

Authoritarianism of Caste and Class System in Mulk Raj Anand's Novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie*

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Abstract

Anand's determination to rid Indian society of the evils of caste and class conflict led him to write *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. The central theme of *Untouchable* is the age old injustice met out by the traditional Hindu society upon certain people with its denomination on the pretext of some incongruous ideologies. In *Untouchable*, Anand is on sure ground as he is denouncing an aspect of traditional Hindu society which deserve absolute condemnation.

The central theme of the novel *Coolie* is the tragic denial to a simple, landless peasant of the fundamental right to happiness. Munoo, the character introduced by Mulk Raj Anand in *Coolie* is an effective instance of being a victim of exploitation. *Coolie* has epical sweep if not epical significance. The four tragic episodes which make up Munoo's tragic life as servant in a Bank clerk's household, as a worker in a pickle factory in a feudal city, as a factory worker in an industry in Bombay and lastly as a servant of a woman in Simla presents a sequence of events suggestive of the abject condition of a helpless, illiterate Indian. His very journey across the country affording of a vivid panoramic view of the variegated facets of India is not a journey a self-discovery or self-definition but towards a kind of tragic death.

Key words: Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, caste system

Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the founding fathers of the Indian English novel. He is among the first writers to render Punjabi and Hindustani idioms into English. His determination to rid Indian society of the evils of caste and class conflict led him to write *Untouchable* and *Coolie*.

The central theme of *untouchable* is the age old injustice met out by the traditional Hindu society upon certain people with its denomination on the pretext of some incongruous ideologies.

Novels of Reality

In *Untouchable*, Anand is on sure ground as he is denouncing an aspect of traditional Hindu society which deserve absolute condemnation. This shameful practice prevalent in India since time immemorial, has been seriously viewed by Anand in this novel. E.M. Forster in his preface to *Untouchable* comments that the Indians,

[...] have evolved a hideous nightmare unknown to the west; the belief that the products are ritually unclean as well as physically unpleasant, and those who carry them away or otherwise help to dispose of them are outcastes from society. Really it takes the human mind to evolve anything so devilish. No animal could have hit on it. (9)

Anniah Gowda in his article Mulk Raj Anand says:

Earlier novelists, writing in English as well as the Indian languages, have wrung our bosoms with the sufferings of child widows, unmarried mothers and so forth, but none before Anand have tried to take us down to the lower depths as Gorki called them, of society. (65)

Anand strongly believed that literature is the best vehicle for his journey towards the destruction of the evils. *Untouchable* is one of the greatest evils of our country. The people who belong to the so-called untouchable communities have been bearing the burden of social persecution from the time immemorial. Amarnath Prasad describes that in the Manusmriti,

the law book of Hindu social code and domestic life, the pathetic plight of the untouchables have no right to go to the temples and no liberty even to listen to the incantations of the Vedas or some other holy scriptures. They were not allowed to study the language Sanskrit which is supposed to be the riches of language. (32)

Mulk Raj Anand condemned untouchability derives its effectiveness from a total control of all the aspects of his problem. He shows a sure grasp of the psychology of both caste Hindu and the Untouchable. The caste Hindus are armed with the feeling of class superiority for a long tenure and this feeling deters them to accept the untouchables are also human beings like themselves instead they treat the untouchables as subhuman creatures to be exploited.

The Novel *Untouchable*

Untouchable is a powerful novel devoted to the exposition of the problem of untouchability. Gandhi was very well aware of this social evil of untouchability in India. He asked Anand to write a tract on untouchability. But instead of writing a tract, Anand chose to write a novel on the evil of untouchability. It was regarded as a revolutionary novel when it came out. It championed the cause of the underdog.

Untouchability is a social evil. It is such a vital burning sociological issue which fills the literary canvas of Mulk Raj Anand, a pioneer in the field of Indian fiction, who has made “deliberate attempts to expose the distress of the low caste and classes of India” (Williams : 39).

Gandhi was more than any other social reformer in the history of modern India, who waged the first effective crusade against the evil of untouchability, practiced in India, stating that it is a sin against God and Man. To quote his words:

There is an ineffective blot that Hinduism today carries with it. I have decided to believe that it has been handed down to us immemorial times. I think that, this miserable, wretched, enslaving spirit of untouchables must have come to us when we are at our lowest ebb. This evil has stanch to us and still remains with us [...]
(Rao : 91)

The Story of a Sweeper Boy, Bakha

The novel is the story of a sweeper boy, Bakha, a symbol of the poor plight of the outcastes. Bakha the sweeper boy, who is fascinated by the European style in dress, receives

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humiliation and insult wherever he goes. At home he is abused by his old father Lakha and outside he is let down by the caste Hindus who are always conscious of their superiority and have the pollution complex. The sweepers were ill-treated, abused and beaten. Their women were molested by the Hindus. They were given thrown away to eat. They were denied the opportunities of education and worshipping in the temples.

In the first stage of the novel, Anand describes to us how a shopkeeper throws towards Bakha a packet of 'Red Lamp' cigarettes although he pays its full price and how a Hindu creates a terrible scene in the market place when he gets accidentally touched by Bakha. Then in the second stage close at its heels comes the episode of an attempt by pundit Kali Nath to molest Bakha's sister. A little later, he carries in his lap a body wounded child to his house, but instead of any praise for this kind act, he gets curses and abuses from the child's mother who thinks that he has polluted both her son and her house by his touch. The two stages of the novel chiefly aim at projecting in bold relief the problem of caste snobbery and untouchability in our country.

Types of a Variety of Characters

Anand has created in his work, types of characters like planters, land-lords, money lenders and priests who are all exploiters in their view utterly lacking in human and social concern. He believes that for the betterment of society, one must dare to defy the principle of determinism, and one must always go seeking one's problems, as all problems are man-made. For instance, no section of human society will be condemned with the perennial task of scavenging from generation to generation, if machines and modern technology can be put to rightful use.

Focus on Social Problems

Several novels denote social problems like caste system, class-conflict or the status of women in the modern structure of the society. Most of the novelists have attempted a fiction projecting what is relevant to the understanding of the predicament of contemporary man. This chapter also gives a brief introduction about the life and works of Mulk Raj Anand and his two novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. These novels depict the evil impact of caste and class based

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discrimination in Hindu society. The theme of social protest and reform emerges conspicuously in Anand's two major novels, *Untouchable* and *Coolie, Untouchable* coaches for the caste struggle and exposes the rigidity of caste system in the Indian society and *Coolie* deals with the class struggle and centers on the miserable and piteous condition of the poor and exploited labourers and coolies.

Truthful Portrayal of the Plight of the Downtrodden

Truthful portrayal of the plight of the untouchable who have been the victims of social injustice, oppression and exploitation is presented in the two novels. The novels depict realistically the so-called outcastes' colony. The filthy surroundings have had a great impact on the souls of the "outcastes". Anand has shown them as they are in all their filth and degradation. Anand has exposed the rigidity of casteism through pathetic and heart-rending scenes in the novel. The touching scene, where Bakha gets a slap for accidentally touching a caste Hindu shows the inhumanity of the caste-system.

The Miserable Plight, Suffering, Poverty and Economic Deprivation: Life of Munoo

These novels focus on the miserable plight, suffering, poverty and economic deprivation of a larger section of Indian society. The central theme of the novel *Coolie* is the tragic denial to a simple, landless peasant of the fundamental right to happiness. Munoo, the character introduced by Mulk Raj Anand in *Coolie* is an effective instance of being a victim of exploitation. *Coolie* has epical sweep if not epical significance. The four tragic episodes which make up Munoo's tragic life as servant in a Bank clerk's household, as a worker in a pickle factory in a feudal city, as a factory worker in an industry in Bombay and lastly as a servant of a woman in Simla presents a sequence of events suggestive of the abject condition of a helpless, illiterate Indian. His very journey across the country affording of a vivid panoramic view of the variegated facets of India is not a journey a self-discovery or self-definition but towards a kind of tragic death.

Munoo a passive character never has a chance to act but he acted upon by the society in which he is also a member. Munoo's expectations are extremely modest he is forced by poverty

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to be pulverized at the age of fourteenth itself. His only prayer is, “I want to live, I want to know, I want to work” (*Coolie*: 183). Coolie is a true manifestation of misery of the poor in the society. Professor Khan observes:

It is not fate or almighty who is responsible for the tragedy of Munoo, the hero of the novel, but the society in which he is brought up. He is a victim of social forces in his life like the tragic heroes of the great novelist, Galsworthy. Munoo, the hero of the novel is a universal figure who represents the miseries of the poor and downtrodden. Social forces of exploitation and poverty determine the life of Munoo in the novel. (*Coolie*: 183)

Anand’s Crusade

Mulk Raj Anand is a crusader against social distinctions and man-made barriers. He is intolerant of injustice of every type. He is a novelist with an inherent social purpose. His aim is to expose the follies and effectuations of the privileged classes—priests, money-lenders, businessman, tea-planters and British rulers. Each of his novels deals with social problems. Anand is not merely content to state the problems. He also suggests their solution. There is a faith that man is by nature lovely and that all his errors and sins are dust and mud sticking on the outside. They may be shaken off in a moment and men reinstated in his native glory.

Mulk Raj Anand has combined human and sympathy for the poor and afflicted in his novels. His novel focuses on the basic conditions in which man is living and deals with a social problem. Balarama Gupta says to Anand, “Man is the measure of all things his works are nothing if not humanistic in their vision” (49). Anand does not write about be jeweled Maharajas and their countless court mistresses but about the short simple annals of the sons of the soil. According to him, all his heroes, who had emerged in his novels, were dear to him, because they were the reflections of the real people he had known during his childhood and youth.

Thus Anand has revealed his social concerns by exposing the authority and hypocrisy of the caste Hindus in his novel *Untouchable*. The main aim of the novelist is to expose the

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hypocrisy of the caste Hindus and to arouse the reader sympathy for the underdog. Anand was able to portray the unpleasant experiences of the protagonist in a pictorial manner. The main issues of downtrodden Indian who are traditionally oppressed by the evils of religion, caste and social divisions are brought out in such a way that it arouses pity in the minds of the readers.

The central focus of Anand in *Coolie* is on the exploitation of the underdogs of the society. Poverty, greed, selfishness, hypocrisy, corruptions, industrialism, capitalism and communalism are the several elements in this novel. Anand suggests that a little more tenderness on the part of the society could have turned Munoo into a happy individual and also averted his tragic end. It reveals the social critic, angry protester and tender humanist in Mulk Raj Anand with a passionate plea for social change. He tries to create an awareness to establish human rights to every Indian, to rich and poor, high caste or low caste. Authoritarianism of caste and class system in Mulk Raj Anand's novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie* is an unbeatable description.

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