



Problem of Identity in Anand's Untouchable

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Abstract

R.K Narayan (1906- 2001), Raja Rao (1908- 2006) and Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) are the 'triumvirs' of the modern Indo- English novel. Their contribution to the Indian English novel makes it so rich that it can honourably be placed with the English novel as a whole. Out of these three pillars of the Indo – English novel, Mulk Raj Anand is a forerunner of what is called today the Dalit Literature. The Dalit Literature became an independent identity in 1973 with the conference of this literature held at Nagpur in 1976. But it became a regular movement in the year 1990. Between 1976 and 1990 Mulk Raj Anand wrote his first novel Untouchable (1935) which exclusively deals with the scourge of untouchability. The principal character of the novel is Bakha, a low caste who represents the down trodden society of the pre-Independence India. The novel deals with a day in the life of Bakha and the novelist shows that from dawn to dusk he is subjected to inhuman behaviour and exploitation by the people of the higher castes. The community in which the protagonist lives is devoid of the basic necessities of life. They are not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, and also they are not allowed to fetch water from the well. Looking at the atrocities of the Hindu higher castes perpetrated on Bakha, the Christian missionary Hutchinson allures him to become a Christian as there is no caste consciousness and there is no difference between the higher and the lower in the eyes of Christ. Bakha does not succumb to the Christian allurements and comes under the Indian hero Gandhi who is bent upon eradicating caste differences. He accepts his identity as an untouchable as he says: "For them I am a sweeper, sweeper- untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!"

The word "Dalit" may be derived from Sanskrit and means "ground," "suppressed," "crushed," or "broken to pieces." Dalit in general are those oppressed classes which are economically and socially backward and also those who are the victims of orthodox Brahmin caste ideology. Historically, India as a society had been mostly understood in the background of her caste or Varna system. The Varna system is one of the controversial Indian phenomenon. However one may find that this system was simply to ensure a

healthy and flexible society unlike the one which has been rigidified due to colonial misinterpretation and mistreatment of *varnas*, resulting in caste which we find in the present day India. The Varna was flexible but it became solidified through *jati*. The four major castes include the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriya (warriors), and the Vaishyas (traders) and the Shudras (menial workers). All these castes (Pariahs, Chamars, Mahars, Bangis and so on) are the oppressed classes in the so called upper class

society. Slavoj Zizek wrote in his essay 'Apostate Children of God' that how Brahmin ideology sustained itself as elite ideology through the strategic usage of Vedic scripture. Zizek quotes:

Laws of Manu stages a radical shift with regard to its starting point: the ancient code of Veda. What we find in Veda is the brutal cosmology based on killing and eating: higher things kill and eat/consume lower ones, stronger eat weaker that is life is a zero sum game where one's victory is another's defeat. The "great chain of being" appears here as founded in the food chain, the great chain of eating: gods eat mortal humans, humans' eat mammals, mammals eat lesser humans who eat plants, plants "eat" water and earth such is the external cycle of being. So why does the Veda claims that at the top society are not the warrior-kings stronger than all other humans, "eating" them all but the caste of priest?

When the explanation of the existence of humanity came into the hands of Brahmin (slavoj) they interpreted the Vedic knowledge for their own profit. This in turn made Brahmanism explicitly exclusive. For example, when the socially backward people like dalit did not have access to the sacred and elite language Sanskrit (also called the language of god), they were devoid of truth of the sacred texts written in language, Brahmins were the mediator who used to interpret these texts. So in a way dalits were mentally colonised, they were not allowed to see the other side of the history. The strategy of exclusivism can be understood through Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* where through

conversation and abusive slippages he discusses the logic behind the deprivation of dalit entity.

Untouchability and Caste are the most notorious evils of the Indian society. Both untouchability and caste are cruel forms of slavery which lead to denial of human rights. In Ambedkar's view the caste system is a social division of people of same race. He puts that "Caste is the bane of Hindus. Caste is cause of downfall of the Hindus. Owing to the caste Hindus life has been life of continuous defeats. Caste has ruined the Hindu race and has destroyed demoralized and devitalized Hindu society".

All the various literature written on and from the perspective of Dalits has always aimed at the liberation of Dalits. However even before Dalit writings were popularised the sad plight of the dalit, the untouchables and the downtrodden of India found voice in the writings of Mulk Raj Anand. Anand has given a vision to the pains, frustrations, sufferings etc of the dalits which his evident through his work the *Untouchable* (1935). In fact E.M Forster wrote, in the Preface, about *Untouchable*: "*Untouchable* could only have been written by an Indian who observed from the outside... And no Untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position. By caste he is a Kshatriya, and he might have been expected to inherit the pollution-complex. But as a child he played with the children of the sweepers attached to an Indian regiment, he grew fond of them, and to understand a tragedy he did not share".

India is a democratic country where all the people are considered equal and also there is no place for untouchability. But even today caste plays a primary role in determining the status of

an individual. The sufferings of the untouchables are innumerable and cannot be defined. They are discriminated on the basis of their birth, the menial tasks they do and are given mental and physical torture. In the novel *Untouchable* the protagonist Bakha is shown as a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak and thoroughly Indian. But even then he is never appreciated instead he is humiliated and is given a dose of abuses. *Untouchable* is fictional representation of untouchables during the 1920's and 30's through the story of a day in the life of Bakha. Bakha the sweeper rebels against the established social order of the society in order to gain equality and identity. Anand as a child had played with the children of the sweepers attached to an Indian regiment, he grew fond of them. He has just tried to put all his memories of childhood in his novel making them violent critiques of casteism and a bitter exposure of inhuman treatment meted out to them the so called 'untouchables' or Shudras.

The untouchable community in the novella is devoid of basic necessities of life: they cannot fetch water from well on their own but have to wait for someone to give them the water. The well becomes a juncture of complex relationship between the upper and the lower castes and also between the lower and the lowest caste. For example, Gulabo, the washer woman, discourages Sohini, Bakha's sister from taking water ('Go back home,' said Gulabo mockingly. 'There is no one to give you water here!') (Anand 16). The purity cult again seems to be prevalent here which has pervaded even within the lower castes to create disparity among them as well. The caste of Gulabo by conforming to the purity cult transacts power with both the upper as well as

lower caste. However, largely they both are treated inhumanely. All this becomes even more troubled when brought in the stark contrast with the agendas of Gandhi's humanistic concern.

Upper Caste people like Kalinath inherit the religious education which had been manipulated by their prejudiced ancestors and they knowingly or unknowingly oppress the underprivileged class. Now, when human morality is intuitive, it is certainly the dominant class which will assert it and so if persons like Bakha's father, Lakha, think that he and his class are destined to work under other upper caste people then, it is the subjective belief of ages that speaks through him or his class. At the same time they are not allowed to get themselves educated and these are social restrictions like they are not allowed to sit with non-untouchables or to enter the temple. So, this coercion is the restriction to the formation of their individual being and without it any notion of liberal state fails. For even if one accepts that they are taught by Brahmins and "the compulsion is justified by education for future insight" (Berlin 196), they are taught so that upper caste meet their personal ends. In fact, I will not say it education by compulsion but rather informing falsely about religion by coercion. Had Brahmins been true to their teachings they would have taught egalitarianism.

So as downtrodden, Bakha is helpless from all sides. He has an ability to observe the society and point out the problems "How queer, the Hindus don't feed their cows although they call the cow "mother"!" (Anand, 45) He therefore is able to reason out very well the discrimination done with his caste from the religious point of view. Religion, therefore, plays here an important role in determining the behavioural pattern and its

relation to the values they believe in. It also distinguishes between acceptable and non acceptable and people do believe in such values because where in totality did the meaning of scriptures and religion receded and where the authority of such scriptures materialized is untraceable and so it keeps the people under illusion.

In modern India, this primitive work based caste system in which the class got permanently recognized as caste, needs reformation and therefore intervention by the State. In the novel *Untouchable*(1935), Mulk Raj Anand provides adequate instances regarding how Bakha's individuality gradually arrived: he identifies his individuality when he finds that Tommies (English men) were at ease and developed candid relations with him without much trouble so unlike his upper caste countrymen.

The analytic trip of Bakha comes to a halt when he is on his way to hear the speech by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi makes an enchanting comment on scavenging:

"Therefore I prayed that, if I should be born again, I should be so, not as a *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra*, but as an outcaste, as an *Untouchable*. I love scavenging. In my ashram an eighteen-year-old Brahmin lad is doing a scavenger's work, in order to teach *ashram* scavenger cleanliness."(Anand 138)

Gandhi again emphasizes on purity cult but deeper than that he loves scavenging and wants scavenger to be clean. It seems as if Gandhi is promoting clean scavenging. Zizek writes in this regard:

... (Gandhi) emphasized the importance of scavenging and celebrated the Untouchables for performing this "sacred" mission. It is here that the Untouchables are exposed to the greatest ideological temptation: in a way which prefigures today's "identity politics," Gandhi is allowing them to "fall in love with themselves" in their humiliating identity, to accept their degrading work as a noble necessary social task, to perceive even the degrading nature of their work as a sign of their sacrifice, of their readiness to do the dirty job for society. (Zizek)

Bakha, enchanted with the speech of Gandhi hopes for better tomorrow. It is at this point that he feels a sort of spiritual elevation, an epiphanical moment ("a sudden impulse shot through the transformations of space and time") (Anand, 1935: 147-148) which for Bakha appears as boon. There is yet another perspective within the novella in the form of the poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar, after the spiritual message of Gandhi ji that if scavengers change their profession they will end their caste and modern sanitary system, the flush, will bring about the solution. Poet says, "Then the sweepers can be free from the social stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society."(Anand 145-146) This individuality wholly arrived after the speech he heard of Mahatma Gandhi makes him aware of self identity and he stops imitating Tommies and tries to discover the world of freedom which could enhance his being. This self-restraint, rational self direction is what we can call

individuality in true terms and not simply of priorities of individual being.

As far as individuality is concerned Anand has very efficiently depicted it but it seems more contrived when one views it in relation with the religion. In representing the untouchables, Mulk Raj has worked on the minutest detail of their caste and the problems. For the novel is about their identity and the way they were to be portrayed needed a good deal of contemplation. But there is one incident which to me looked contrived and rather exaggeration of their being ignorant. The incident is as follows:

“Bakha had got his answer. The word ‘Ram’ he had heard very often, also ‘Sri, Sri’, and he had seen a red shrine with a monkey carved on a wall, caged from without with brass bars- that he knew was called the shrine. Krishna was the blue god who played the flute in the coloured pictures of the betel-leaf-seller’s shop in the street. But who was Hari, Narayan? And he was more completely baffled when a man passed by repeating ‘Om, Om, Shanti Deva.’ Who was Shanti Deva? Was he in temple?” (Anand, 49)

Bakha had been abused many times throughout the novel and he had learnt to improve despite such abuses and coercion or restraint. He had asked many thought provoking question from Tommies as well as from Indian babus then how is it that he never enquired about gods from relevant authorities? But again a few pages down:

“Jesus! Who was Jesus! The same as Yessuh Messih? Who was he? The sahib says he is god. Was he a god like Rama, God of the Hindus, whom his father

worshipped and his forefathers had worshipped...” (Anand 118)

Thus from the forgoing account of the treatment of the story of Bakha it is evident that Mulk Raj Anand was much too concerned about the problems and predicaments of the Untouchables in the Indian society. He was highly impressed by Gandhi ji’s answer to the serious problem of untouchables and as such this novel is a fictional transmutation of the problems of Dalit identity in India.

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