



Research Article

SOCIAL REALISM IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE AND COOLIE

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ABSTRACT

The present research article is an attempt to study social realism in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. As a novelist Anand had a concept of realism which is as much a result of his studies as of his experiences and observations. Not only this, he must have, it may be assessed, sufficiently thought over his problems as a writer before he actually choose to be a novelist. Anand wanted to reveal life in all its contrarities. Besides, he also wanted to create awareness in the reader. The safest and the most objective assessment of the genius of Anand should be to call him a social realist observation of what was happening in the society in which he lived during his days. Anand has painted *Untouchable* and *Coolie* with the colors of social realism. These two novels are hard core reality of the Indian society of early decades of twentieth century. The novels describe the sufferings of the protagonists, and record the miseries felt by them. Thus, both these two pieces have together occupied a special place in Indian literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand has painted *Untouchable* and *Coolie* with the colors of social realism. These two novels are hard core reality of the Indian society of early decades of twentieth century. The two novels describe the sufferings of the protagonists, and record the miseries felt by them. These two pieces have together occupied a special place in Indian literature. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* give a voice to the predicament of the mute humanity in vicious circumstances. The suffering is not caused by fate but by fellow human and the social surroundings from which the sufferers still have great and immortal hopes for betterment of life. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* are the sagas of suffering of the protagonists - Bakha and Munoo. Anand is considered a reformer; he does so because it is one of his aims to disturb his readers' complacency to shock them out of conventional attitudes, and encourage them to make a fresh approach to experience. In *Untouchable* it is that of a progressive revolutionary, of a humanist who is all compassion for the working, downtrodden classes, and the social outcasts. Being a realist whose social realism has an unmistakable streak of Marxism in it, he carries his readers along, wins their confidence and establishes a close, harmonious relationship with them as well as with his characters. Anand lays stress on the demands of the present; he refuses to be bound by stale custom and orthodoxy. In fact, his novels convey emotional truths as well as social realities and the beauty of his art of fiction is well

realized by way of analysis and interpretation of social problems and of corrupt practices in *Coolie*, *Untouchable*, *The Big Heart* and *Two Leaves And A Bud*. He combines wide experience with architectonic skill, cosmic vision with objective truth, as in *Coolie*, a novel instinct with epic amplitude and magnificence. It is a fact that he never allows idealism to eclipse his vision of social reality. In *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, Anand reveals the curse of untouchability, exploitation, child labor, social governance, social set up of society, customs, religion belief, prejudices and the theme of the miserable masses is studied in a rural and urban setting where hunger and starvation are caused by the operation of natural forces. This is nothing but a reflection of the society. Both these novels deal with the theme of untouchability, exploitation, poverty, hunger and the suffering of the Indian masses. The theme of suffering caused by vicious circumstances in life has been realistically depicted, and the heroic struggle of the central figures, against heavy odds, raises the novels to the lofty heights of an epic.

Untouchable and *Coolie* are called epics of social realism as they have all the qualities of great epics though in different ways. According to the ancient Greeks, the epic is a narrative poem, longer in scope and size, having a divine inspiration. The characters in an epic poem can be partly human and partly divine. In epics, the action should be complete and grand. An epic hero is not an ordinary person. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* have the same qualities of epics. Francis H. Stoddard writes about novel which Sharma quotes as, "A novel is a narrative of human life under the stress of emotion. It differs from the epic in that. It is a narration of human

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rather than super human life, under the stress of ordinary rather than of excessive or heroic emotion.¹

In this sense, modern novel is closer to the epic in its endeavor of portraying modern man's predicament in a hostile environment. Novel tends to assume the form of an epic of common man in an ordinary everyday life. It realistically describes the various aspects of life. In this sense, *Untouchable* has epic dimensions as it deals with epic struggle of the Indian untouchable or the social backward class against the established social order and on other hand, *Coolie*, the life history of Munoo is the life history of starving millions of India who are beaten from pillar to post, and being over worked and treated as beasts of burden, they die prematurely of hunger, suffering and disease. Munoo is a universal figure, a larger than life character, and one who represents the suffering and starving millions of India.

Like Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, Premchand's *Godan*, Mulk Raj Anand has created a unique protagonist Bakha in *Untouchable* and Munoo in *Coolie*. In *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, Mulk Raj Anand presents the Indian downtrodden and laborers with their problems – social rejection, poverty, starvation, poor health, misery, death and humiliation. Anand's immortal creation of the protagonist Bakha and Munoo represent Indian society. One finds that in Bakha's life at each stage, tragedy deepens and intensifies, without any respite. Bakha is a poor untouchable, tradition-follower who is an idealist and cannot think of going against society, religion, beliefs and the 'agents' of religious institutions.

Anand has taken the theme of his novels from real life and so his novel is nothing but social realism. He brought to fictional life Bakha, his boyhood companion, the untouchable sweeper boy, in *Untouchable*. Anand's mother abused Bakha for 'polluting' her son when Bakha carried home a bleeding Anand, hurt by a stone. Bakha is reviled by caste Hindus as he cleans latrines; but Anand captures Bakha's pride in his work: he tackles his odious job with a conscientiousness that invests his movement with beauty. The novel was not only a powerful social tract, but a remarkable technical feat as in a single days action the author builds round his hero a spiritual crisis broad enough to embrace the whole of India. Forster wrote in its introduction: "It has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it."

Anand continued his interest in social themes with his next few novels dealing with the destiny of the working class in India. *Coolie* centered on Munoo, an orphan boy dying of tuberculosis brought on by malnutrition. It exposes the whole system through its victim's tale of exploitation. Even in the dreariest of surroundings, the little hero retains his qualities of warm-heartedness, love, comradeship and curiosity. In *The Village*, inspired by the experience of Anand's mother's family whose land was taken away by the landlord of the village, the novelist explores the state of the poor peasantry under British rule.

The underdog protagonists Bakha and Munoo sail in the same boat as far as personal suffering is concerned. There is a similar central theme in *Untouchable* and *Coolie*-social exploitation, the exploitation of the poor and the underprivileged by the forces of capitalism, industrialism and colonialism. In Anand's *Coolie*, Munoo is denied his fundamental right to life and happiness and is exploited and

made to suffer, till he dies of consumption. The novelist makes it quite clear that Munoo is not the only victim of such exploitation. He represents millions of those for whom such exploitation and denial of life and happiness is the lot of everyday life. The lot of the poor is equally wretched and miserable whether in rural or urban India. Whether in a village like Bilaspur or small town like Sham Nagar or big cities like Daulatpur and Bombay the story of suffering is the same.

Such painful journey of Bakha and Munoo is a unique feature for the study of comparative aspects found beautifully woven in these extra ordinary epics of miseries by Anand. Both the novels have similarities in their social background, exploitation by landlords and masters, ill fate created by surroundings, social beliefs, cumulative torture, unfulfilled desires from life. Yet the protagonists make constant though painful journey in life with the hope of betterment and at last both Bakha and Munoo are crushed under heavy burdens of life and get disintegrated into ashes with the so called pure and religious dust of mother India.

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Mulk Raj Anand has presented the miserable condition of social backward class and coolies in India. Both these novels have been written with a purpose. These novels are powerful indictment of modern capitalistic Indian society and feudal system with the shameless and tragic exploitation of the underdog and poor. Both the protagonists want to live but the society does not allow them to live. They die of exploitation, poverty and hunger. If the poor are treated humanely, most of the social problems can be solved easily. Humanism is the only solution to the problems.

The theme of the novel - untouchability it self is very realistic. *Untouchable* is a realistic novel of socially crushed protagonist Bakha. It is a slice from a life without any modification. The novel begins with a realistic picture of the outcastes' colony. The local color of the novel is evoked with the photographic realism and accuracy. Anand describes, "The outcastes' colony was a group of mud walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odor of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to beamed into fuel cakes."²

This realistic description is what Anand himself has seen and presented as it is. This mode of realistic description continues throughout the novel. Anand has painted the realistic colony

where untouchables and other outcaste people stay and wait to be humiliated by others caste Hindu. From the description of the novel, it looks like that Anand has spent a day with Bakha and observed it minutely. It is very much real and true. Bakha's day starts as writes, "Bakha thought of the uncongeniality of his of his home as he lay half awake in the morning of an autumn day, covered by a worn-out, greasy blanket, on a faded blue carpet which was spread on the floor in a corner of the cave like, dingy, dank, one-roomed mud house. His sister slept on a cot next to him and his father and brother snored from under a patched, ocher-colored quilt, on a broken string bed, on the other side."³ This is the reality what one can see in the hut of an untouchable. Anand observes and presents the real photographic picture.

Certainly Anand's novel untouchable is a masterly work because it evinces a happy harmony between his social preoccupations and artistic gifts. As Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar sums up the novel, "Untouchable strikes us as the picture of the place of a society, and the certain persons not easily to be forgotten; a picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy. As a novelist addressing himself to the task of exposing certain evils, Anand has been as effective as Dickens himself."⁴

CONCLUSION

Thus, Anand has exposed social evil in its myriad manifestations and has evocatively presented different layers of human experience in the fiction. He enables to view humanity at large in a proper perspective. His close association with the underdogs and his passionate recordation of their woes has given his novel a rare cogency and an intimate quality of felt life.

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