



Oppression of the Subaltern: A Depiction by Mulkraj Anand in his Untouchable

Aravind R

Assistant Professor, Dept of English, Vidyavardhaka First Grade College, Mysore, India

Received: 20 Mar 2023; Received in revised form: 14 Apr 2023; Accepted: 20 Apr 2023; Available online: 30 Apr 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Anand is largely remembered for his depictions of the oppressed class in India. He had got an international acclaim because of his perceptive insight into the lives of the oppressed class in India. Untouchable, being his first novel that was published in 1935, is well known for his analysis of the exploitation and subservient, pathetic conditions of the lower class people that he depicts through a character like Bhaka. Though the novel presents incidents that happened in a day in the protagonist's life, by large it speaks about the oppression of the lower castes by the upper castes that was very much visible in the colonial as well as the postcolonial India. The novel mainly focuses on the subaltern that was and also is the most burning issue in the Indian subcontinent. The novel displays the pretensions, snobbery and flamboyance gestures of the upper class against the lower classes*

Keywords— *Oppression, subaltern, under privilege, untouchable, Caste.*

The novel *Untouchable* presents a remarkable opening for the Indian English writer to investigate new world of subalterns. It states a hope both for the untouchable Hindus and India, bringing the philosophy of Gandhi which efforts to raise consciousness with the purpose of removing the caste system as well as hierarchical system of the Indian culture. They are common victims and suppressive as they do not have the economic and political power to fight back the upper-class people's supremacy. Mulkraj Anand is a prominent English writer of his era. He is belonged to the literal spectrum of the 'Big Three' of the Indo-Anglican fiction. He raised his pen against the class and caste systems of our country during the decade of 1930s. He was born on 12 December 1905 in Peshawar, the capital city of North West Frontier Province of India before the country's partition. He is considered extraordinary novelist for his effort to represent the deprived and the subjugated people who are struggling for their existence. Mulk Raj Anand published his first novel *Untouchable* in 1935, which concentrates on the miserable life of subalterns who attempt to change their existing state by entering the centre from the margin, but their endeavour falls apart when it comes to face reality. The depiction of the subalterns in

this novel is the crucial subject to be analysed critically. Anand echoed the real situation of Subalterns, their mentality and reality. In the Indian cultural context, subalternity occurs on the basis of caste, class and gender. The caste system has played a great destruction to the people of our country. Under the British rule, the situation was not different. The caste system is deep-rooted in our country from the time immemorial. Untouchability, a social evil, is by-product of caste system.

The term 'subaltern' does not mean today what it meant in 1982. Recently the term Subaltern is used in broad perspective as synonym for minorities, subjugated women, refugees, colonial subjects, the illiterate, and children whose voices have been muted. The Postcolonial writers have been trying to bring consciousness to the oppressed, marginalized or so-called Subalterns. This consciousness shall help them to move from margins to the centre of the society. Untouchability began with the religion of Hinduism and later it blows out into the origin of the Hindu societies in India. Mostly, the aristocratic people like Brahmins, use the religion to defend a strongly defined ordered structure of society to control the

economically lower-class people. They are common victims and they accept suppression as they do not have the economic and political power to fight back the upper-class people's supremacy. They are not able to get the voice to speak out their condition and portray themselves before the world. The concept of subaltern covers not only the untouchables but also all the poor and marginalized groups of people. These subalterns have very few chances to change their fate in society which is measured by the upper class and closes the options like consciousness, education and equal rights to raise their status.

A nation, a country, a society or a community can never be prosperous where people treat each other on the basis of religion, caste or creed. Where certain people try to get hold of anything and everything and thus deprived the rest of the masses even of their basic commodities like food, shelter, water etc. That is what prompted Mulkh Raj Anand to write

Untouchable. One of the prime concerns of the novelist is to highlight the course of the marginalized. He is not a writer of imagination but of reality, which he had found and experienced in India. He has seen India dividing into two conflicting forces- the people governing or caste Hindus and the people governed or marginalized. He wished to write about the folk whom he had known from very close. The novel peeps into the life of an outcaste, Bakha who represents the misery and inhuman treatment of the marginalized and the have-nots before independence. The novelist narrates the incident that occurred in the life of Bakha, which spans over a single day but in reality every day of Bakha's life is full of such incidents. He is not an individual but a type which is always underestimated and oppressed by the caste Hindus. Bakha feels like a caged bird that

flutters its wings for a free flight but he finds himself helpless to do so. Bakha is chained in such a suffocation partly due to the surroundings, uncongenial and unhygienic, where Bakha has to live and partly due to the treatment which he met at the hands of caste Hindus. We are given the detailed description of the surroundings: "The absence of drainage system had through the rain of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out most offensive smell" (P. 11)

By portraying Bakha, as an outcaste, the novelist has hammered hard on the Hindu religion which is constituted on the basis of various castes. Though this caste conflict was on its summit before Independence, it is still seen much or less, almost in every sphere of life

Literature is a tool that draws the openness and fight for subjugated people. Like other literatures from different places of the world, Indian English writers have marked

those subaltern issues with special attention in their works. Gandhi realized that the people of India should be freed not only from the British rule but also from the depravity of the caste system. Gandhi had made tough efforts to travel all over the country to spread the message of love and brotherhood and had appealed to the people of

our country not to indulge in inhuman activities of the caste system. Anand pictures this in the ending while Gandhi comes to Bulandshah village and speaks to the people in Golbagh.

The fight against the injustice of casteism is in fact not new to the Indian writers, to date back Basavanna, a 12th-century Indian statesman, philosopher, poet, social reformer also had spread social awareness through his poetry, popularly known as *Vachanas*. He rejected gender or social discrimination, superstitions and rituals to every person regardless of their birth, to be a constant reminder of one's bhakti (devotion) to Shiva.

Basava taught that every human being was equal, irrespective of caste, and that all forms of manual labour were equally important. Sharanas welcomed anyone, whatever occupation he or she might have been born in, to convert and be reborn into the larger family of Shiva devotees and then adopt any occupation he or she wanted. Basava insisted on ahimsa or non-violence and vehemently condemned all forms of sacrifices, human or animal

. This movement not only had all the general characteristics of the bhakti movements but also managed to grow beyond them. Everyone associated with the movement was a devotee whose aim was nothing but realization of god. This otherworldly outlook however did not prevent them from addressing the issues faced by the people in the real world. They thought and worked hard to improve the prevailing social conditions. The movement produced more than two hundred people who composed vachanas (couplets). Let us note the professions of a few of these poets – boat rowers, barbers, tailors, fishermen, wood-cutters and hunters to count a few. Many dalits like Maadara Chennayya too have composed vachanas. More than thirty women have composed vachanas. Women poets like Akka Mahadevi were also independent thinkers who posed many hard questions to the society. Urulilingappa and Kalavve were a dalit couple and they both composed vachanas. Sankavve a prostitute, is perhaps one of the earliest women writers of India. Compose vachanas still remains a mystery. Basavanna whom Allamma describes as a symbol of the "energy of the age", was the central personality of the movement and an inspiration.

The casteism which prevailed from the chronicle and the rotten, evil practice of the Indian society, people used to see them from generation to generation. It steadily became a civic norm and custom to be followed by every upper class and lower class who are living in a society. This acceptance of the devastating casteism is adopted and accepted by everyone who are doing this discrimination proudly, caustically or those who miserably, vulnerably suffering from this. Mulk Raj Anand illustrates this acceptance through his work and incidence where Sohini, his sister after getting molested and criticized by the society as blamed because of hypocritical or treachery by Kali Nath she accepted the humiliation. She said to her brother Bakha that it is ok to go to a home as we are of lower castes, no one listens to our voice. When Bakha came home and told all the incident to his father he ignored as he knew the ritual and evil humiliating custom which shows his fear and acceptance of this system prevailed in Indian society. Another incidence which demonstrates the acceptance and fear is when the long humiliating and ugly events happen in Bakha's life like being bitten by the upper cast, humiliated by a lady and many more. He went to his friend where he shared his day events a friend Chota in an angered tone reply that we have to do against such inhumane and evil conduct done by the upper class.. .

Mulk Raj Anand is a writer of social realism and a spokesman of the underprivileged and the poor. Most of the major issues that prevailed in colonial Indian society such as caste-class based discrimination, exploitation, poverty, child labour are presented through the child heroes. As a child, Anand himself was the witness of the bloodshed in Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. Once as a boy he was even apprehended by the British police for breaking the laws of curfew of which he hardly knew the meaning. All these incidents instilled a deep sense of protest against Britishers. Mulk Raj Anand's works chiefly deal with the sufferings and agonies of child protagonists. As a writer he experimented with child psyche. What makes his writings distinct is the fact that dealing with the adult psyche is an easy task, but the portrayal of a child's psyche is surely a daunting duty. Anand's depiction of child hero is vivid because he himself lived with them a lot during his childhood.

As far as the theme in the Anand's work is concerned, it is also a fine experimentation. As Anand is a writer who is the eyewitness of colonial, post-colonial period. He depicts issues like exploitation by Britishers, poverty, impoverishment etc., before him no Indian writer in English did dare to choose them in his work as subjects

Anand is thought to be a writer who instead of imitating the Western style and models invented his own styles and techniques with an Indian flavour. The fine use of Indian English, portrayal of the characters, child heroes and the themes makes Anand works distinct and prominent one. These strategies immediately capture reader's attention and leave the reader with imprinted picture in his head. Moreover, all these experimentations set up the platform for the coming writers in Indian English literature.

Mulk Raj Anand depicted the practice of untouchability, essentially a matter of pretentious religiosity and exploitation. By a very well worked out technique of dramatic irony, Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* exposed the social realism in contemporary Hindu society. Mass society theory argues that social movements are made up of individuals in large societies who feel insignificant or socially detached. Here we take our protagonist Bakha who is an outcast in the society and he has an oppressed feeling of protest in himself this wrong approach of the society. Anand in 'Untouchable' apparently gives three solutions to wipe out the problem of untouchability. They are Christianity, Gandhian way and the last is the use of Mechanical Device (flush system) to clean latrines. The non-discriminatory attitude of the non-Hindus makes the untouchables realise and tends to draw them closer to the non-Hindus such as the Christian missionaries who exploit the caste differences and untouchability among the Hindus to draw the untouchables into their religious fold. It is over seventy years of independence but the problem of caste persists even today. Till now we are not able to wipe and clean the slate of social inequality. But we can proudly say that Mulkraj Anand's *Untouchable* ignited the voice of social protest against this evil practice.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anand, Raj, Mulk. *Untouchable*. Penguin Books India: New Delhi, 2001.
- [2] Forster, E. M. Preface. *Untouchable*. By Mulk Raj Anand. New Delhi: Arnold Associates, 1935. 7 - 10.
- [3] Iyenger, K.R.Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*, Bombay: Asian Publishing House, 1973.
- [4] Naik, M.K. *Perspectives on Indian Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publication, 1985.