



Art For Life's Sake : A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie and Untouchable

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Abstract

The discussion of the two novels above makes it abundantly clear that Anand, like most Indo-English novelist, did not stick to any one particular theory of the novel. He knew that novel, by its very nature, was a loose genre and allowed the writer to use it according to his purpose and motive. Anand has followed the old age conventions of the novel, but has also departed from them at places to make his works richly appealing. If he has followed the conventional mode of story-telling, he has also chosen to keep it to the bare minimum as in Untouchable, and instead built his novels on character, dialogue and interior monologue. He has also employed deviant linguistic modes to achieve the desired effects according to his intention.

Key words : Appeal, Dislike, Expansion, Family, Society

Among the Indo-Anglian novelists, Mulk Raj Anand has always deserved a place of distinction for originality of style and the seminal approach to the socio-political problems treated in his works. The undercurrents of this approach are essentially humanistic, the charge of propaganda, ideology, etc. notwithstanding. His imagination was primarily kindled against the irrational approaches to human fate by the forces that may be. C.D. Narasimhaiah has rightly emphasised this "human centrality" of Anand's fiction, reiterating that "it needs to be recognized that that forms the very core of Anand's philosophy as well." What Narasimhaiah points out is the fact that Mulk Raj Anand's life and personality, and also all his writings were inspired by his deep humanism. And this has been the fountain-head of all his thinking, acting and writing.

With his first novel Untouchable, he, in fact, inaugurated the literature of the underdog. He not only interpreted the soul of India, the real India of the villages, to the West, but also convincingly made known to the colonial rulers the debilitating impact of their presence in India. After the departure of the British, he shifted his concerns towards the social predicaments and upheavals confronting the emerging Republic.

In traditional anthropocentric approaches to the study of literary texts, the value of historical context had always been accepted as absolute till the more linguistically oriented approaches began to consider text as an entity per se and tended to discard context as something extrinsic to it. Such a belief was earlier espoused by New Critics like LA. Richards and Alan Tate in 1920s

Later, the stylisticians whose thoughts were inspired by the principles of linguistics emphasized that meaning of the text was inherent in the language that contained it and therefore a critic ought to concentrate upon the linguistic structures to decode that meaning. Defining the aim



of literary analysis that concerns itself only with linguistic analysis, Eric Nils Enkvist stated that:

The task of the linguistic stylistics is to set up inventories and descriptions of stylistic stimuli with the aid of linguistic concepts.

It may indeed be true of all creative writers that they seek primary inspiration from their personal life and their life's conditions. However, the ability and skill to transmute the life's material into literature not only differs from writer to writer, but also depends upon each writer's real motives and his literary beliefs. That is one reason why some writers appeal as more objective than subjective or vice-versa. As far as Indo-Anglian writings are concerned, it is a well accepted postulate that most writers write from their own life's conditions. However, "of all great Indian novelists in English, Anand is perhaps one whose life is most closely and most obviously connected with his work. For him, his life is his art and art his life." A brief conspectus of the early influences on Anand's young mind yields revealing facts about the writer's life and his works. For example, his mother's religious fervour for the idols of gods and goddesses had no appeal to the young child in spite of its sincerity. In fact it "had negative effect on Anand from early childhood." This dislike for superstitious zeal for idols changed into a sort of a prejudice against Indian customs and traditions. His early education in cantonment schools where the curricula was aimed at presenting Indian history and tradition as inferior stuff had a damaging impact so much so that he acquired a bias against all indigenous customs and grew up hating everything Indian. Such dislike also resulted into a strong feeling of protest against all kind of bigotry - of caste, class and religion - that characterized the Indian social system. No wonder then that most of Anand's protagonists are non-conformists who defy religious bigotry. In a larger sense, Anand found this capitalism a part of British Imperialism which suppressed all human urges of the oppressed. Anand was of the view that religion was the opium which was being used by the capitalist institutions to keep people down for their selfish ends. It is such understanding of Anand that incited both critics and readers to dub him as a Marxist. This, however, should not mean that Anand was either an anti-Hindu or an anti-Indian. It only implies a creative writer's insightful understanding of those evil practices that played havoc with social justice and human aspirations.

There is no denying the fact that Anand loved his India, its art, its culture and its monuments and all that was good and beautiful. That he had an irresistible love for the Indian ethos, its art and archaeology was proved when he came into contact with Ananda Coomarswamy who inspired him to recognize the latent glory' in Indian art. As his interest became keener, his urge to return to India grew intenser. Finally, he came back to India in 1932. Here, Gandhiji's freedom struggle and his humanistic ideals held out another great attraction for him. He read in Gandhiji's 'Young India' the miseries and the oppression that the sweepers in India had to undergo as a result of the caste-system. Untouchable was, in fact, a direct outcome of his exposure to Gandhi's ideals in the 'Young India'.

Such findings about the connection between the writer's life and his works are indeed useful for the study of Anand's novels. But this should not lead one to believe that his novels are mere biographies. Saros Cowasjee very rightly observes: "it is clear that Anand is not merely engaged in a personal odyssey, but is restructuring an epic of a whole generation of Indian youth at a period of momentous change in their country's history, culture and outlook." What Cowasjee means here is that the immediate context of his novels, of course, is the times when they were written but that is not all about them. They are works of art and as such transcend the time while living in it. Although, we may hear in the novels cries of anguish against injustice prevalent in India of those times, yet Anand, in reality, emerges as a crusader against injustice perpetrated upon the poor and the 'have-



nots' by the imperial and capitalist powers everywhere.

The conditioned mind of Mulk Raj Anand often seems to use novel for the distillation of his social and political ideas; and his characters mostly work out to be little more than elucidators and amplifiers. The Indian ethos outside Anand's works that shaped his creative sensibility' and its humanistic, implication in turn coagulate as the internal context of his books and both dynamically interact with the motive that the writer seeks to obtain in them

Untouchable indeed is a reconstruction of Anand's own first hand experiences of and exposures to the curse of untouchability and its concomitant psychological repercussions in the Indian world. Bakha, a sweeper, was the name of a boyhood friend whose courage and humanity he knew. He also knew the unkind and unsympathetic attitude to the innumerable Bakhas in India. Anand determined to "carry the crores of Bakhas to the sensitive souls of this nation, giving them dignity and heroism" through his works of fiction.

Further, Anand's life and experience in the Sabarmati *Ashram* reinforced his motive to create heroes even from the untouchables in India. Bakha and the whole novel *Untouchable* are the artistic restructuring of Anand's reflections and recollections during *Ashram* period: 'These passionate feelings and memories are reflected in every page of *Untouchable*.'

The novel *Untouchable* opens quietly on an autumn morning and by the time the evening approaches, the author has been able to build round his hero, Bakha, a spiritual crisis of such magnitude that it seems to embrace the whole of India. "Get up, oh you Bakhya, oh son of a pig!" his father calls out and Bakha sheds out his reverie of the Tommies- life he wishes to lead and once more tackle his task of cleaning the public latrines. Returning to his hut to quench his thirst for tea, he is out again to sweep the market street and the temple courtyard. On the way, he buys four anna's worth of sweetmeat after weighing the consequences of it in rational and philosophic terms: "eight annas in my pocket", he said to himself, "dare I buy some sweetmeats ... but Come, I have only one life to live." "Let me taste of the sweetmeats; who know tomorrow I may be no more." (U: p. 51) Overjoyed at his possession, he forgets to call out "posh, posh, sweeper coming!" (U: p.57) and accidentally touches a caste Hindu. He earns for his transgression much abuse from the public and a slap from the man he has polluted. This incident, along with the attempt of the priest to seduce his sister and then cry out "polluted" when she screams poisons everything that happens subsequently. Bakha's consciousness is haunted by the inhuman treatment heaped on his community by the caste Hindus. He is unable to forbear such highhandedness and yet cannot revolt. It is a crisis that tramples his spirit so much so that he is inane to otherwise such pleasant events as a hockey match, a country walk and a wedding.

Bakha is raised to the status of a type, a symbol of a suppressed self against the backdrop of casteist hegemony of the high-ups. Bakha's portrayal in the novel, in fact, manifests Anand's insightful understanding of human nature. As a young man he is as agile and energetic as any youth and a clean champion of all games, has principles and a sense of duty. But his environment breeds in him physical inability to revolt, an uneasy sense of submission, a habitual subservience to superiors who either insult or patronise him. This as much differentiates him from the general run of sweepers as it identifies him with them. After heredity and two thousand years of oppression have done their work on him, there are few resources left in him. He goes about his job wearing the smile of humility customary among his kind. Charat Singh's promise to give him a hockey stick is not a mere isolated piece of admiration. It assumes symbolic value that brings forth that trait of servility which he has inherited from his forefathers.

Bakha's slavish emulation of the Tommies, though comic, is his first affirmation that the life he has been compelled to live is monstrously unjust. Though he may cut a ridiculous figure as he stumps out in artillery boots, wearing discarded trousers, puttees, breeches and regulation overcoat with a 'Red Lamp' cigarette smouldering between his lips, it is all the same^ manifestation of his tremendous strength and courage. That he should emulate the Tommies is understandable, for they treated him "as a human being" and scorned the native population for relieving themselves on the ground and for other filthy habits. For Bakha, the observation ends here, but it may suggest more to the reader who knows that the British themselves were untouchables to the Brahmins.

It is this merit of the novel that induced O.P. Mathur to discover similarities between Bakha and his state and that of Bigger in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. "The traumatic horror of Negro life in America and the pathetic suffering undergone by the untouchables in India have found their respective voices of indignation, anger and protest in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *The Road* (1963)." "Bakha seems to embody the ideal of 'work is worship' propagated by Mahatma Gandhi, in whose *Sabarmati Ashram* his novel was written."

The cup of gratitude overflows, and fear and doubt creep in. If kindness brings forth gratitude mingled with humility, excessive abuse occasionally helps him to regain his strength and self-respect. *Untouchable* is typically a story of a young sweeper, who is driven to and fro by the clash of social forces and his inner impulses. It becomes the story, primarily of an untouchable in the Indian context and generally a tale of woes and struggles of a hurt psyche. Anand's novel is predominantly shaped by the context of Indian ethos, and in the constrictive Indian context Anand's heroes confront a constrictive, indifferent and hostile environment. All this lends credibility and authenticity both to Anand's characters and to their situation. K.N. Sinha observes that "much of the power of *Untouchable* derives from its solidarity of specifications. Anand creates here a dense web of actualities, so that the created universe in the novel bears a direct resemblance to the actual one."

Mulk Raj Anand succeeds in transmuting his personal childhood experiences into a work of fiction so objectively that he ends up by penetrating deeper into the human problem and rendering it in universal terms. Anand in his childhood, while playing with Bakha and other playmates like Kamcharan and Chota, got injured when a pebble, by chance, hit him. Nobody dared carry Anand to his home because of the fear of polluting him as all the friends of An. aid belonged to the lower strata of society. However, I niklia. the sweeper boy, "took courage and carried him to hi- home to be scolded by Anand's mother." Her getting angry with Bakha in return of his act of kindness and generosity was something shocking for young Anand. At tltai very instant, all the sensitiveness in him got polarized and it. as if. turned out to be a vow to fight for the cause of innumerable Bakhas in India. It is also, perhaps Anand's reading of the Russian writers like Gogol, Tolstoy and Gorky, which he perused in India before his departure to London that strengthened his determination to create heroes even from the untouchables in India.

Another similar incident that fertilized Anand's artistic forte Finds its outlet in Bakha's non acceptance of Christianity. Anand, in his childhood, confronted the similar predicament when his father's wavering faith in English canons of religion and his mother's superstitious and hazy acceptance of Hinduism germinated the qualms in his mind. He first, like Bakha, thought of embracing Christianity. But his rationale prevented him from this. Anand's dexterous handling of nostalgic experience enabled him to explore the hollowness of religions. There are several such incidents and reflections in the novels that are directly borrowed from the writer's own life; yet the skill with which they have been fictionalised in *Untouchable* is highly appreciable.



Coolie may not have been bom of his life's events as such but it is indeed a direct result of the socio-political conditions in which Anand lived and to which he responded. If Untouchable was inspired by his childhood friendship with Bakha and his oppression, Coolie is the result of his awareness of the sufferings of his childhood playmate Munoo. Though thematically different from Untouchable. Coolie (1936) does reveal the same dynamics of outer-inner contexts and the writer's real motive as obtained in Untouchable.

Coolie is, in fact, "a character novel" and it offers a chance to the reader to really experience the unending pain, suffering and prolonged struggle of the poor. Once again, the authenticity to the account is lent by a strong grasp of the context and its expression through descriptions. Throughout, the reader is sure of being in the Indian world where the misery of poverty is presented through an orphan boy and which particularly evokes a deep sorrow in the reader. The central theme of the novel is the tragic denial to a simple landless peasant of the fundamental right to happiness. The terrible destiny of being a victim of exploitation is indeed Munoo's birthright. The novel amplifies the views of Bernard Shaw that poverty is the worst crime of all and its eradication is the prime task of any socialistic society. Nevertheless, the writer's human concern in general is also obviated by the elevation of the descriptive mode to the symbolic.

Like Untouchable. Coolie too had its seeds in the personal life of the writer. And like the former, the latter too is an artistic rendering of a paramount social evil -the glaring gap bet been the haves and have-nots. If in Untouchable is portrayed the curse of caste system, in Coolie is depicted the evil of the class-system. The immediate context of Coolie is pre-independent India, and as such, it includes British as well as Indian characters. It examines how the Britishers vitiated the Indian society with the evil of class- system. In Coolie, therefore, the vista of action expands as the conflict is not only confined to the caste-system practised between Indians, but also class-system between Indians. Another noticeable trait of Anand's fictional art revealed in Coolie through which the writer succeeds in presenting life's verisimilitude rather than an account of his personal experiences, is the juxtaposition of the comic and the serious. Chapters three and four, depicting Munoo's experiences in Daulatpur and Bombay respectively, make up the bulk of the novel and show Anand at its angriest. Laughter is kept to the minimum and the comic irony of the previous chapter gives place to caustic one. Munoo has been picked up by Seth Prabha Dayal who, alongwith Ganpat, has come to own a pickle factory in Daulatpur. At first, all appears to go well for Munoo. Prabha himself once a coolie, understands the boy's plight and he and his wife, Parbati consider adopting him as their son. Munoo is fed well on arrival, and the author ironically remarks "it was the most sumptuous meal he had eaten since the feast on the death anniversary of his father and mother, which his aunt had given three months before he left the hills." (C: p. 83). K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, "if Untouchable is a microcosm, Coolie is a macrocosm, that is Indian society." The study of Untouchable and Coolie and their context clearly shows how authentic and realistic are the portrayal of poverty and its concomitant misery in India. The writer has very convincingly exposed the evil both of the caste-system and the class-system eating into the vitals of Indian society. Untouchable that turns attention to the evil of caste- system indeed "displays his penetrating thought and human attitude in understanding the grim realities of social life in India." Much more than this, however, the analyses above show that Untouchable is a novel with a universal message about the dignity of labour and the sanctity of duty. If it brings out an insight into the memories of the castaways, it also forces the readers to realise that devotion to duty is the noblest form of worship "and all labour is a kind of creativity." Similarly, Coolie that depicts the deplorable conditions of coolies in India eventually



becomes a tale underscoring that problem of class is a universal phenomenon. The two novels thus bring into sharp focus Anand's humanistic love for the suppressed and the unprivileged in all societies.

Believing firmly that story-telling is truth telling, Anand attempted to create life's verisimilitude, which is authentic and veritable. He worked it out with devotion, unmindful of the apprehension of being labelled a propagandist. He called himself "a truth addict, to the point of being a prig." In his devotion to truth and its revelation in fiction, Anand did not even mind breaking with conventions as long as they served both art and life. The present text is devoted to examining this very aspect of his art vis-a-vis the conventions of fiction which have been in practice from time to time. Prose fiction, like any other literary genre, is characterized by specific conventions which inhere both the writer's language and his modes. Ronald Carter in 1979 proposed that while studying the style of discourse, attention should be paid to the context-specific conventions of a discourse.

The conventions mentioned in Ronald's scheme are both those that characterize the genre and also the language. The present article, however, focuses on the fictional conventions and Anand's use of them in order to more fully understand his aim in the two novels. That Anand's views of fictional art are very close to Forster's is evidenced by the fact that E.M. Forster consented to write a preface for his first novel, which had been rejected by nineteen publishers. What Anand did in his *Untouchable* perhaps conformed to Foster's views of fiction. Anand's own formulations in this regard further substantiate the affinity between the two great writers of the age. Anand's view of the novel conforms to the classical nineteenth century conception of it, with the difference that he takes the social responsibility of the novelist even more seriously than the Victorians did. At the same time, the writer also lets the readers form their impression about the characters from their situation and their dialogues.

The instructive commentary and the direct communication proceed side by side to make the narrative effective. The form and organisation of *Untouchable* is unusual as compared to that of *Coolie*. It is not only compact and well knit but more modern in its narration: "in fact Anand acknowledges the influence of 'Stream of Consciousness' technique on his narrative art in *Untouchable*." However, Anand claims to have modified and adopted the Joycean technique to suit his material and motive.

The fusion of the modes of fiction is best reflected in the structure of *Untouchable*. Anand has employed a fusion of the Western realistic tradition of the novel with the Indian tradition of the moral fable. This may, of course, be ascribed to Anand's Indian background and Western education. A moral fable exposes and then suggests a remedy - generally at the imaginative level - which may often be nothing better than a fantasy - and briefly hints at a better order, after the particular evil has been eradicated or overcome. The evil which is the subject of *Untouchable* is the evil of untouchability which makes the protagonist, who is not specially bothered by it at the beginning of the story, its victim.

Anand was very alive to the disconcerting problem of untouchability that had blighted the Indian society for so long. And as a social critic, he often uses the tool of irony to expose social evils. Untouchability is particularly vulnerable to ironic treatment as its practitioners are satanic in their hypocrisy and Pharisaical in their piety. Anand provides a lot of information about India, its historical, cultural and social aspects. At the same time he has succeeded in disseminating those ideas and the ideals that he held on to as a writer and as a social critic. The discussion of the two novels above makes it abundantly clear that Anand, like most Indo-English novelist, did not stick to

any one particular theory of the novel. He knew that novel, by its very nature, was a loose genre and allowed the writer to use it according to his purpose and motive. Anand has followed the old age conventions of the novel, but has also departed from them at places to make his works richly appealing. If he has followed the conventional mode of story-telling, he has also chosen to keep it to the bare minimum as in *Untouchable*, and instead built his novels on character, dialogue and interior monologue. He has also employed deviant linguistic modes to achieve the desired effects according to his intention. Through this freedom of using conventions and modes, Anand has succeeded in truth telling and putting the reality straight.

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