

Assessing Mulk Raj Anand's Works in a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract. Mulk Raj Anand is one of the pioneering Indian writers in English in the postcolonial era. He gained international fame and recognition for his gallant and audacious writings in support of the marginalized and oppressed. His critical writings certainly represent the desperate plight of the poor. In addition, they not only raised the voice of the suppressed but also acted as a protest against the persecutors. His writings reflect his deep concern about the marginalized, oppressed as well as about the enlarging social divide in the then contemporary Indian society. Anand's choice of literature as a means to protest and his efficacious and judicious use of English in his writings certainly put him among the distinguished post-colonial writers of the Indian subcontinent. This paper endeavours to ascertain the elements of postcolonialism in Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* and *Untouchable*.

Keywords : Postcolonialism; subaltern; dalit; discrimination; emancipation; untouchable.

Mulk Raj Anand is well known for his courage to speak against the ruling classes and for his social solidarity for the underprivileged. Anand wrote a number of novels, out of them *Coolie* and *Untouchable* attained extraordinary success. These two novels not only expose the cruel face of his contemporary society but also strongly condemn the social exploitation done on the basis of caste, religion, social status, financial status, etc. Anand's protest was against the colonial forces, the economic exploitation of the poor done in the name of capitalism and feudalism, and the social suppression by the Hindu upper caste. Anand's bold protest writings were the result of his exposure to these ruthless exploitations of human done by other humans.

Anand has uncovered in his writings the exploitation and oppression of the low caste since the British period i.e. the pre-independence era, which still continues till today even after more than seventy years of Indian independence. Anand's commitment to bring betterment to the life of the oppressed section of the society is so palpable in his writings. He took the task on his shoulders to bring to light the apathy of the upper castes and rich classes and the discontentment in the lives of the underprivileged and untouchables.

Anand has a revolutionary zeal, which can be felt in all his works and it makes him stand out among the Indo-English novelists. He aims in his writings at reviving the social values on the one hand while on the other, endeavours to combat the evils in the society. He believes that any literary work must represent the genuine

picture of a society and must epitomise the social problems, reality, and the miserable lives of the poor. Anand writes in his *Apology for Heroism*:

Any writer, who said that he was not interested in la condition humaine, is either posing or yielding to a fanatical love of isolation- a perverse and clever defence of the adolescent desire to be different. (*Apology for Heroism*, 81-82)

He goes further and says that “a writer must go straight to the heart of the problem of our time, the problem of human sensibility in present complex world, the tragedy of modern man.” (78-79) He never seems to escape from his ideological commitments and using literature for propagandist purposes. Anand is a committed novelist who has an incredible urge to end the prevailing socio-economic subjugation, to bring equality in the society, and to restore equal rights for all the low castes, marginalized, and oppressed.

Anand was well aware of the exploitation and suppression of the low caste masses. He himself witnessed such inhumane treatment of the poor. His personal memoirs of these sufferings of the marginalized always annoyed him as well as provoked him to take the help of literature to lend his voice so that the voice of the voiceless can reach the upper classes of the society. He, at an early age, experienced the ill social and religious practices, bigotry, and hypocrisy in the Indian society. The ill practices like feudalism, marginalization, untouchability, and socio-economic oppression by the upper castes and rich classes were extremely common. In addition to these experiences, Anand was considerably affected by Karl Marx’s letters, which he read during his visit to England. Many other such life experiences also added fuel to his defiance against these social evils. During his time, oppression and exploitation were so common that it was barely noticed by the affluent. In his writings, Anand brings to light the mindset of the upper classes behind the exploitation. His writings not only uncover social evils but also sketch a true picture of Indian society. However, torments of the poor, especially in pre-independence social situations, prevail in most of his writings. They also clearly show his bitter experiences during the colonial period and are presented in the most eloquent manner in all his literary discourses. Moreover, they establish an inextricable link between all the postcolonial writers having a common interest in the eradication of subjugation and exploitation.

Anand’s concerns about the socio-economic exploitation of the poor and suppression of their voices are so immensely deep that they put him under enormous pressure to protest against marginalization, oppression, casteism, and religious bigotry extremely conspicuous. His writings are a little bit too different from other writers who use humour and satires. Anand writes about the miseries of the inarticulate Indian people in a touching manner. As Professor K.R.S. Iyengar points out:

Thus, when Anand started writing fictions, he decided he would prefer the familiar to the fancied, that he would avoid the highways of romance and sophistication but explores the by-lanes of the outcastes and the peasants, the sepoys and the working people. It was, however, no laborious exercise of the self-conscious proletarianism. To Anand it was merely the easier and more natural way; he was himself of the proletariat. It is the atmosphere of the late twenties and early thirties, the air was filled with the dust of politics and infected with the fumes of man's inhumanity to man, but it was not altogether unrelieved by hope. It is also worthy of mention that Anand is a committed writer. (Iyengar, 334)

Anand grew up in colonial society and wrote as a colonial and postcolonial writer, however, he stayed close to his own unsettling experiences. He himself witnessed the colonial period which is patently obvious in his works. In his early childhood, he stayed at a cantonment of Mian Mir and Nowshera where he constantly felt the presence of the foreign rulers. As Anand was a young kid at that time, he feared the power of the foreign rulers and never affirmed their dominion. Furthermore, he lost all the respect for the foreign rulers when he was once given an unjust punishment by a Sahib of his father's regiment. Anand salaamed and stared at the officer and thought he would give a reply, but to his surprise, the officer got angry and swished his cane. His father's passive submission to the Sahibs was utterly humiliating for him.

At a tender age of eight, Anand had his first traumatic experience of the barbarous crime of killing three hundred innocent Pathans by British brigade. The piled-up corpses of Pathans in the graveyard completely shook his mental state. In another incidence, Anand was arrested by the police during a curfew, was flogged, and held at the police station overnight in Amritsar. The memories of the terrifying killing of three hundred Pathans could not be forgotten, yet, another similar tragedy struck him when three hundred women were shot dead by the British regiment for their disobedience. These extremely cruel, violent, catastrophic incidents left inextricable impressions on his psyche. By now, Anand had seen various unsettling incidences and could easily realize that the society is severely inflicted by the syndromes of the caste system and social, economic and religious superiority over others. This self-proclaimed superiority gives special rights to the upper caste and to the rich to exploit the lower caste and the poor. Anand firmly opposed these types of superiorities and privileges given to a certain section of the society and condemned the atrocities done to the weaker section in the name of religion and caste. His anti-caste system and anti-superiority views are rapidly apparent in all his writings. His writings not only protest against the colonial powers but also

against the feudal exploitation of the lower class and discrimination done on the basis of religion. Anand becoming a protest writer is due to his experiences of the inhumane exploitation of humans done by fellow humans, which was at its peak during the colonial era.

Anand's true affection for the common people and his genuine concerns for their upliftment make him a real humanist. He could realize that the politics of power forebodes further social evils and misery to poor people to come in the future. He also realized his responsibility and used his writing skills for the cause of a social change. Anand's writings gave a boost to the voices of the voiceless. Through his works, he sets the responsibilities of a writer to uncover the truth and to write for people's sake. He believes that a writer should be a role model for others in the form of a mentor, reformer, and teacher. Anand himself tells us in his *Apology for Heroism*:

The theme of my work is the whole man and the whole gamut of the human relationships rather than only one single part of it. Just as I desire a total and truly humane view of experience, a view of the whole man, in order that a completely new kind of revolutionary human may arise, so I have been inclined to stress the need for a truly humanist art commensurate with the needs of our time. (86)

Anand changed the whole genre of Indian literature from history and romance to the harsh realities of the present society. He also changed the escapist or entertainment reading behaviour of the people and drew their attention towards readings to bring a social change. His writings are full of intentions to ignite social reforms. He purposefully writes to capture the attention of the readers to make them aware of the misery and suffering of the poor due to the exploitation done by the capitalist society. His writings faithfully serve the purpose of bringing plights of the marginalized to light. Anand successfully exposes the exploiters and justifiably criticises them in his writings. He also criticises the decay in Indian traditions. As M.K. Naik says:

Anand is at his best when exposing the limitations of the decayed Indian traditions and championing the cause of modernism as a cure for the ills of Indian society and when in doing so, he maintains his balance. (Naik, 24)

Anand's concerns about the socio-economic oppression of the poor deepen with each of his novels. He portrays the cruel exploiters as priests, businessmen, money-lenders, landlords, and other upper-class people. He represents the exploited as the low-class people, poor, untouchables, labourers, coolies, peasants etc.

Anand's novels have an intimate connection with his own childhood experiences of the oppression and marginalization of the underprivileged. His harrowing experiences of the cruel exploitation of the people living around him since his childhood certainly affected his feelings towards them. This leads to a development of genuine sympathy and feeling for the exploited, which he vividly portrays in all his novels. Anand accurately depicts different exploitations like social, economic, and religious, which were widely spread in the Indian society. These exploitations have their roots in religion and politics. They also have a connection with the British period, which had a close association with capitalism and imperialism. Whenever poor labourers tried to raise their voice for their issues, their mill or factory owners incited communal riots to divert their attention from issues. The British used these communal riots as a tool to keep control over the Indian masses.

In Anand's novels, social exploitation can be divided into three major categories. The first category includes social exploitation based on religion while the second includes social exploitation done due to defective marriage and education. The third category includes social exploitation for the purposes of sexual pleasure. These exploitations existed in Indian society since the medieval period, which grew further in the British period and continue to exist even in today's modern India.

Anand's novels uncover the prolonged conflict between the upper-class and the lower-class, the privileged and the underprivileged, the upper-caste and the lower-caste, the rich and the poor. The differences between these groups are obvious in the novels and the deep concerns for the latter groups clearly show Anand's sympathy towards them. Anand as a writer could always find an opportunity to portray the almost irreconcilable conflicts spread in the Indian society.

A vivid picture of the soaring relationship between the masters and their auxiliaries i.e. the dehumanizing of the relationship by the masters and the endless terrible sufferings of the auxiliaries is depicted by Anand in his novels. Due to his careful observations of such relations, he could easily assess the psychological condition of both the masters and the oppressed class and soon realized that many people in the society, especially the upper class, were tainted by colonial mentality leading to the inhumane oppression of the poor. Anand makes a careful assessment of each and every aspect of this contagious disease of colonial infection, which maligned most of the upper class.

Anand also believed that the other prominent causes of the social divide in the Indian society were the age-old customs and orthodoxy. He genuinely balances the amount of truth and social realities in his writings. They clearly reflect on the social problems prevailing in the society such as social and as well as economic exploitation of the marginalized class. It can be seen in his novel *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, which deal with the different types of blatant exploitations that are common

and have roots in religion, caste, economic status, etc. *Untouchable* especially discusses the exploitation based on the caste system, which is most peculiar to India. In this novel, Anand highlights the different exploitations at work with different systems of domination. *Untouchable* is a story of a sweeper boy named Bakha who is the protagonist of the novel. The whole novel revolves around Bakha. His character has been portrayed in a manner that signifies the exploitation of class, caste, and colonial subjugation.

Anand throws light on a heterogeneous field where different kinds of exploitations are at work with different systems of domination. The hero of *Untouchable* is a sweeper boy named Bakha, around whom the whole gamut of action moves. Bakha occupies a position of subalternity in more than one scheme of exploitation – class, caste, and colonial subjugation. Anand portrays him as a symbol of psychological slavery that pervades a colonized society. He combines wide experience with architectonic skill, cosmic vision with objective truth, as in *Coolie*, a novel instinct with epic amplitude and magnificence. Anand's focus is here on the economic exploitation of the Indian peasant and worker by the oppressive forces of capitalism and colonialism. He portrays the predicament of the industrial workers through the tragic tale of the protagonist, Munoo who is a village lad. The story of Munoo is the story of every exploited individual in India and the patterns of life are intended to show the pitilessness in the lives of millions of people who are condemned to lead a life of an unending saga of social degradation. Like Premchand, Anand too, is a serious novelist and a passionate reformer, a critic of life. He traces the roots of social injustice and moral degradation to the disruption based on co-operation and brotherhood and the growth of inequality and tyranny based on class and caste scruples.

The caste system, though seemingly related to Indian milieu or the Hindu community has a universal dimension which needs to be recognized. It is therefore, surprising that barring Anand, no other Indian writer has projected it in any significant terms. The fact that even after the passing of the Untouchability Offences Act in 1955, the evil of untouchability does persist in the country. It reflects a deep-rooted prejudice which affects human behaviour and poses an intractable problem. Social discrimination will hinge in our society. The exploitation of the subaltern is all pervasive, though their form and proportion might be different from the cases of the pre-independence era.

The origin of untouchability is an enigma to modern history, but it is generally held to be a perverted outcome of the caste system. As time passed by, they divided themselves into different occupations. Those who took to learning became Brahmins, undertook governance became Kshatriyas, took to trade were Vaishyas, and those who served to these three classes became Shudras. But in actual practice, this original principle of division of labour did not sustain for long. The result was that the original four divisions became watertight compartments

Assessing Mulk Raj Anand's Works in a Postcolonial Perspective and degenerated later into the present-day caste system. Another view holds that these untouchables were broken men and then the followers of Buddhism. In their fallen days, they did not assimilate themselves with Vedic Hindus or give up beef eating and so they were degraded and segregated as Untouchables.

The practice of untouchability continues and Dalits continue to live outside the villages, excommunicated from society. They are denied entry into temples, they are not allowed to share community wells, they are forced to drink water from separate glasses in some rural cafes and they are frequently attacked or abused if any sign of defiance is shown. When they cross an upper caste house, they routinely alight from their bicycle and push it rather than riding it. Sometimes they take off their footwear till they clear the exclusion zone. The police are reluctant to register their complaints or investigate cases filed by them. Some decade-old massacres of Dalits have not yet reached the prosecution stage. Strangely, the Shudras or the backward castes have become advocates of political Hinduism or Hindutva, and have emerged as the biggest threat to Dalit rights. The backward castes have progressed economically over the past century, and being peasant communities, their interests clash with those of the landless Dalits.

The basis of everyone's rights lies not in their religious identity or affiliation but in their humanity. Dalits need education and training in human rights. As victims of superstitions, they need exposure to rational thinking. The succor and superstition of another religion will do little to change a lot of the Dalits. The problem of untouchability is more than an issue of law and order – it is a deep-rooted, millennia-old malady that afflicts society. Unless the Dalits have belief in them and are empowered to assert their own humanity, unless they themselves discover their inherent human dignity, they will continue to be where they are – on the extreme of society. However, empowerment of the Dalits will come only when their fractured movements are united on the basis of democratic principles. Emancipation is a personal achievement, and the victim needs to enact his or her own emancipation.

The caste system which is very much prevalent in our society separates the high caste people from the low caste by birth. This class hierarchy sows seed for exploitation. The high caste men look down upon the lower caste men. The so-called caste Hindu exploits them. This is the greatest sin that mankind often commits. Swami Vivekananda remarks, "The greatest national sin is the neglect of the masses and that is one of the causes of our downfall". (327) Anand, through his writings, has waged a war against those intimidating social forces and has tried his best to uphold the dignity of the Dalits.

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