

The Voice of Humanity: A study of Mulk Raj Anand's fiction.

Priyanka Kadyan

Assistant Professor in English

Guru Nanak Girls College

Santpura, Yamunannagar

Email- priyankalohan@gmail.com

Abstract

Caste system in India is a kind of stratification based on inequality among human beings in matters of social interaction. Caste system and its manifold divisions are peculiar to Hindu society. It is considered that if a man does sinful acts, he will be reborn in low caste or even as an animal. Thus, birth in a particular caste becomes an index of the soul's progression towards liberation.

Mulk Raj Anand, a reformist, was against caste system in India. He felt that casteism which is an off-shoot of karma, breeds cruelty and inferiority. Karma is a malignant belief prevailing in the society, propagated by the high caste Hindus, which means that all men suffer in their present existence because of their bad deeds in their previous birth. In order to avoid suffering, Anand placed man at the centre

of all things. He believed in equality of all men. He doesn't see any distinction among man in the form of caste, creed or race. He saw them as obstacles for a human being's growth.

The present paper is an attempt to show how Mulk Raj Anand through his art tries to awaken our sympathy for the underdogs of the society, which in turn can urge us to take part in the revolt leading to social reform. His first novel *Untouchable* depicts the wretched condition and ordeals of the oppressed people and their struggle for a better life. He was one of the very few writers who wrote to awaken the social conscience. He was audacious enough to admit that he used literature as a means to some other end, and that this end was the alleviation of the suffering of fellow human beings. Anand wrote novels and short stories with a view of teaching men to recognize the fundamental principles of

human living and exercise vigilance in regard to the real enemies of freedom and socialism. It was a lifetime apostasy for him to help raise the untouchables, the peasants, the serfs, the coolies and the other suppressed members of the society to fight for human dignity deliberately denied to them by the privileged sections of the society. He felt that it was his duty and the mission of his life to focus the attention of his readers on the innumerable wrongs, injustices and the injuries that were being continuously perpetrated on these young unfortunate underdogs of Indian society. Although through the repeated efforts of many people strong steps have been taken to protect the rights of these lower caste people but a lot still needs to be done to totally abolish the stigma of caste system in India

Paper

In his "Foreword" to G.S. Balarama Gupta's *Mulk Raj Anand*, K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar remarks:

There are novelists about whom one critical study would be written, but one would be enough. There are novelists who would be effectively suffocated even by one research performance. And there are novelists who are large- who invoke multitudes- who can survive several attempts to probe and sound and contain

them. Mulk Raj Anand is surely one of the last categories. Each new study adds a little to our understanding of Anand and his work, yet leaves the subject unexhausted.¹

Anand's works cover a wide range of subjects and topics. He has distinguished himself as a novelist and has left a deep impression on the Indian Literary scene. He is a writer with a purpose. Perhaps, he is the first Indian novelist writing in English selecting his themes from the lower class life of Indian people. He picked up the common man, the bottom dog from the road, and made him the hero in his fiction. So, it is apt to look upon Anand's novels as the social documents of great value.

Mulk Raj Anand is the 'angry young man' who cannot tolerate exploitation of one man by another man, or of one class by another class. He is a sworn enemy to all kinds of exploitation- be that economic, social or political. Thus, the main evil Anand attacks in his novels is the evil of exploitation. He was powerfully moved by the economic and social exploitation to which the class of the underdogs of Indian society was so mercilessly subjected to, by those in the positions of power and authority. Anand has focused the attention of the reading public on the economic exploitation that has been mercilessly and systematically carried on against the poor landless people.

Anand has discussed the life of the Indian masses with close comprehension. The tyrants, the exploiters, and the oppressive rulers find themselves fiercely dealt with. In most of his novels, Anand has treated mainly the underdogs, coolies, the laborers, the peasants, the untouchables, the downtrodden people, the soldiers etc. The themes of Anand's choice stand

scrutiny through his different protagonists. He drew these protagonists from the people whom he knew or met. Bakha in 'untouchable' (1935), Munoo in 'coolie' (1936), Bikhu in 'the road' (1963) etc. are all such characters.

Many critics have regarded Anand as a writer with a mission. As Harish Raizada puts it:

*What gives Mulk Raj Anand a distinctive place in the Indo Anglian fiction is the high value he attaches to his vocation as a writer.*²

He is a committed writer. He has written for the betterment of underdogs. He has written not for art's sake, but for the sake of life. Most of his novels project him as a humanist. In his novels, he does not nearly show his sympathy for the wretched low-caste people, but he is anxious about and longs to fight for their rights. He wants to fight but in a non-violent manner. Sometimes, his novels appear as propagandist literature, but the truth is that they are the expression of a deeply felt anger against the injustice and the prejudices prevailing in the Indian society. He criticizes the dehumanizing social evils, which affect the nature and behavior of the people of Indian society. Anand feels pained to see the life of underdogs

*..... Being crushed under the heavy weight of man-made laws, the scheme of cruelty and exploitation that held India in its devilish grip.*³

Anand shows protest and the inner searing of the minds of his heroes. As such, his fiction *may appropriately be called 'a literature of*

*protest.....*⁴. Anand's works register protest against sordid and painful circumstances of human beings. He hopes to find happiness for the millions of hardworking, yet under privileged members of the society. His protagonists try their best to exist under the oppression, the assault and cruelty. They struggle for the better lives. It is their destiny to suffer. But they scarcely give way to defeat.

Anand depicts the prevailing social conditions in his novels realistically. His purpose is to arouse the public conscience for the improvement of condition of the poor people. Anand wants to fill a sense of responsibility in the upper-caste people. The social evil of untouchability has an ancient history in India. This is the outcome of the caste system in the recalcitrant Hindu society. There were four main classes. The sweepers and the scavengers were the lowest of the four. They were regarded as the untouchables because of the filthy work they did. They had to remove human dung. It was thought that their touch might pollute a caste Hindu. So, every upper-caste Hindu avoided them. Over the centuries, untouchability grew into a big social evil in India. Many social reformers worked for its eradication from our society, but it still persists. Anand has studied this malaise of Indian society with great sensitivity through his hero Bakha in his novel *Untouchable*. This untouchable lad has a sense of discontentment with his lot and behaves as an angry Youngman- a sort of social rebel.

In fact, not only Bakha, but almost all of Anand's heroes emerge as rebels. They become alienated from their environment due to their rebellious attitude and revolutionary views. As Meenakshi Mukherjee says,

The heroes of M.R. Anand are individuals who suffer because they refuse to conform. Munoo the coolie, Bakha the untouchable, Bikhu the chamaar, Lal Singh of the trilogy all are persecuted by society for their non-conformity, but all of them are indomitable in spirit.....⁵

Anand does not directly preach or dictate to his readers a lesson of tolerance and liberalism in dealing with the socially outcastes. He just expresses their sufferings and miseries. He leaves the rest to his readers to judge whether they are treating the downtrodden people properly in the society. It is not only the social status, but poverty also, which adds to the misery of so called outcastes and untouchables. Anand is keenly aware of the presence of dirt, squalor, ugliness and suffering as the direct outcome of poverty. He depicts these sufferings and poverty in his novels so that people can do something to remove them. Anand has always been accused that he is sentimental in dealing with the underdogs and that directs his attack on high-castes and socially well placed people. But his attack is on the hypocrisy, the double standards and selfishness of those who abuse the authority with which they have been entrusted.

Anand has entitled his novels purposefully. The titles point to different types of exploitations and sufferings of people whose helplessness and disabilities are shown in his novels. Although Anand has dealt with so many themes and problems in his novels, yet the theme of social consciousness stands out most prominently in his fiction. Almost every novel

of Anand deals with some social issue or other. The chief social concerns with which Anand has dealt are caste distinction, class distinction, injustice and poverty. To focus the reader's attention on these social evils and thus, to make them socially conscious. Anand gives the realistic pictures of the sufferings of the people in his works. The prominent novels which deal with the theme of social consciousness in one way or the other are, *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), *The Big Heart* (1945), *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), *The Road* (1963), *Morning Face* (1969) etc.

Untouchable, on one hand, expresses the impact of caste cruelty. It has a kind of lyrical quality. On the other hand, *Coolie* has a large range of action and characters, and bears somewhat an epic quality. *Two Leaves and a Bud* also puts out the theme of social consciousness, through the projection of a clash of thoughts and interests. The novel begins in a village of Punjab and moves with the middle-aged protagonist Gangu to a tea estate in Assam. Gangu works there as a labourer. He becomes the victim of double exploitation. He not only suffers exploitations from his foreign masters, but also from certain well-placed Indians. Here, Gangu becomes the victim of social injustice. His poverty comes in his way to rise in life. His only fault is his being socially downtrodden fellow.

Two Leaves and a Bud is a fore-runner to the *Lalu* trilogy in which Lal Singh is the protagonist, who is again the victim of social injustice though he belongs to a high caste. In his first novel of the trilogy, *The Village* (1939) Lal Singh has to face the enmity of society and unhappiness of his father because he does the impious act of having his hair cut (he is a Sikh).

He eats in a shop owned by a Muslim, and earns disgrace. People also accuse him of molesting a girl. They want him to ride a donkey with his face blackened. Lal Singh runs away and joins Army. His brother is hanged for the murder of his wife and her lover. He wants, all the time, to run away from the environment in a typical Punjab village. The Second Novel of the trilogy, *Across the Black Waters* (1940), further describes Lal Singh's experiences as a soldier in France. There also, Lal Singh makes a few friends but makes enemies too. In the third novel of the trilogy, *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), Lal Singh returns home and champions the cause of the peasants. He fights for the country and for the rights of the people like him. The main ingredients of this novel are again the same in including social justice and poverty.

The novel, which followed this impressive trilogy of Anand was *The Big Heart* (1945). It also depicts a conflict between two classes of society, i.e. between artisans and capitalists. Ananta, the hero of the novel, fights a two-fold battle. He fights against two factory owners who exploit the manual labour. In his novel *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), Anand focuses on the lot of socially lower-caste peasants. The peasants in India feel alienated in the social environment in which they live: *Alienated labour is as much the fate of this social class as their intolerable economic and social position. Alienation in act of production as well as alienation from their fellow men.....*⁶. The protagonist Panchi is a socially isolated person. He seems to be full of self-pity and superstitions. Anand again takes up the age-old social problem of untouchability in his novel, *The Road* (1963). The protagonist of this novel, Bikhu, is a young outcaste like the sweeper boy Bakha of *Untouchable*. Bikhu is dynamic and an active rebel as compared to Bakha. Thus, the social awareness and sympathy

for the outcastes continues in Anand's novel one after the other.

Anand champions full social, political and spiritual liberty for man. Whenever he finds a man the victim of social injustice and deprived, his sympathies overflow. His love is for socially backward people. Anand enjoys distinction of place among major Indian writers for his commitment to the cause of those who are deprived of human rights in the Indian social set up. So, Anand's concern for the social outcastes, sweepers, untouchables, coolies, plantation workers, peasants etc. is reflected in his fictional works, especially, *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. He is very much conscious of social injustice done to the downtrodden members of Indian society.

References

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3. Suresh Nath, *The Element of Protest in Anand's Fiction: Perspectives on Mulk Raj Anand*, 130.
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6. Dieter Reimenschneider, *Perspectives on Mulk Raj Anand*, 99.