills aspects of life hitherto unexplored in fiction, as though tabooed from it.

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For the first time Munoo faces the urban world in the household of Babu Nathuram, Sub-Accountant in the Imperial Bank in Shamnagar. Compelled by the necessity to fend for himself Munoo is taken by his uncle to Babu Nathuram's house to work there as a domestic servant. Evidently he is on the wrong track. Abuses, miseries and humiliations galore lie in wait for him there for Babu Nathuram's snobbish, termagant wife keeps him half-fed and always busy, denies him the use of lavatory, nags and humiliates him and uses him as a shameless rustic. His sufferings reach their height when he is beaten hard with cudgel. Munoo feels insulted, humiliated, sad, lonely and isolated from the happy world of his social superiors. Unable to bear the cruelty any longer Munoo slips out of the house and runs away. From the Shamnagar episode Munoo learns the humiliating lesson of his being meant for servitude to and abuse and betting of others.

The second act in the tragic drama of Munoo's life presents him as a labourer in a pickle factory and as a Coolie in the market place at Daulatpur. Munoo's life here takes a hellish turn because of Ganpath's treachery in business. Munoo loses his job and is overtaken by extreme feelings of melancholy and self-distrust.

The next phase of Munoo's life presents him as a worker in a cotton mill in Bombay confronting him with the full force of capitalism. There he falls victim to deprivation, unkind and harsh treatment of the owners, and in the wake of the labour strike there Munoo leaves the job.

The final act of Munoo's tragedy projects him as a rickshaw-puller and personal servant of Mrs Mainwaring in Shimla. Tired of drudgery and struggle for existence Munoo succumbs to tuberculosis at the age of 16, and with this we come to the "tragic ending of the naturalistic novel; the life principle is wiped out. Death complete the hero's victimhood." The novel turns out to be Anand's plea for reform. Humanism could be the only panacea for the evils of poverty, exploitation and cruelty which nip the youth before it blooms. The novel also brings to sharp relief the necessity of redeeming compassion to the world held in the deadly grasp of capitalism, industrialism and communalism.

Conclusion :

The novels discussed give us glimpses of dreadful consequences social distinction, evils of social and economic exploitation perpetrated by the caste Hindus upon their lower class or outcaste people in such a way that we feel that the novelist's purpose is obviously to ameliorate their conditions by effecting a radical change in the social setup, making a plea for the same to the conscience and compassion of the reading public. Thus Anand proves himself to be a humanist in the true sense and an Indian version of Charles Dickens.

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