

Elements of Injustice and Exploitation in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* : A Study in Realism

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Abstract. The article discusses the portrayal of the sufferings of the poor and the downtrodden in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. The sufferings of the poor and the dalits have been a familiar sight in India throughout the ages. The exploitation of the Dalits assumes various shapes – social, physical, financial, moral as well as psychological. The conditions of the life of the untouchables are realistically portrayed without inflammation or exaggeration. Not only the distinction and gulf between the high caste Hindus and the untouchables are made clear in this novel, but also the superiority – inferiority complex among the members of the low caste themselves. Anand has located the protagonist, Bakha, in a fixed reality in the hope of capturing the essence of the sweeper's existence. In the novel, the temple priest, Pandit Kali Nath treats Sohini, Bakha's sister like the lowdown girlhood to be molested with impurity. At that time he forgets that Sohini belongs to an untouchable class and he tries to fulfill his sexual desire. Anand tries to show injustice and exploitation with dalits in his novel *Untouchable* by giving many examples, such as the dalits could not sit with high caste people, they themselves could not draw water from the well, they could not go to schools for education, they got their food collected being thrown at them from the top of the house and so on.

Keywords : Dalit; untouchable; injustice; exploitation.

The word 'Dalit' has acquired a special meaning in the Indian society. It is used for the people who belong to the lowest rung of the social ladder. They are the untouchables in the social set up, leading a life of penury and were worst exploited and oppressed by the upper caste. The meaning of 'Dalit' is – worst, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn asunder, destroyed and crushed. The Dalits of our country are also described as dasa, asura, avarna, chandala, untouchables and scheduled castes, depressed classes, harijan and so on. There are scholars who think that the shudras were treated as untouchables in the *Vedas* and *Manusmriti*, that they were called chandals, that they were not allowed to study the *Vedas*, that they were compelled to live in the bastis outside the village, that they were asked to wear iron ornaments, that they were asked to eat in the earthen utensils. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until they were able to work. Use them and then throw them was the policy of the society

Mulk Raj Anand is a great humanist and realist. He is a kshatriya by caste and he lived in pre-independent India. He has seen the poverty, squalor, untouchability and discrimination among the men with his own eyes. He has seen the pitiable condition of the dalits. He felt that there was too much injustice and

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exploitation of dalits or downtrodden in the society. That is why he got inspired and wrote in favour of them. He wrote his first novel *Untouchable* in 1935 on the theme of untouchability and exploitation. In this novel, he has exposed and satirized the hypocrisy, bigotry and callousness of the caste Hindus who can be polluted by the mere touch of an untouchable like Bakha, but who like Pandit Kalinath do not hesitate to molest an outcast girl Sohini. His feelings for the suffering masses of India, colour his novel at every step and it makes him a powerful champion of the underdogs. Anand's novel presents a dialectical interaction between theme and form at various levels. His fictional theory was profoundly influenced by the West, but the reality he sought to artistically represent and interpret the Indian reality. The novel *Untouchable* attained fame all over the literary circle of the world. It is also regarded as one of his best novels.

The novel is based on the principle of stream-of-consciousness. *Untouchable* is well built and compact. There is no superfluity of any nature. The novel tries to mirror a faithful picture of contemporary India. Anand was very much influenced by Gandhi and Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar. He stayed with Gandhi for sometime in Sabarmati and that very year he wrote his first novel. Anand does not like to write merely for the sake of art. He writes with a purpose. He is the champion of the poor and the underdogs. He has a great sympathy for the suffering masses. That is why he has been called a propagandist by some critics. He was associated with communism and used his novels to make broad attacks on various elements of India's social structure and on British rule in India. His novel describes the life of the oppressed and offers glimpses of the oppressors :

The outcasts were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the near by brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. (*Untouchable*, 14)

Untouchability has not come from nature, man on the earth made this discrimination. All the people of the earth have sons of the same father, God. God has not divided men into classes, like upper class people and lower class people. Man himself generates gap between man and man. Man exploits man; man is the enemy of man and he hates man. All these problems are created by man. God made all people with equal rights and freedom. He did not divide the work of the people like upper caste people do a job of engineer, a doctor, an I.A.S. officer or high authority work and a lower caste man does a job of cobbler, sweeper, gardener and so on. Men have been practising unjust actions in the society since early times. In ancient times, low caste people works as a slave. They have no right to go to temple for worship. This injustice occurs in a situation where the equal are treated unequally and the unequal are treated equally. Discrimination, ageism and

homophobia are examples of social injustice and all these conditions are shown in the novel *Untouchable*. Bakha is a universal figure to represent the oppression, injustice, humiliation meted to the whole community of the outcastes in India. Bakha symbolises the exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of untouchables like him. In this novel, the main protagonist, Bakha does the job of a sweeper. He cleans three rows of latrines. He represents the sweeper's community. The sweepers have not learnt decency and decorum. He is always abused by his father Lakha. At the age of eighteen he carries the entire burden of his family. The one day action of the hero is intended to represent a fairly complete sociological experience. He is born in a sweeper family. So, he is never provided proper upbringing to become a civilized man. There is a touching scene in the market where Bakha is cruelly slapped, beaten and humiliated. It suddenly brings home to Bakha his real position in social order; it is a moment of self revelation for him :

For them I am a sweeper, sweeper.
Untouchable; Untouchable; Untouchable.
That's the word : Untouchable : I am an
Untouchable. Like a ray of light shooting
through the darkness, the recognition of
his position, significance of his lot dawned
upon him. It illuminated the inner
chambers of his mind. (43)

Infact, *Untouchable* describes the inhuman treatment of human beings. Sohini is helpless when she can not prepare food and tea for her brother. She is trying to light a fire between two bricks. She is blowing hard but fire is not burning because of the mud floor and wet wooden sticks, that served as fuels. Smoke irritates her eyes. Her eyes are full of tears when she turns and sees her thirsty brother. Her helplessness is because she is an outcaste; she cannot draw water from the well to quench the thirst of her brother. She has to wait for a pitcher of water for hours together and has to depend upon the high caste Hindus even for the basic necessities of life. The dalits' pitiable condition is seen in Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan* also :

Chowdhriji, all of your guests have eaten and
gone... Please put something on the pattal for my
children. They too, have waited for this day.
Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty
pattals and said, "You are taking a basket full of
joothan. And on top of that you want food for your
children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pickup
your basket and get going. (Valmiki, 11)

One day while Bakha is passing by a street he catches sight of sweets. He starts looking for cheaper one because he knows the shopkeeper always deceives the sweepers and the poor people, charging them much bigger prices. The confectioner

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smiles faintly when he asks for jalebis worth four annas. There is a prejudice that a low caste man would never buy four annas' worth of jalebis. Bakha walks along the road having jalebis and enjoying it but suddenly hears someone shouting at him and being abused. His senses are paralysed. He is about to apologise but he gets a slap. This is the worst moment of Bakha's life till now. The untouchables have the power but they can not retaliate because they think upper caste is superior:

‘You swine, you 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*, 38)

Another episode of exploitation is seen when Bakha runs to save his sister, Sohini from Pandit Kali Nath, the priest, who is trying to violate her modesty. Kali Nath’s evil intentions are made clear earlier when he gives water to Sohini and asks her to come to clean his courtyard. This clearly points to the fact that when it comes to gratifying their desires, the upper caste forget the caste barrier. They don’t hesitate in exploiting the down-trodden. On the other hand, the priest is ready to have physical relation with a beautiful untouchable girl and fulfil his sexual desire. But when his evil intention is not completed he begins to cry :

“Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with
you! You have defiled our whole service.
You have defiled our temple! Now we will
have to pay for the purificatory ceremony.
Get down, get away, you dog!” (53)

In *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand gives his message of humanism, socialism, brotherhood and equality. Bakha’s character underlines this belief in the dignity of man. Abuses, poverty, filth, dust, latrine cleaning, waiting in a queue for even the basic necessity like water, eating food thrown at them is their destiny. Even the money paid by Bakha for a packet of cigarettes is first sprinkled with water and then taken. It is a picture of hopeless existence and struggle for the survival of untouchables.

At present, we have a democratic republic, but injustice, equality, liberty and fraternity, the four basic tenets promised in the Preamble of our Constitution are clearly not available at all. Dalits continue to be oppressed and discriminated in the village, in educational institution, in the job market, and in the political field and any sphere or at any juncture of their lives. Human trafficking is a serious crime at present. This crime cannot be reduced without abating regional irregularity and financial inequality. The poorest of the poor states with inappropriate employment and the way of livelihood are being targeted. They are misled and are given greed to divert their mind.

That the caste system must be abolished if the Hindu society is to be reconstructed on the basis of equality, goes without saying. Untouchability has its roots in the caste system. They cannot expect the Brahmins to rise in revolt against the caste system. Also we cannot rely upon the non-Brahmins and ask them to fight our battle.(Internet)

Of all his novels, *Untouchable* is the most compact and artistically satisfying. It is the shortest of the novels and the most revealing and rewarding of the lot. The unities are admirably preserved, as in a classical play for *Untouchable* covers the events of a single day in the life of the low caste boy, Bakha. All happenings have been precisely packed in order to create an artistic effect, Bakha, the sweeper boy, is the dominant character from the beginning to the end. He is one of the immortal characters of Indo-Anglian literature. His character has been drawn with insight and detachment.

Anand has successfully used the novel-form as an instrument of his humanism. The conclusion of *Untouchable* is realistic and it reflects Anand's social realism. It is based on the experiences of Anand. Pity and sympathy for the poor and the suffering is a part of Anand's novel *Untouchable*. It is concerned not only with the life and suffering of some particular individual but also with the life and sufferings of untouchables as a class. Bakha symbolises the exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of dalits like him. The work of this caste is to clean toilets and streets and to keep them clean for the upper castes. They are forced to reside in *kuchcha* mud-walled, single room cottage. There is no proper drainage system and there is foul smell everywhere. The main theme of the novel is caste discrimination. In spite of dissatisfaction, Bakha dreams of social justice. The theme of the novel itself is very realistic. *Untouchable* expresses the injustice and exploitation with crushed protagonist Bakha and his sister, Sohini. It is a slice from a life without any modification.

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