



UNTOUCHABLE: CURRENTS AND CROSS-CURRENTS OF SUBALTERNISM

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is a prolific writer and pioneer of Indian writing in English. His literary works are noted for his realistic, socialistic, iconoclastic and sympathetic documentation and delineation of social, political, religious and economic issues. The basic concern of his novels is poverty, inequality, injustice, oppression, discrimination, exploitation, suffering and untouchability. *Untouchable* is his debut novel which centres around an eventful day of an outcaste, Bakha, a scavenger who being a prototype of millions of untouchables of India symbolizes their plight and predicament, hardship and humiliation, merciless tortures and inhuman torments to which they were subjected. The sub colonial dominant discourse of casteism in traditional Indian society runs parallel with the hegemonic discourse of British colonialism. As an example of subaltern studies, *untouchable* takes the perspective of Bakha's the 'Other' who is silenced by the dominant discourse of caste- hierarchy. This research paper intends to mark *untouchable* as an instance of subaltern studies with two fold implication and signification. This study investigates the dominant discourses or the ideological assumptions in traditional Hindu society. This humanist social reformer adheres to the doctrine of humanism and gandhianism and envisages a casteless and classless nation.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Casteism, Subaltern, Dalitology, Gandhianism, Socialistic, Humanism, Ideological Assumptions, Untouchable, Iconoclastic, Imperialism.*

Introduction

Among the doyens of Indo Anglican literature, Mulk Raj Anand is known for his realistic, socialistic and sympathetic presentation of the perennial problems of the poor through his literary works. Mulk Raj Anand has received worldwide recognition and acclamation for his note of socialism and humanism. He started writing at the moment when India was in the grip of colonial rule; the country was experiencing the evil of imperialism. As a profile writer of social consciousness and political awareness, he could not help faithfully mirroring the society. Poverty, illiteracy, superstition, religious hypocrisy, political upheaval, the caste system and untouchability became the staple of Anand's writings. Apart from giving vent to the aspects of colonialized India in his debut novel *Untouchable*, he is sincere in highlighting the sub colonialism that was running correspondingly in Indian society paving the way for plethora of plights and predicaments for the subaltern/marginalised. As an iconoclast, Anand spoke against exploitation, oppression, discrimination, inequalities and injustices prevalent in society. The unquestionable impulse of Mulk Raj Anand to write for the proletariat and the outcaste was triggered off social, political and human causes. The novel is a reliable record and a true transcription of the pathetic plight of untouchables who were subjected to immitigable indignities due to their social inferiority and lowly origin.

Concept of Subalternism

Subaltern studies has been in vogue during the 1980s which aimed at recapturing history for the under classes, down-trodden and the underprivileged people, and for the unheard voices. Subaltern theory takes the perspective of the "other" as the one who had no voice because of race, class, or gender. This theory is based on deconstruction as Derrida has proposed it. It emphasizes that norms are established by those in power and imposed on the "other". Instead of dwelling on histories of the deities and the Eurocentric bias of current imperial history, scholars of the subaltern studies focused on subaltern in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. They advocated the idea that there may have been political dominance, but that this was not hegemonic. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, published in 1935 can be deemed as subaltern studies with twofold implication and signification. Firstly, the narrative is the veritable document of the colonized and the subaltern/other at large. Secondly, it is a sensitive story based on the life of the most downtrodden, despised, disregarded and deprived section of Indian society, the outcasts – those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Bakha, the central character of *Untouchable*, is an archetypal untouchable who represents the sorrow, agony and anguish, misery and misfortune, inequality and insecurity, plight and predicament, trial and tribulation of the millions of untouchable in Indian.

Socio- Cultural Ethos

The year of the publication of the novel is 1935 when India was under colonial rule but the author is not intent on manifesting the evil effects of imperialism, the ruthless tortures and inhuman torments to which the innocent Indians were subjected. His intention is not to show the Colonizer-Colonized relation rather he is preoccupied with the dominant discourse of sub-colonialism which was prevalent in the veritable form of caste prejudice. Anand is vocal of the ill-treatment and oppression, the untouchable were dispensed with. His narrative is basically concerned with the nationalist-movement in the pre-



independent period; the nationalist movement intended to develop a nation that would encompass everyone irrespective of race, class, caste or religion. In spite of the initiative to create unity among diversity in India conflicting issues like inequality of the caste system, gender and religious discrimination surfaced as problematic during the nationalist movement. The caste system was a hierarchical pattern which provided privileges to certain groups of people on account of their religious connection; Anand says that a Dalit has to perform due to his caste. It is ironical that the force of nationalism which was directed at uprooting the foreign domination in order to imagine an independent nation was divorced of a workforce considered as outcastes. It is strange that those who were against the hegemonic discourse of colonialism had accepted casteism as the dominant ideology by means of which people belonging to the high caste can govern, exploit, deceive and deprive the low castes or the outcastes because of their negligible status of an untouchable.

During the rise of the nationalist movement, there was an inclination in Indian Literature to reflect social issues. Mulk Raj Anand was true to his vocation. As a novelist his primary duty was to reveal the reality. Among the nationalist leaders, Anand has supported Gandhi and he adhered to Gandhi's ideologies for the purification of the society and the reformation of the religion. In *Untouchable* he has pointed out that caste system was an important flaw in traditional Hindu social structure. Dalits existed as outcasts at the bottom of the social hierarchical system. They were assigned the menial duty to perform. The miserable treatment of the Dalits disaffirmed the mission of the nationalist movement. They were envisaged as a tainted, an ostracized and a segregated caste :

“The outcastes’ colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water- carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society.”

Anand’s purpose in writing *Untouchable* was to purge of the prevailing perception of people about Dalits. He endeavoured to get rid of Bakha who represents a Dalit of the social stigma and religious dogma’ he strove to establish his rights and identity, the loss of which had completed him to approve of the conventional code of culture which was tyrannical and oppressive for him. The incidents which are narrated in the novel are hardly ensuring empowerment of a Dalit because nowhere do we find that his voice of protest is able to defend himself. Anand’s message is quite clear; when the social discrimination, religious hypocrisy, economic inequality are abolished from the society, , neither caste prejudices will prevail in society nor a Dalit will suffer from identity crisis.

Protest and Compromise

The feeling of revolt grows in Bakha’s consciousness but he submits himself to the superiors who exploit him. He surrenders owing to the inborn slavery and docile humility that he has inherited from his father:

“We can’t do that. They are our superiors. One word of theirs is sufficient to overbalance all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kin.”

Bakha thinks of vengeance and retaliation when he is subject to inordinate infliction, injustice and insult. But he has to yield to an overwhelming power which pacifies his rage and indignation, and placates his thought of revenge. SarosCawasjee is right when he says:

“Anand reveals hypocrisy in Hinduism through an instance; both Bakha and a Sadhu stand at a doorstep begging for food. The contrasting attitude of a woman to them speaks volume for people’s hypocritical nature.”

As a novelist with a mission, Anand’s objective was to unveil the tragic dilemmas of the untouchables. Bakha discloses the real cause of their unending misery and exposes his wish to terminate the troubles he has been experiencing everyday:

“All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused? The sentry inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That’s why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That’s why they don’t touch us, the high-castes.... For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable I am an Untouchable”

“This is his realization, his understanding of his place in the social order and the new enlightenment which is:

“Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that has happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer.”



“The outcastes are exploited on economic level too. The sweetmeat-seller who is a hypocrite and a humbug manipulates the scales to deceive the outcastes:

“... The shopkeepers always deceived the sweepers and the poor people, charging them much bigger prices, as if to compensate themselves for the pollution they courted by dealing with the outcastes”

Untouchable maps the inner conflict of an individual who is caught in the web of an age old caste system. The mental conflict arises between the revolutionary spirit to achieve dignity and a docile submission to ideology of the superiors:

P.K. Rajan has true insight into the powerless power of the untouchables whose quest for freedom is lost in immense bewilderment. He comments:

“It is the individual’s quest for freedom in a social system of ruthless exploitation. Bakha as an untouchable seeks his freedom in the feudal society with its unquestionable faith in the infallibility of caste discrimination, with its hypocrisy, cruelty, deceit and inhumanity. We see him stand passive and bewildered at the immensity of horror, hoping for a change.”

Remedial Measures

Towards the end of the novel, Anand reveals the ideological conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi. Colonel Hutchinson, the Christian missionary and the Chief of the local Salvation Army is introduced to reflect on Anand’s belief that the idea of conversion for the autonomy of a Dalit’s rights is futile as Bakha is ignorant of the identity of Christ. Gandhi, according to Anand, is the true source of emancipation for the untouchables from their life of indignity and injustice. The nationalist vision of Gandhi is too difficult for Bakha to understand; he is jubilant to realize that Gandhi is concerned with the uplift of Dalit identity.

“As you all know, while we are asking for freedom from the grip of a foreign nation, we have ourselves, for centuries, trampled underfoot millions of human beings without feeling the slightest remorse for our iniquity. For me the question of these people is moral and religious. When I undertook to fast unto death for their sake, it was in obedience to the call of my conscience.”

Bakha didn’t understand these words. He was restless. He hoped the Mahatma wouldn’t go on speaking things he (Bakha) couldn’t understand. He found his wish fulfilled, for a potent word interpreted his thoughts.

The moment Bakha joins the nationalist rally he has a spontaneous feeling that he has entered an eternal space where he is not subject to discrimination and dehumanization. There no one accuses Bakha of polluting the high-caste by his defiled touch. Mahatma’s magic spell has broken the caste barriers:

“Men, women and children of all the different races, colours, castes and creeds, were running towards the oval....- there was everybody going to meet the Mahatma, to pay homage to Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi.”

Bakha’s joy knows no bound. Mahatma’s mesmerizing speech has made Bakha hypnotized, spellbound; it heals the wounds and the bruises he has received in his encounter with the high-caste Hindu people. Though he is ignorant of Gandhi’s ideology and standpoint in the nationalist movement, he is well aware that he is the harbinger of radical reformation for the long-oppressed Dalits:

“I am an orthodox Hindu and I know that the Hindus are not sinful by nature,’ Bakha heard the Mahatma declaim. ‘They are sunk in ignorance. All public wells, temple, roads, schools, sanatoriums, must be declared open to the untouchables. And, if you all profess to love me, give me a direct proof of your love by carrying on propaganda against the observance of untouchability. Do this, but let there be no compulsion or brute force in securing this end. Peaceful persuasion is the only means. Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the Untouchables and the protection of the cow. When these two desires are fulfilled there is swaraj, and therein lies my soul’s deliverance. Maya God gives you strength to work out your soul’s salvation to the end.”

In spite of Mahatma’s inspired harangue, conflicting questions come across Bakha’s mind. Mahatma’s direction to the untouchable for purification brings suspicion in him. The conflict questions Mahatma’s ideological supremacy. Thought Bakha is in need of his father’s opinion and suggestion the conflict gives preference to the use of flush system as an appropriate substitute to get rid of stigmatization, marginalization and deprivation of self and identity.



“They claim to be Hindus. They read the scriptures. If, therefore, the Hindu oppress them, the Hindu religion, but in those who profess it. In order to emancipate themselves they have to purify themselves. They have to rid themselves of evil habits, like drinking liquor and eating carrion. But now, the Mahatma is blaming us, Bakha felt. That is not fair!’ He wanted to forget the last passages that he had heard.”

“I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us,’ he whispered to himself, ‘and all that the poet said perhaps I can find the poet some day and ask him about his machine.”

Anand’s purpose is perspicuous. He avidly aspires to unshackle the Dalits from the fetters of caste bondage. But he has no faith in the method of conversion. He advises the untouchables to change their profession; once their profession is changed they cannot be looked down upon as untouchables. The introduction of technology-based machinery, the flush system can relieve an outcaste like Bakha from his daily drudgery of cleaning latrines. An innocent, ignorant and Illiterate Bakha can understand what emancipation and deliverance is. He has no obsession with this life of degradation and demoralization. He does not want any more to be called an untouchable.

Conclusion

The analysis established that Dalits like Bakha are subjected to endless conflicts between multiple ideological assumptions of the traditional Hindu culture and the desperate attempts of the Dalits to recover their rights and identities. Society intervenes to prevent them from mounting the platform surrounding the well for taking water, from entering into temples, from touching any high-caste Hindu, from going to schools which were meant for the “babus, not for the lowly sweepers”; religion interferes in the hypocritical representations of Pundit Kalinath and Colonel Hutchinson to exploit them; politics intercedes to make the mass accept the ideological philosophy of a political party. Economical exploitation is the prerogative of the deceitful shopkeepers who deceive the untouchables knowing that they will not protest. Even they are compelled to repay compound interest for the money obtained on loan:

“...there had recently been a quarrel between the bania and his father on account of the compound interest Ganesh had demanded for the money Lakha had borrowed on the mortgage of his wife’s trinkets to pay for her funeral”

The endless conflict makes him aware and experienced. Bakha undertakes the metaphorical journey from innocence to experience. P.K. Rajan Says:

“Untouchable, with its fabulist narrative structure, dramatizes the tragedy of its central character, Bakha, by using the device of character-situation interpenetration which is the typical western story telling mode. This method accentuated by the Joycean structural synthesis of a single day’s stream of consciousness, tends to form what R.T. Robertson terms “an alternating pattern of experience and introspection” which firmly shapes the novel right from the beginning. It is through this method, borrowed from the western story-telling tradition, that Anand delineates the spiritual growth of his hero from innocence to awareness, and his emergence “from the anonymous mass into the quick of his individual life.”

Mulk Raj Anand has written *Untouchable* to represent the Dalit experience and to provide for the untouchables a place and position of prestige. The predominant plea in the novel is the absolute abolition of untouchability. Anand has faithfully depicted the discrimination within Hinduism and its effect on the Dalit protagonist. As a humanist, it was unbearable for him to see one exploited, oppressed and misbehaved on account of the rigid caste system. As a reformist he was eager for the reformation of Hinduism; he endeavoured to purge Hinduism of dogmatism which gave birth to hypocrisy, prejudice, deception, demarcation and dehumanization. As a socialist he advocated for a world of unity, equality and coexistence.

Well, we must destroy caste, we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations. We must recognize an equality of rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone. When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables. Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of status that is their right as useful members of the casteless and classless society.

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