

## Glimpses of Ecocriticism in Anand's *Untouchable* and Its Relevance in Contemporary India

Anurag Jadaun, M.A., M.Phil.

(Under the Supervision of Dr. Manimozhi Sayeekumar)

1. In the contemporary Indian political and literary scene, the most popular issue is Cleanliness (Swachchhta). For its implementation the Indian government has launched one of the biggest schemes Swachchhta Abhiyan and under its umbrella lakhs of toilets have been built so far. I am not pleading in favour of the present government but just reminding that what the government is thinking now, as one of the solutions to the prevailing unhygienic and unhealthy conditions in Indian society, had already been propagated by Mulk Raj Anand in 1930s in his novel *Untouchable* (1935).

2. Mulk Raj Anand is notable for his depiction of the lives of the downtrodden, for his keen insight into the lives of the oppressed and their analyses of impoverishment, exploitation and misfortune. The matter of grave concern is that the voice of the champion of the downtrodden went unheard for 70 years and no significant step was taken either by the government or by the public for cleanliness and maintenance of hygienic conditions of the poor living in rural India.

3. Nature and literature have always been in close relationship through the ages. Writers have often taken shelter under the nature for their creative expression. A few among the priests of nature were Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Thoreau, and Robert Frost. These writers found creativity, similes and metaphors in the nature. But Mulk Raj Anand is in different category as he did not take nature as his mouthpiece. He observed the social problems, and then put forward the solution which can maintain a balance between society and environment. An exemplary example of this is his *Untouchable* in which he suggested the use of Flush Toilet system. Anand's recommendation for flush toilet symbolically aimed to maintain a balance in society and environment by abolishing the caste system and improving the hygienic environment and healthy conditions.

4. In literary context two terms have become very important today – ecology and ecocriticism. As a separate movement or school of literary criticism, ecocriticism started developing in the 1990s. Ecocriticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. There is a close relation between ecocriticism and literature. It is an interdisciplinary study of Ecology and Literary Criticism which is unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature.

5. The protagonist of *Untouchable*, Bakha, a young boy of eighteen, aspires to live a good life but as soon as morning dawns his job of toilette-cleaning starts. He has to clean several times three rows of latrines single handed. He makes efforts to bring cleanliness in the place of filth and possible disease; such is Bakha's daily toil.

6. The problem of drinking water among the untouchables is depicted through the 'Well Incident.' Untouchables were a social outcast and were not allowed to touch even the brook or pond, as they would contaminate the stream. They had to wait hours beside the well and had to request the upper castes to pour water in their pitchers. They weren't allowed to '*touch anything that touchables touched*'. A significant point and the cruellest irony of life is that even for water, the basic necessity of human existence, the sweepers had to depend on the mercy of upper caste Hindus.

7. Anand feels that dung and latrine cleaning bring dishonour to men like Bakha. The only way to remove this dishonour is to introduce a scientific device whereby the life of the untouchable may undergo a change. Anand's solution is that the introduction of flush system changes not only the character of work but also gets rid of the diseases it spread among the common mass. Anand adds another point and he says that gaining of economic freedom will modernise their life and make them respectable human beings. The degeneration in social life is considered to be the result of a conservative religion.

8. Often writers present nature imagery to symbolise the environmental effect and its meaning they want to convey. But Anand is in different category as he depicts less about nature but symbolises more in terms of societal and environmental problems. Anand project the humiliation and agony faced by a subaltern in the Indian society which is divided into the graded inequality and hierarchical anarchy.

9. Anand's fiction depicts human-human relationship. It focuses on the inequalities permeated in society and evils rooted in man's ulterior instinct to dominate and exploit others. His concern for nature springs from his concern for human beings. He shows that the downtrodden are the worst victims of social as well as environmental problems like pollution and commodification of resources. Anand has concern for the preservation of nature. He outlines the degeneration of the environment and its disastrous impact on human nature. Anand regrets the increasing gap between man and nature as the oppressors detach themselves from nature. Man's greed and materialistic ambitions make them neglect the nature outside and repress the nature within. In the case of the victims of oppression, the nature within is stifled by suffering and subjectivity and outside nature is often inaccessible to them.

10. Anand's writing provides a panoramic view of the rural life in India with all its virtues and downsides. His thorough knowledge of the multitudes and their predicament gives him an added advantage in painting the peasant life with vividness of description. There is a unique blend of photographic representation of social and environmental realities which make Anand's fictional themes more appealing.

11. As literature engages with life and everything in the world, it must also engage with the environment. No field of art is untouched with the influence of the nature and environment. It cannot be denied that recently launched Hindi Movie *Toilet* also has

resonances with the Anand's *Untouchable* in terms of raising the issue of need of toilet and clean environment. On these lines there is a growing need to study and explore literature finding the relationship between ecology and environment. Mulk Raj Anand's fiction depicts the realistic picture of the downtrodden of India and for this he indirectly echoes the need to improve the ecosystem.

=====

## Bibliography

1. Ulka Anjaria. *A History of the Indian novel in English* Cambridge Univ Press Pub 2016
2. AV Krishna Rao. *The Indo Anglian Novel and the Changing Tradition*. Rao and Raghvan Pub, Mysore 1972.
3. Margaret Berry. *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist*. Oriental Press. 1971.
4. Suresh Chandra. *Fresh Perspectives on Fiction: Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao*. Anmol Publications. 2005.
5. Rajinder Kumar Dhawan. *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Survey of Response to the Novels and Short Stories of Mulkraj Anand*. Prestige Books. 1992.

---

**Anurag Jadaun, M.A., M. Phil.**  
**Research Scholar (Ph.D.)**  
**Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research**  
**Chennai-73**

**Under the Supervision of**  
Dr. Manimozhi Sayeekumar  
Prof & Head  
Department of English  
Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research  
Chennai-73