

Mulk Raj Anand as an Excellent Delineator of Societal Curses and Evils in his Fictional World: A Brief Note

S. Divya Bharathi

Ph. D. Scholar,

Department of English & Comparative Literature,
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021, Tamil Nadu, India.

Received Jan. 12, 2018

Accepted Feb. 18, 2018

ABSTRACT

*This paper throws light on social issues and problems projected in M.R.Anand's fictional world and it is notable for his skilled depiction of the lives of the poor and downtrodden in the traditional Indian society. His novels **Coolie** and **Untouchable** expose the way of the existing evils in India. The various visible feature of language used by the writer is not only deplorable environment of the marginalized Indian society, but also the societal curses leveled on the downtrodden.*

Key words: Labour, untouchability, poverty, economic, condition of women, Religious hypocrisies.

Indian English fiction has its beginning with Bankim Chandra Chattopathya's *Raj Mohan's Wife* (1864), Nagesh Viswanatha Pai's *Padmini* (1903), T.Ramakrishna's *The Dive for Death* (1911), K.S.Venkata Ramani's *Murugan, The Tiller* (1927). Creative writers in Indian English fiction were so desirous of maintaining Indianness in their work of art that they shared rich experience of the tradition, culture and heritage. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

"Whatever be the language in which it is written, a novel by an Indian writer demands direct involvement in values and experiences which are valid in the Indian context" (Twice Born Fiction, 19).

In the words of C.D. Narasimhaiah, "What one has in mind is a shared tradition, a community of interests and sets of values that a people live by, all of which give a sense of identity to individual and nation" (The Swan and the Eagle, 18). Truly speaking, any talented writer can bend the language to his/her purpose, communicate the texture of the novel and create the native atmosphere. Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand have brought worldwide recognition to Indian English fiction by their traditional form of storytelling. Their portrayal of life is realistic and authentic. Falling in line with the thinking of those writers, Mulk Raj Anand has attempted his literary hand in projecting societal issues and problems in his fictional world.

Mulk Raj Anand, a society committed novelist, has produced a good deal of literature by writing more than a dozen novels and about seventy short stories and a host of essays and articles on a number of subjects. Religious hypocrisy, feudal system, East-West encounter, the place of women in the society, superstitions, poverty, hunger and exploitation are his common themes. Despite this galaxy of themes projected in his novels, Anand laid focus on the sufferings, misery and wretchedness of the poor as a result of the exploitation of the downtrodden class of the Indian society. In all such notable novels like *Coolie*, *Untouchable*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *The Sword and the Sickle* and *The Road*, M.R. Anand delineates poverty, hunger and exploitation as major themes. For instance, the novel *untouchable* covers the span from 1930 to 1940 when poverty, slavery and the inhuman exploitation of the masses were at the peak. It was Gandhi who had waged a war against the forces behind these evils. The novel describes a single day in the life of the protagonist Bakha, a scavenger boy. Bakha starts his day welcomed by the abuses of his father and is forced to clean the latrines with a brush and a basket. His sister Sohini goes to fetch water from the caste well where she is compelled to wait for a caste Hindu to draw water which is again a routine for her life. Pundit Kali Nath fills her pitcher with water and summons her, with an ill intention to clean the temple courtyard. Bakha, on the request of his father rushes to the town to clean the roads. While walking through the streets of the town, a caste Hindu gets defiled by his touch to which he tries to apologize. Joining his hands in humility, he stands deaf and dumb. The people gather around the scene and abuse Bakha. He pleads but no one feels pity for him. The defiled man gives a slap on Bakha's face and leaves the place. For the first time in his life, Bakha is made aware of his status as an untouchable. He feels insolent and rushes to the courtyard of the temple announcing his arrival aloud. While roaming outside the temple, he curiously looks into the temple. A Brahmin sees Bakha on the steps and shouts at him for polluting the temple. While climbing down the steps, he finds his sister Sohini standing in the courtyard frightened and speechless. She tells Bakha about the priest's attempt to molest her while she was cleaning his latrine. She further tells him that she screamed out of fear and the priest came out shouting that he had been defiled by an untouchable girl.

While wandering through the railway station, he hears the news of Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in the town. He rushes to Golbagh to hear Gandhi's speech. With the sight of Gandhi, he forgets all the miseries of the whole day. In his long speech, Gandhi expresses his wish to be reborn as an untouchable. He calls them 'Harijan' and the cleaners of Hindu religion. He also warns them against their bad habits and asks them to stop accepting the cooked food for their work. Through the conversation between the two pro and anti-Gandhi groups, Bakha comes to know that the only solution to eradicate untouchability in the use of machine or the flush system. In the words of Jha, "Anand is the first Indian novelist to have depicted in the novel from the stigma of this evil which isolates a man from his own society" (P 59). Not only the protagonist but also most of the minor characters in his novels belong to the low caste, downtrodden society. Mulk Raj Anand in his article "The Source of Protest in my Novels" says:

'I wished to create the folk whom I knew
intimately, from the lower depths, the lumpens
and the suppressed, oppressed, repressed, those
who have seldom appeared in our literature" (20).

All these characters embody a particular vision of reality which the novelist has assigned to them. They are normal, simple, credible human beings unaware of their social condition. In the preface to *Two Leaves and a Bud*, M.R. Anand says:

"All these heroes and the other men and women
.... were the reflection of the real people I had known
during my childhood and youth ... They were the flesh
of my flesh and blood of blood" (73).

Bakha's character is modeled after one of Anand's childhood friends, who was humiliated by his own mother for being a sweeper boy but whom Anand adored as a hero. Anand could never forget that sweeper boy and the insult and humiliation that he received by Anand's family. He gave voice to his views against the exploitation of a sweeper boy through the character of Bakha in his very first novel *Untouchable*. The novel ends with three solutions to the problem of untouchability – Christ, Gandhi and the flush system. The novel, thus, depicts untouchability as a social evil. It is a remarkable feature of the novels that Gandhiji appears in person to speak on the evil of untouchability. It enjoys immense popularity as a document of the injustice of Hindu society committed on the social out-castes.

As a pioneer novelist of India, M.R. Anand is the angry man of literature. He did in Indian fiction what Dickens did in English fiction. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly says: "As a novelist, Anand has been as effective almost as Dickens himself" (P 148). Anand's commitment in his novels is seen in his consistent effort to make his fiction a vehicle of his philosophy of humanism. He came to fiction through philosophy and it has given it depth and deep-rooted purposiveness. Humanism is the philosophy of man. It reveals man's essential dignity and nobility. According to his approach to man, man is a creative source of infinite possibilities. Anand's novels are an expression of this philosophy. He is the humanist who reveals the essential dignity of the underdogs of Indian society. Prof. P.P. Mehta says:

"Dr. Anand in his novels emphasizes the fact that nobility and dignity are not the monopoly of the rich. Mute inglorious Miltons and Cromwells are not uncommon in the ranks of the poor" (P 27).

This humanism is central to Anand's novels. The charge of propaganda is rejected by an artistic pervasiveness of humanism which peeps out of characters and situations which Anand favours personally. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* show this quality in abundance. Munoo and Bakha are innocent, dignified and lovable in spite of the conscious humiliation heaped on them. Anand relieves the lot of man by bestowing dignity on the victims. His humanism shows that man is man, be he a sweeper, a prince or coolie. Prof. Iyengar pays a tribute to his humanism. "It is this marvelous capacity to bring out the essential human element in such a variety of characters that makes Anand the laureate of humanity and his fiction cumulatively the Comedies humane of twentieth century India" (Gupta, ix).

As a realist novelist, Anand is free from the "East-past Complex". He does not write about the glories of past or the spiritual heritage of India as Raja Rao does in *The Serpent and the Rope*. His philosophy of humanism taught him to believe in here and now. Hence his themes are nothing but contemporary problems of India. As S.Z.H. Abidi has put it, "He has fought with social convention, religious hypocrisy and superstition. The subjects of his novels are untouchability exploitation, poverty and wretchedness, labour-problem, hunger and religious narrow fanaticism, condition of women, economic insecurity etc. His novels focus attention on the basic conditions in which man is living in modern times" (P 45). Novels like *Untouchable* and *Coolie* are fitting examples for this. According to Premila Paul, Bakha

serves as a mirror to the pathetic correction of the untouchables. He represents all those sweepers who are doomed to live life worse than the slaves. E.M.Forster in his preface to *Untouchable* rightly observes:

“... The slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse...” (P 10).

Bakha is an exploited person and a rebel. He is a scapegoat of the rigid caste system. Injustice inflicted upon him makes him rebellious. Excessive abuse and insult make him think about retaliation. At such moments, he feels like a tiger at a bay. Saros Cowsjee in her book *So Many Freedoms* rightly comments:

“But he is a tiger in a case, securely imprisoned by the conventions his superiors have built up to protect themselves against the fury of those whom they exploit” (P 52).

Bakha wants to protect but he who cleans the fifth of the people becomes aware of the filth around him. He realizes that he is surrounded by his own people who are meek, humble and have accepted exploitation as their fate. His father tries to calm him down by making him realize that such exploitation is not unknown to their caste. His sister, Sohini, also tries to pacify him by asking him to accept it as a part of their destiny. His inability to revolt should be perceived as an outcome of the oppression of the outcastes for thousands of years. His submission to the superiors who exploit him is the result of the urban slavery that he inherits. As exploitation is the major theme of *Untouchable*, it deals with different types of exploitations such as social, economic, political, religious and sexual exploitation. But social exploitation is at the root of all other exploitations. The novel is, no doubt, an inner conflict of an individual who is caught in the web of an age old caste system. P.K.Rajan in his studies on *Mulk Raj Anand* says:

“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 honour, hoping for a change” (P15).

Anand shows his concern over the organized social evils and curses in the society which is the cause of the miseries of the outcaste downtrodden. This social curse or evil is the real enemy of the society. Munoo is *Coolie* is also exploited to the core. Though Munoo is the protagonist, he is a flat passive character. He remains diffident and ineffective till the end. As Riemenscheider points out,

“Munoo is not the common type of hero we expect to find in a novel. In his opposition to society, he is passive while the society is active. Munoo does not build, his son own life which on the contrary, is built for him” (P 32).

Munoo symbolizes all those coolies who are victims of industrialization, beaten from pillar to post. S.A.Khan rightly says:

“He is one among the millions of coolies tested and formulated by my rid forces of class distinction exploitation and dehumanization.... the story of Munoo is quiet essentially the story of every exploited individual in India and the pattern of his life is intended to show the pitilessness that lies imbedded in the lives of millions of people who are condemned to lead a life of an unending sage of social depredation” (P 30).

To conclude, Mulk Raj Anand’s intention is to awaken the exploited, suppressed, dehumanized classes of the society and he opines that exploiting the proletariat has been our national sin which we have been committing for centuries together. What is understood is that Anand is an adept in highlighting the fact even the untouchables are human beings who should be treated as ‘human beings’ at all costs to establish a stable society.

Works Cited:

- 1.Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. London: Penguin Books, 1940.
- 2.Anand, M.R. *The Swan and the Eagle*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1968.
- 3.Anand, Mulk Raj. *Coolie*. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1972.
- 4.Abidi, S.Z.H. Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie: A Critical Study*. Bareilly : PBD, 1994.
- 5.Cowsjee, Saros. *Mulk Raj Anand and His Critics*. The Banasthali Patrika, 12 Jan 1969.
- 6.Gupta, G.S. Balarama. *Mulk Raj Anand*. Bareilly: PBD, 1974.
- 7.Iyengar, K.R.S. *The Novel Today*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962.
- 8.Mehta, P.P., *Indo-Anglian Fiction: An Assessment*.
- 9.Mohan, Ramesh. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978.
- 10.Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Twice Born Fiction*. New Delhi: Arnold – Heinemann, 1971.
- 11.Nicholson, Kai. *Social Problems in The Indo-Anglian and the Anglo-India*. India: Jaico, 1972.
- 12.Singh, R.S. *India : Novel in English*. New Delhi: Heinemann, 1977.