

The societal pragmatism in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand – A Study

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Abstract: Mulk Raj Anand is very well-known as an Indian novelist, distinguished writer, reformer, art critic, editor, journalist, a short story writer and political activist. He opened a new section of writers of fiction along with Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan and produced a great deal of English literature and his mastery in the realistic and sympathetic portrayal of the exploited class of Indian society marks his genius as a socially committed novelist. That's why he is not only known as India's Charles Dickens but also considered the messiah of the have-nots, unloved, down-trodden and unwanted. The exploitation of the down-trodden in Indian society made him focus his attention on their miserable and pathetic condition and formed the major theme of his works. His writings reflect his urgent social concern, preoccupations and the social impulse and made the reader to be immediately aware of the exploitation faced by the down-trodden through the heart-throbbing description of their wretched state. Painted with the colors of social realism Mulk Raj Anand's two novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie* reflect the hard-core reality of the Indian society of early decades of twentieth century.. Written with a purpose both these novels condemn the modern capitalistic Indian society and feudal system for the shameless and tragic exploitation of the poor and underdog as there is nothing but a true, real and bitter reflection of the society in both the novels dealing with a similar central theme of social exploitation, the exploitation of the down-trodden and the underprivileged because of the curse of untouchability, poverty, hunger, child labor, social governance, social set up of society, customs, religious belief, prejudices and the suffering of the Indian masses by the forces of capitalism, industrialism and colonialism. The present paper shows the true colours of social realism in *Untouchable* and *Coolie*; the epic-like novels of M. K. Anand to strike a chord in the hearts of the conscientious Indians through a beautiful and real-to-life portrayal of the exploited masses of Indian society.

Keywords: distinguished, exploited, down-trodden, social impulse, social realism

INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand's first novel is a highly charged intellectual discourse on the illusion of infallible relationship between work and untouchability, and *Coolie* is a humanistic discourse on the subject of human labour. It may be argued that the central issue in either case is the philosophy of work and that untouchable and coolie are analogical metaphors of human enslavement, subjugation and oppression. While the setting of both the novels is in the backdrop of caste-dominated colonial India, the two metaphors, as developed by Anand, have a much more comprehensive meaning and context, perhaps too much larger than could possibly be carried by the respective narratives or even allowed by the tenuous scope of history. It is indeed true that Bakha, the protagonist of *Untouchable*, is an Indian sweeper and Munoo of *Coolie* an Indian coolie, but they are universally accepted and have become global figures. The two metaphors provide a heartbreaking commentary on man's inhumanity to fellow man in the history of the human race, especially on the formation of collusive centers of power and the unprecedented complexity of these hegemony structures in controlling human beings. *Untouchable* is basically an epic of misery of the individual caught in the net of the age-old caste system but at the same time, the novel has a tragic beauty of its own. For Anand filth and dirt is as much a part of life as beauty, cleanliness and decency. It is not that he loves ugliness but realism demands it if it is that in actual life. He has not hesitated to introduce the neglected stratum of society in his novel. In his preface to *Untouchable* E.M. Forster called Mulk Raj Anand's first novel *Untouchable*, indescribably clean though criticized by news-papers in London as „a dirty work“

Untouchability is so deep rooted in the Indian society that we can still see the effects of it on the fringes of modern India. On the face of it everyone acts as if they do not discriminate, but where do the Hindus go with a century of consciousness and conditioned mind that lived in the society where the caste system is still rampant. Change is coming, not in the offing, but slowly and Mulk Raj Anand was able to bring out the subject of this discrimination which prevailed in the Hindu dominated India. Bakha is a young man, proud and even attractive, yet none the less he is an outcast in Hindu Indian caste system: an Untouchable. In deceptively simple prose this groundbreaking novel describes a day in the life of Bakha, sweeper and toilet cleaner, as he searches for a meaning to the tragic existence he has been born into - and comes to an unexpected conclusion. Untouchable is Mulk Raj Anand's first novel and it brought to him immense popularity and prestige.

This novel shows the realistic picture of society. In this novel Anand has portrayed a picture of untouchable who is sweeper boy. This character is the representative of all down trodden society in pre-independence of India. The protagonist of this novel is the figure of suffering because of his caste. With Bakha, the central character, there are other characters who also suffer because of their lower caste. They live in mud-walled cottages huddled colony in which people are scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes. The lower castes people are suffering because they are by birth outcaste. But Mulk Raj Anand had depicted the hypocrisy of the upper caste people that men like Pt. Kali Nath enjoy the touch of the Harijan girls. Mulk Raj Anand exposes all this hypocrisy and double standard or double dealing. In this novel Bakha is a universal figure to show the oppression, injustice, humiliation to the whole community of the outcastes in India. Bakha symbolizes the exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of untouchables like him. His anguish and humiliation are not of his alone, but the suffering of whole outcastes and underdogs.

Social Realism:

In Untouchable he brought fictional life to his boyhood companion, the untouchable sweeper boy – Bakha his hero through his minute observation as if he has spent a day with Bakha to make it very much real and true and builds round him a spiritual crisis broad enough to embrace the whole of India in a single days' action and captures Bakha's pride in his work of cleaning latrines. According to Premila Paul, Bakha serves as a mirror to the pathetic correlation of the untouchables and represents all those sweepers who are doomed to live life worse than the slaves. Every aspect of the novel reflects a very true picture of social realism. Anand creates sympathy for the low caste who clean dirt are treated like dirt by the high castes. The novel begins with a harsh realistic picture of the outcastes' colony and makes the theme of the novel – untouchability itself very realistic.

The description of the outcaste colony in the beginning of the novel reveals not only poverty but also the subhuman level of their existence. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other out castes from the odor of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks. A brook ran near the lane. The castes which look after the cleanliness of the high castes are destined to live in dirt. Anand has used real Indian words to narrate the humiliation and his picture has great quality to make the novel real. Indian tone makes Anand's use of words very realistic:

Anand expresses his anger, agony and despair of the exploitation of the outcastes in the name of religion and held Hindu religion itself responsible for this social discrimination. Brahmin priests and Mahants who are the so called custodians of religion keep themselves away from the shadows of the outcastes but do not hesitate to molest their girls. The molestation of the untouchables by the high caste is very common throughout the countryside of India. They look at the low caste women as objects of sexual satisfaction. As, both the superiority and the inferiority complex are too deeply rooted in the high caste and the low caste respectively. That's why the indecent aggression of the priest towards the untouchable girl is tolerated by them. Coolie is an epic of misery giving us a heartrending real account of the suffering and misery of the poor like Munoo. The poor are the victims of social, colonial, capitalistic, and communal exploitation and Anand's picture of the Indian poor and their suffering is both pathetic and realistic. Hoping against hope, Munoo seeks a safe shelter in life.

The theme of the exploitation of the underprivileged is presented in great depth and the picture is drawn with vividness. With its scene shifting from the Kangra hills down to the plains of Bombay and back to the Punjab hills with its crowded canvas, the novel covers all the classes of society from the landless peasant to the aristocratic Anglo-Indian and British. Anand describes the real situation in the novel. The scene dealing with Munoo's life in the industrial slums of Bombay offer a graphic account of the working of the capitalist system.

The factory is an intolerable inferno with unbearable heat radiating from the tin sheets, the continuous wild hum of the machine, the monotony of the work, the threat of impending danger and above all the inhuman attitude of the employer. Anand seeks to evoke pity towards the miserable plight of a subaltern in our society. Through him Anand has focused attention on the wretched plight of the millions of subalterns in India who are toiling, suffering, starving and dying of bitterness and despair-unable to carry on the burden of life-long sufferings. Social realism found in real life characters presented in Anand's novel. Lakshmi in *Coolie* is a typical Hindu wife devoted to her husband and children. Parbati has that "wisdom of the heart" which Anand considers more valuable than any amount of intelligence. Social set up presented by the characters in *Coolie* serve to fill up the canvas and complete Anand's panorama of Indian social life-coolies in the grain market of Daultapur, the sick and destitute pavement dwellers of Bombay, the workers in the cotton mill etc. He focuses only on the mundane affairs of his fictional men and women. As a principle of his social realism, he does not dwell on the extraordinary in emotion or intellect, and strictly adhere to the common social activities of his characters. As writer of fiction, Anand's notable marks are vitality and a keen sense of actuality. Of Anand's early novels it can be said that they come fresh from contact with the flesh and blood of everyday existence

CONCLUSION

In short, Mulk Raj Anand presents a real picture of Indian life in *Coolie*. There is sincerity and immediacy in his realistic approach to his problems. If the themes here betray a sense of protest, it is a part of realism because realism is by no means a transcript of life only. Anand's social realism is sustained by his faith that an artist can contribute immensely towards social change. He is a novelist who believes in portraying realism. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* are alike so far as their themes are concerned. The former portrays an untouchable in his true colours and the latter lays bare the life of a coolie, a victim of capitalistic economy.

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