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Untouchable and Coolie: the Soul of Social Realism

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ABSTRACT

*Mulk Raj Anand is very well-known as an Indian novelist, distinguished writer, reformer, art critic, editor, journalist, a short story writer and political activist. He opened a new section of writers of fiction along with Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan and produced a great deal of English literature and his mastery in the realistic and sympathetic portrayal of the exploited class of Indian society marks his genius as a socially committed novelist. That's why he is not only known as India's Charles Dickens but also considered the messiah of the have-nots, unloved, down-trodden and unwanted. The exploitation of the down-trodden in Indian society made him focus his attention on their miserable and pathetic condition and formed the major theme of his works. His writings reflect his urgent social concern, preoccupations and the social impulse and made the reader to be immediately aware of the exploitation faced by the down-trodden through the heart-throbbing description of their wretched state. Painted with the colors of social realism Mulk Raj Anand's two novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie* reflect the hard-core reality of the Indian society of early decades of twentieth century.. Written with a purpose both these novels condemn the modern capitalistic Indian society and feudal system for the shameless and tragic exploitation of the poor and underdog as there is nothing but a true, real and bitter reflection of the society in both the novels dealing with a similar central theme of social exploitation, the exploitation of the down-trodden and the under-privileged because of the curse of untouchability, poverty, hunger, child labour, social governance, social set-up of society, customs, religious belief, prejudices and the suffering of the Indian masses by the forces of capitalism, industrialism and colonialism. The present paper shows the true colours of social realism in *Untouchable* and *Coolie*; the epic-like novels of M. K. Anand to strike a cord in the hearts of the conscientious Indians through a beautiful and real-to-life portrayal of the exploited masses of Indian society.*

Keywords: *Social Realism; Untouchability; Class Conflict; Child Labour.*

1.0 Introduction

As a realist Anand has not only carried his readers along but also won their confidence and established a close and harmonious relationship with them as well as with his characters. Real life that forms the theme of Anand's novels is nothing but social realism. He has painted the elements of human nature; the common emotions of mankind like tears, anger, joy, sorrow, pity, sympathy, compassion and so on with great delight.

Untouchable and *Coolie* are the sagas of the miseries and sufferings of the unique underdogs - Bakha and Munoo created by Anand like Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Premchand's

Godan. Both the protagonists sail in the same boat as far as personal suffering is concerned. But neither they nor their fate is responsible for their exploitation but the fellow human and the social surroundings from which they still have great and immortal hopes for the betterment of life.

The idea of untouchability as a social evil obsessed the minds of men in the 1930's. Gandhi called the untouchables harijan ("men of God") and fought almost single-handed for the eradication of the evil of untouchability. Through this revolutionary novel Anand projects all untouchables in India and their day-to-day problems in real life. The realistic description of what Anand himself has seen and presented throughout the novel makes it a slice from life without any modification.

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With accuracy Anand evoked the local color of the novel with the photographic realism to describe the problem of untouchability-the social curse.

Untouchable is basically an epic of misery of the individual caught in the net of the age old caste system but at the same time, the novel has a tragic beauty of its own. For Anand filth and dirt is as much a part of life as beauty, cleanliness and decency. It is not that he loves ugliness but realism demands it if it is that in actual life.

That's why he has not hesitated to introduce the neglected stratum of society in his novel. In his preface to Untouchable E.M. Forster called Mulk Raj Anand's first novel Untouchable, indescribably clean though criticized by news-papers in London as „a dirty work“ untouchable deals with different types of exploitations such as social, economic, political and sexual exploitation, as exploitation is its major theme but social exploitation is at the root of all other exploitations that refers to the class discrimination on the basis of birth, which gives some castes undue advantage over other castes. It is an inner conflict of an individual who is caught in the web of an age old caste system. P. K. Rajan in his Studies in Mulk Raj Anand says, it is the individual's quest for freedom in a social system of ruthless exploitation

In Untouchable he brought fictional life to his boyhood companion, the untouchable sweeper boy – Bakha his hero through his minute observation as if he has spent a day with Bakha to make it very much real and true and builds round him a spiritual crisis broad enough to embrace the whole of India in a single day's action and captures Bakha's pride in his work of cleaning latrines.

According to Premila Paul, Bakha serves as a mirror to the pathetic correlation of the untouchables and represents all those sweepers who are doomed to live life worse than the slaves.

Every aspect of the novel reflects a very true picture of social realism. Anand creates sympathy for the low caste who clean dirt are treated like dirt by the high castes. The novel begins with a harsh realistic picture of the outcastes' colony and makes the theme of the novel – untouchability itself very realistic. The description of the outcaste colony in the beginning of the novel reveals not only poverty but also the subhuman level of their existence

There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water

carriers, the grass cutters and other out castes from Hi the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks and society A brook ran near the lane

The castes which look after the cleanliness of the high castes are destined to live in dirt.

Anand has used real Indian words to narrate the humiliation and his pen picture has great quality to make the novel real. Indian tone makes Anand's use of words very realistic:

“Men came one after another, towards the latrines. Most of them were Hindus, naked, except for the loin-cloth, brass jugs in hand and with the sacred thread twisted round their left ears.”

His use of literal translation of Punjabi exclamations and swear-words shows his real portrayal of Punjabi characters and realistic presentation of Punjabi life with great minuteness and present the convincing and credible accounts of the social manners, customs, ideas and beliefs of Punjab. There is a frequent use of the expressions like “Rape-mother”, “Rape-sister”, “Wha Guru”, “Ri daughter of a Pig” in the novel.

The abusive words ; “ low-caste vermin”, “Swine”, “Cock eyed son of a bow-legged Scorpion”, “dog”, “brute”, “dirty dog”, “Son of a bitch”, “Son of a dog”, “Offspring of a pig” etc thrown on lonely and helpless Bakha by the people who gather around him, reveal their polluted mind.

Outcastes are treated as subhuman species between humans and dogs .Even the high caste women treat the outcastes worse than animals. As, they do not allow them to touch them though they touch even the stinking animals like cows and bulls:

“Vay Bakhiya, take this. Here's your bread coming down.' And she flung it at him.”

Even Anand's narration of Bakha's desire to look like Britishers is very much real to the colonial mind of Indian untouchable. The hypocrisy of the high caste shop keepers who manipulates the scales to cheat the outcastes knowing that they will not protest and accept the money paid by the outcaste by splashing water on it and throw at them the things they buy.

When Bakha failed to announce himself as usual and „pollutes“ a caste Hindu unconsciously in return receives the torrent of abuses;

“Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach!”

But the heart compassionate final outburst from Bakha makes us feel as if Anand was waiting for that;

“They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt..... I won’t go down to the town again. I have done with this job”.

Anand also throw light on the hypocrisy and lustfulness of the pretentious so called priest through the character of Pt Kalinath who has a strong sexual desire with Sohini, an untouchable though believes to be polluted by the touch of untouchable. This age old tyranny and injustice done to untouchable in India can be seen when pt. Kalinath fails to molest sohini and raises an alarm of;

“Polluted, Polluted, Polluted!” shouted the Brahmin below.....”

The helplessness of a brother who curses himself to have such a beautiful sister presents a true and real picture of the society in a beautifully interwoven piece of narrative art:

“So beautiful! So beautiful and so accursed! I wish she had been the ugliest woman in the world. Then no one would have teased her!”

Anand expresses his anger, agony and despair of the exploitation of the outcastes in the name of religion and held Hindu religion itself responsible for this social discrimination. Brahmin priests and Mahants who are the so called custodians of religion keep themselves away from the shadows of the outcastes but do not hesitate to molest their girls. The molestation of the untouchables by the high caste is very common throughout the countryside of India.

They look at the low caste women as objects of sexualsatisfaction. As, both the superiority and the inferiority complex are too deeply rooted in the high caste and the low caste respectively. That’s why the indecent aggression of the priest towards the untouchable girl is tolerated by them.

Through the temple incident Anand successfully shown the potential of the outcastes to hit back as well as the cowardliness of the high caste exploiters also in which the Pandit levels the charge of defiling against her and but disappears in the crowd when he fails in his attempt to molest Sohini. Even the pompous behaviour of Colonial Hunchinson, a Christian priest is also not quite different from that of the Hindu Pundit who takes advantage of Bakha’s miserable condition and tries to attract him towards Christianity. But failed in that.

Anand as a social reformist and scientific humanistic projects real theme, real problem and real solution in the novel. Through his concern for the downtrodden he has raised the issues, realize the reader to have pity and compassion for untouchables and finally through Bakha Anand provides three solutions to remove untouchability to his problems: Either become a Christian with the help of Hutchinson, the Salvation Army Missionary. Or take comfort in Gandhiji’s Chastisement of the caste Hindus and wait till the social conscience of the people is roused or the introduction of the water – closet; the flush system. Anand proposes modernization through industrialization within the ideological framework of Gandhism and the novel ends with a resounding note of optimism implied as it is Bakha’s adolescent dreams, when he sees an apostle in Gandhi.

Certainly a happy harmony between Anand’s social preoccupations and artistic gifts makes untouchable a masterpiece and, a rare coherence and an intimate quality of felt life show his close association with the underdogs and his passionate recordation of their woes and as a realistic novelist with difference Anand has eloquently presented different layers of human experience in the fiction through the exposure of the social evil in its myriad manifestation and enables to view humanity at large in a proper perspective. Thus, Anand’s realistic presentation made Untouchable a historical document. Anand has a purpose to write novels and uses literature as a means to modify society:

“I feel that, only in fiction which is the transformation, through the imagination, of the concrete life, in words, sounds and vibrations, one may probe into the many layers of human consciousness in its various phases.”

The awareness of the suffering of his childhood playmate, Munoo urged Anand’s to write Coolie. It is real and social realism that is the pillar of the novel. Coolie is the tragedy of Munoo, an orphan who moves from place to place in search of livelihood, driven by hunger, till he finally meets with his doom. The realistic picture of poor Indians where mass suffer from the exploitation is truly depicted by Mulk Raj Anand in Coolie. The novel begins With the Punjabi rustic words and explores the social evils of child labour and suffering saga of Munoo:

“Munoo ohe Munooa oh Mundu!”

The harsh reality found in the novel reflects the true picture of Munoo’s life painted with the real color of life. The very subject itself is real. The exploitation and suffering saga of the poor boy is an account of the society where we find this situation in our day to day life. Anand has made the pan picture of the reality in the novel. The use of real language and the translated words gives the effect of freshness and reality. Anand explores the miserable condition and relationship of master and servant like that which existed between Nathoo Ram and Munoo:

“I bow my forehead to you, Babuji, he said, joining his hands and dusting his feet as he entered.”

Coolie is an epic of misery giving us a heart-rending real account of the suffering and misery of the poor like Munoo. The poor are the victims of social, colonial, capitalistic, and communal exploitation and Anand’s picture of the Indian poor and their suffering is both pathetic and realistic. Hoping against hope, Munoo seeks a safe shelter in life. The theme of the exploitation of the underprivileged is presented in great depth and the picture is drawn with vividness. With its scene shifting from the Kangra hills down to the plains of Bombay and back to the Punjab hills with its crowded canvas, the novel covers all the classes of society from the landless peasant to the aristocratic Anglo-Indian and British.

Anand describes the real situation in the novel. The scene dealing with Munoo’s life in the industrial slums of Bombay offer a graphic account of the working of the capitalist system. The factory is an intolerable inferno with unbearable heat radiating from the tin sheets, the continuous wild hum of the machine, the monotony of the work, the threat of impending danger and above all the inhuman attitude of the employer. Anand seeks to evoke pity towards the miserable plight of a subaltern in our society. Through him Anand has focused attention on the wretched plight of the millions of subalterns in India who are toiling, suffering, starving and dying of bitterness and despair-unable to carry on the burden of life-long sufferings.

Social realism found in real life characters presented in Anand’s novel. Lakshmi in Coolie is a typical Hindu wife devoted to her husband and children. Parbati has that “wisdom of the heart”

which Anand considers more valuable than any amount of intelligence. Social set up presented by the characters in Coolie serve to fill up the canvas and complete Anand’s panorama of Indian social life-coolies in the grain market of Daulatpur, the sick and destitute pavement dwellers of Bombay, the workers in the cotton mill etc. He focuses only on the mundane affairs of his fictional men and women. As a principle of his social realism, he does not dwell on the extraordinary in emotion or intellect, and strictly adhere to the common social activities of his characters.

As writer of fiction, Anand’s notable marks are vitality and a keen sense of actuality. Of Anand’s early novels it can be said that they come fresh from contact with the flesh and blood of everyday existence.

Mulk Raj Anand knows how to touch and melt. He is familiar with human suffering and so he succeeds in focusing real life of his characters. In Coolie, there is a pathetic account of the suffering and misery of Munoo in the different phases of his life. The moving account of Munoo reflects the way in which the poor Indian are exploited and ill-treated. The narrative style which Anand has adopted is also very outstanding. In expressing the deep feelings of human heart, Anand’s style assumes great lyrical power and beauty.

He puts forth the realities of life in aphorisms. Mulk Raj Anand’s socialist vision of life, his characters, narrative techniques, philosophy of life, and moral precepts make a set of remarkable social realism for both these novels. The fiction of Anand is largely realistic. Social realism is a dominant strain of his novels. They express his philosophy of realism and naturalism. They also express his dreams. Thus three things – realism, naturalism and social realism get mingled in his fictions.

The most important writer in the new wave of realism that swept over Indian literature in the nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties was Mulk Raj Anand. As befits the aspirations of a social realist, he chose the novel as his medium, and it was the novel which was to remain dominant form of literature for Indo-Anglian writers up to the present time.

Coolie is written in the vein of a realistic fiction. The illusion of reality or miserable life in Coolie is created by starkly realistic narration. It is

well-known fact in India that an orphan is very often maltreated by his uncle and is thrown into the busy stream of life even as a child. This psychology is the first stroke of realism in the beginning of the novel. Anand is social reformist and in his hands the fiction is a platform for social reform and awareness among the masses and his novels are powerful instruments to protest social reality P. K. Singh observes:

“Anand is very much a man of the world, living and loving in accordance to the rhythms of his own nature.”

The root cause of exploitation in the Indian context is poverty and hunger. Anand wants to expose all those social villains in the tragedy of Munoo and wants to make an appeal to the Indian society for the just class division of the society. The realistic picture of poverty can be seen in Anand’s depiction of the sordid life of the labourers living in the slums of Bombay.

“The bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered garbs. Some were curled up in knots, other lay face downwards on folded arms, others were flat on their chests...”

Being a realistic novelist, he makes his protagonist die. The death of Munoo show that the coolie belongs to suffering and his life is wholly determined by the ruthless forces of the society but beneath his pervasive pessimism, there is an essential undercurrent of optimism, in that protagonist’s death poignantly established the rotten state of society and the consciousness of the need for its drastic reform.

The social realism in *Coolie* is unified by the intensely human personality of the hero, who goes through this world like a shaft of love illuminating it and resolving the blind confusion of human relationships. From the very beginning of the novel we see Munoo trying to forge links with the world much in the same way as Bakha in *Untouchable*.

Munoo easily transcends caste considerations and thinks of only the two essential classes of mankind, “the haves and the have-nots”

In short, Mulk Raj Anand presents a real picture of Indian life in *Coolie*. There is sincerity and immediacy in his realistic approach to his problems. If the themes here betray a sense of protest, it is a part of realism because realism is by no means a transcript of life only. Anand’s social realism is sustained by his faith that an artist can contribute immensely towards social change. He is a novelist who believes in portraying realism. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* are

alike so far as their themes are concerned. The former portrays an untouchable in his true colours and the latter lays bare the life of a coolie, a victim of capitalistic economy. *Untouchable* attacks the social setup; *Coolie* concentrates on social evils which issue from an inequitable economic system which Anand has presented in realistic manner. What Sudarshan, the modern poet, says applies to both Bakha and Munoo:

“The world was listening your saga of suffering with rapt attention. And you went to sleep while telling your story!”

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