

An Expression of Humanism in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Special Reference to *Untouchable*



Dr. Ritu Sharma

Associate Professor, Dyal Singh College Karnal

The term 'Indo-Anglian' is used to denote original literary creation in the English language by Indians. Today there are a large number of educated Indians who use the English language as a medium of creative exploration and expression of their experiences of life. Their writings have now developed into a substantial literature in its own right and it is this substantial body of literature which is referred to as Indo-Anglian literature.

The Indo-Anglian writing has been established as a separate genre as distinguished from "Anglo-Indian writings" and "Indo-English writings." This way of writing has been enriched by some writers as Sarojini Naidu, Tagore, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Aurobindo Ghosh and Mahatma Gandhi. Today a number of eminent Indians such as R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao continue to write in English and Indo-Anglian literature continues to grow and flourish and attain higher and higher peaks of excellence. Mulk Raj Anand is one of the pioneers of Indo-Anglian writings.

Anand is crusader against injustice of every type. He set his face against the exploitation of the poor by any class, this included, the British masters, the village money-lenders, the businessmen, the native rulers, priests and tea-planters. So acute is his sympathy for the poor, the oppressed that in his novels we sometimes hear the author's cry with anguish against the injustice so common in those days.

Untouchable (1935) is a sociological novel which seeks to stress the evils of untouchability by focusing attention on the miserable plight, suffering, poverty and degradation of a large section of Indian society. This evil has been highlighted by studying what happens to the soul of Bakha on a single eventful day. Bakha as an untouchable seeks his freedom in the infallibility of caste discrimination, with its hypocrisy, cruelty and inhumanity. He stands passive and bewildered at the immensity of horror, hoping for a change. Bakha, thus, is a symbolic figure, a universal figure, a larger than life figure, who stands for a large section of Indian society which has been doomed to suffering since times immemorial. *Untouchable* is the story not of Bakha's suffering alone, but of the sufferings of all the untouchables as a class. This novel deals with the lives and fortunes of humble scavenger.

Anand, on the threshold of a literary career, makes an effective protest against the stigma of pollution attached to untouchables. M.K. Naik says:

He exhibits a sure grasp of the psychology of both the caste Hindu and untouchable ... his picture of relationship between them is objective and balanced.¹

Thus in *Untouchable*, Anand is deeply concerned with a social problem of national dimension and takes up a role of a writer committed to the eradication of the evils of society.

Anand observed that a big section of society called untouchable lived in the midst of surroundings, which though imaginable in different terms after the long passage of time since the days of *Manusmariti*, are no less miserable. They were treated as the outcasts and they were compelled to live a sub-human life. Sweepers and cobblers were regarded as outside the fold of Hindu castes, even though they firmly believe in the canons of Hindu religion. Thus, Bakha, the hero of *Untouchable* belongs to the same degraded section of society. Anand's conscience and his belief in the dignity of man, even from the lowest strata of society, made him to paint a true

An Expression of Humanism in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Special Reference to *Untouchable*

picture of the exploitations of this section of society.

Untouchable depicts a heart-rending picture of the plight of the untouchables in the caste system and exposes the callousness and hypocrisy of caste Hindus. Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, is a child of the outcaste colony:

Where there are no drains, no light, no waters of the marshland, where people live among the latrines of townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere; of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night pitch-dark.²

Bakha's living in such unhygienic conditions not only destroys him physically but also hurts him mentally and emotionally, for he nurses a sense of inferiority "when he comes into contact with the people of higher castes.

The novel dramatizes the events and happenings of one particular day, covering sixteen hours in the life of Bakha. The happenings are mostly psychological in nature, and bring out the hero's prolonged torments, punctuated by small moments of joy. Bakha is a child of modern outlook and progressive sensibility. He is sensitive, ambitious and non-conformist. He is conscious of his rights, and wants to rise on the social ladder by getting education. Being an outcaste, he is unable to join a school: "The masters wouldn't teach the outcastes lest their fingers which guided the students across the text should the leaves of the outcaste's books and they be polluted." (31) Bakha just cannot understand why he should be regarded socially inferior. He worked in the barracks of Europeans, where the sepoys did not hesitate to touch him. But the caste Hindus treat him differently. Bakha has an urge to look like to be in the 'fashun'. But as the day dawns, his work of cleaning the latrines begins, his dreams notwithstanding. His sister, Sohini is also particular after fashion. One day she goes to the village well to fetch water. While she is drawing water from the well, Pundit Kali Nath, the priest, feels attracted by her youthful looks, and driving away her companions, he pours water into her bowl and indicates that she should come to his home later in the day to clean the courtyard. When she goes there he makes improper suggestions to her, and as she starts screaming, he shouts, "polluted, polluted!" and gathers a crowd of indignant high-caste people. In the meantime, Bakha also reaches the scene, having finished sweeping the streets. When Sohini tells him about her molestation by the Pundit, his first reaction is "I will go and kill him." (55) But he finds himself unable in taking action because of his awareness of his low social standing. He is furious but he swallows his anger. He sends his sister away and starts to collect bit of bread at the house of well-to-do people. He gets more of bitter experiences during food collecting and returns home. He is burning in the fire of anger against the so-called upper-caste people. The frustration of his desire to be recognised as a respectable individual gives birth to a spirit of revolt in him. He shouts before his father:

They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt. That pundit *in* the temple tried to molest Sohini and then came shouting, "Polluted, Polluted." The woman of the big house in the silversmiths gully threw the bread at me from fourth storey. I won't go down to the town again. I have done with job." (70)

Thus, Anand shows that Bakha is individual with essential human ingredients. He is extremely conscious of his place in the society. He does not like his father, accept the caste realities in a docile and fatalistic manner. His mind is preoccupied with his humiliated lot in a conservative caste-ridden society. He simmers with discontent and dreams of social justice. This remarkable capacity of Bakha to see through the sham of casteism, and to aspire to see the end of evil. It is a different thing that even such a bold person as Bakha finds himself unable to get his due.

A humanist is not in favour of escaping life's realities. Instead of rejecting life, he is in favour of accepting it. Anand draws a realistic picture of society that how superstitious people in this society are who believe that by touching an untouchable, they will also become untouchable. They feel they have been polluted by so much as

An Expression of Humanism in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Special Reference to *Untouchable*

being touched by an untouchable. The untouchables while walking through the streets are supposed to announce their traditional approach - "Posh, posh sweeper coming." When Bakha goes to sweep the market and temple courtyard, he passes by a shop of sweetmeat-seller and his mouth waters to take some sweets. He buys *Jalebies* worth four *annas*, and this sets in a series of humiliations and curses. Much delighted and tasting sweets he forgets to announce his approach and accidentally touches a caste Hindu, who, in turn, abuses him and gives him a slap. The *Jalebies* in his hand fall down in the dust. The so-called polluted Lala shouts:

You've touched me... I will have to bathe now and purify myself anyhow. Well, take this for your damned impudence, son of a swine. (41)

There is another incident in the novel which would serve as an example of the hypocrisy of the caste Hindus. When Bakha goes to collect food, a lady throws down the bread from the fourth storey, soiling it with dust and filth on the road. A minute earlier the same lady had rushed down to welcome and request a Sadhu to bless her son who was ill. Anand criticises the people who are superstitious and give food to idle Sadhu as charity but hesitate to feed the untouchables.

In another incident, Bakha is accused of "polluting" the little injured boy when he escorts him to his house. The indignant mother says:

Vay, eater of your masters! What have you done? You have killed my son! she wailed, flying her hands across her breasts and turning blue and red with fear. "Give me my child! You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son. (106)

The lady is so hypocritical that instead of acknowledging the help rendered to her boy by Bakha, she hurls abuses upon him. The lady does not praise him for endangering his life to save her child. On the contrary, he is condemned for polluting the child by lifting him into his lap. The society refuses to recognise an untouchable's sentiments, even his act of kindness.

In *Untouchable* Anand is on sure ground, as he is denouncing a practice of traditional Hindu society which deserves wholesale condemnation. But it should not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Anand is painting a distorted picture of society. His picture of the relationship between the caste Hindus and the untouchables is objective and balanced. His condemnation of untouchability is effective because it comes out of a total control of all the aspects of the problem. He very well understands the respective psychology of both the untouchable and the caste Hindu. He does not fall a prey to the obvious temptation of overstating his case and of dividing his characters neatly into sheep and goats. "His caste Hindus are not all bullies and tyrants; nor are all his untouchables admirable; nor yet is the lie of his untouchable hero a sage of unrelieved misery."³

Humanism sees man as man, and man cannot be all good or all evil. In spite of all his fault and weaknesses, everyman deserves some respect. In *Untouchable*, Bakha is though not a passive character yet having grown since birth in a corrupt social order, he has come unconsciously to accept it:

Bakha is after all not a very passive character. Whenever he is insulted, especially when he is hit by the passer-by, he is so deeply hurt that he feels like hitting back. But he restrains himself, and one of the reasons for this forced restraint is that he has not yet been able to shake off the sense of servility and meekness that weighs heavy on his shoulders as an accumulated burden of centuries of tradition.⁴

An Expression of Humanism in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Special Reference to *Untouchable*

Bakha is aware of the limitations of the given social structure. He is ready to rebel against the inhuman oppression and injustice, but he also knows that since others accept their lot passively, his individual protest would not change the social order. In Bakha's passive acceptance of his destiny: "what is the use... they would ill-treat us even if we shouted" The dominant sense of futility is not a consequence of inertia or ignorance. Nor is it a defeat of Bakha's conscience. Saras Cowasjee praises the novelist for not showing Bakha romantically active, "Bakha in moment of action has come and gone, and it is in his failure to act that the fidelity of the novel lies."⁵

It does not mean that Bakha accepts the given situation and he sets himself according to the wave, but actually he tries to improve his lot as well. The achievement of the novelist lies in imbuing his hero Bakha with a deeper sense of awareness of his position in society. Therefore, he is static and dynamic at the same time. He is static because he is alone, weak and helpless and his weakness and helplessness is that of all untouchables and is dynamic because he tries to understand the causes of his plight and in his own ways wages battle against the social and economic forces that deny him his human rights. He himself is a man of integrity, smart and hardworking and is alive as much to love and sympathy as to hate and suffering. Since he is denied education and the advantages of communion with the elite, he is mentally backward, but he shows readiness to understand everything. It is true that Bakha meets some wicked persons like Pt. Kali Nath. Yet contrasted with the callousness of this person, is the humanity of Havaladar Charat Singh, who treats Bakha kindly and asks him to have tea with him. Bakha says to himself:

For this man, I wouldn't mind being a sweeper all my life. I would do anything for him. (96)

When Charat Singh asks him to put some pieces of coal in his chilm, Bakha is surprised. For a moment he doubted whether Charat Singh was conscious:

He might be forgetful and suddenly realise what he had done? Did he forget that I am a sweeper? He couldn't have done, I was just talking to him about my work. And he saw me this morning. How could he have forgotten? (97)

When Charat Singh gives him a new stick to play with, Bakha was overcome by his kindness.

Strange! Strange! Wonderful! Kind man! I didn't know he was so kind. I should have known. He always has such a humorous way about him! Kind, good man! He gave me a new stick, a brand new stick! (100)

There is another incident of humanism which Lakha tells to Bakha. Once Bakha lay ill in his childhood. His father, Lakha ran several times to the house of Hakim Bhagwan Das to persuade him to medically examine the boy, who lay on death bed and to give medicine to save the life of the dying boy. But being a sweeper, Lakha had to stand at a respectful distance. But at last, the heart of Hakimji moved and thus, Bakha's life was saved.

The ruling class also come in for criticism for committing atrocities upon the poor people and compelling them to lead a sub-human life. English, after years in India, have learnt only some useful imperatives and sweer-words such as "jao (go away); jaldi karo (be quick); sur ka bacha (son of a pig); kute ka bacha (son of a dog).⁽¹¹⁴⁾ They have not tried to understand the wounded psyche of the untouchables. The missionary's wife sums up, the attitude of English people towards the native:

Oh, is that what you've been doing, going to these blackies again. (122)

Further, she expresses her hatred for the untouchables when she scolds her husband. "I can't keep waiting

An Expression of Humanism in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Special Reference to *Untouchable*

for you all day, while you go messing about with all those dirty banghies And chamars. (123) The missionary himself in the novel, for all his genuine efforts, has failed to transplant himself to the Indian soil, and the presence of his irreligious wife right in his house makes a mockery of his attempt at proselytizing the heathens. Saras Cowasjee says:

Like Bakha, Hutchinson too in a way is an outcaste;
one alienated from the British residents of the city
and driven from home by his card playing and hard-
drinking wife.⁶

Like Anand, other Indian social reformers had strongly condemned the practice of untouchability - the most important expression of the Hindu caste system. Gandhi also condemned it saying: "Untouchability is the greatest blot on Hinduism."⁷ It is against the Shastras. It is against the fundamental principles of humanity. It is against the dictates of reason that a man should by mere reason of birth, be forever regarded as an untouchable. The Hindu references have come to the conclusion that it has no support in the Hindu Shastras taken as a whole. Therefore, very much influenced by Gandhiji's ideas, Anand too heard the cry of untouchables who want to escape from exploitation, which they have to undergo because of religion and society in which they are firmly rooted, but are unable to do so. Anand believes in the dictum of 'art for the sake of man.' The novel, for him is an instrument for the enlightenment of man and for the betterment of his lot, a means for the expression of his love, sympathy and compassion.

In consonance with the Shelleyan hope for better future and Tennyson's aphorism "The old order changeth, yielding place to new" is Anand's larger belief that the dated and decadent institutions have in any case to go from our society, which of course, does not mean that all tradition is meant to be thrown overboard. Unfortunately, ever after years of independence, the lot of the poor untouchables in India has not much improved. They are still discriminated against and used almost literally as the beasts of burden by the upper-caste people. Sometimes they are butchered like sheep and goats in large numbers in some parts of our country.

There is of course, nothing in the situation today which would either counter or improve upon the ingenious way out offered by Anand's novel as long back in the thirties. There is also nothing to eclipse the ray of hope for better future which Bakha perceives in the introduction of the machine. Apparently, Bakha and his tribe may have to remain untouchables for many more years to come, but a new sense of self respect has been ushered in which will bring lustre and dignity to the Bakhas of tomorrow. E.M. Forster aptly sums up the ending of the novel:

Bakha returns to his father and his wretched bed,
thinking now of the Mahatma, now of the machine.
His Indian day is over and the next day will be like
it but on surface of the earth, if not in the depth of
the sky, a change is at hand.⁸

REFERENCES

- 1) MK Naik, Mulk Raj Anand (New Delhi : Arnold Heinemann, 1973), p.29
- 2) Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (New Delhi : Arnold Heinemann, 1981), p 7 (All the subsequent references to the novel have been taken from this edition and the page numbers have been given in parenthesis after the quotation.)
- 3) MK Naik, Mulk Raj Anand, p 31.
- 4) G.S. Balarama Gupta, *Mulk Raj Anand : A Study of His Fiction in Humanist Perspective* (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1974) 32-33.
- 5) Saras Cowasjee, *Mulk Raj Anand: An Appraisal*, Perspectives on Mulk Raj Anand, ed. K.K. Sharma, (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1978) 33.
- 6) Saras Cowasjee, *Mulk Raj Anand: An Appraisal*, pp.34-35
- 7) Saras Cowasjee, *Mulk Raj Anand: An Appraisal*, p 134
- 8) E.M. Forster, The Preface to *Untouchable*, 8.