

Kaleidoscopic Portrayal of Early Twentieth-Century British India: A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is considered one of the pioneering Indian writers in English of Anglo-Indian fiction who gained international acclaim. Along with R.K. Narayana, and Raja Rao, he is popularly known as the trio of Indian English novelists. He marked his revolutionary appearance by giving voice to the oppressed section of the society with his novel, *Untouchable* in 1935. In this novel, he takes a day from the life of Bakha, a young sweeper who is an untouchable because of his work of cleaning latrines in the early 20th century British India. Discrimination based on caste and poverty are the two focal points of this novel. This paper aims at portraying a kaleidoscope of socio-cultural, economic and political spheres of life. It aims at painting the unexplored, and less talked vistas of life. Hence while revisiting untouchability and poverty, this paper offers an analysis to a variety of colours or a collage of varied aspects of human life.

Keywords: Kaleidoscope, Collage, Discrimination, Untouchable

Mulk Raj Anand unfolds the multi-coloured facets of life in *Untouchable* by depicting a day from the life of a young sweeper boy of eighteen years. The novel is set in the north Indian cantonment town Bulashah in the early 1930s colonial India. The central concern of the novel is showcasing the discrimination based on caste through the experiences of Bakha's family, with the untouchable's experiences, and through the perceptions and behaviour of the upper caste Hindus. Besides the slime of untouchability Mulk Raj Anand presents the abject poverty with local colour, an inclination towards the western culture, propagation of Christianity as white man's burden, political upheaval, Mahatma Gandhi's activeness with social and political agendas, Sense of fear among the rulers, abuses of social evils, hypocrisy of the adorable Pundits and kind nature of some upper caste officials, Bakha's experiences in his family, while cleaning the public latrines, his experience of touching inadvertently with an upper-caste Hindu in the town, flinging of breads at him by a woman in silversmith alley, attempt of the Pundit to molest Bakha's sister Sohini in the temple, Bakha's experience with Hawildar Charat Singh and Colonel Hutchinson, His and his friends fancies for the English lifestyle, practices of fetching water at the well, and Bakha's experience during Mahatma Gandhi's address to the congregation, all bring vivid images of varied hues of social, economic, political, and culture of that time before one's eyes. Mulk Raj Anand depicts the events realistically as, "realism is said to represent the life as it really is" (Abrams 333).

While portraying the slur of discrimination based on caste, the novelist shares the two most poignant experiences of Bakha and acquaints the readers with a discriminatory practice at well through Sohini's Experience. Bakha is a dexterous worker who does his duty with devotion. His work is appreciated by his seniors and all who comes across it. He pays special attention to his looks as he is inclined towards the Western culture i.e. dress sense, manners, habits etc.

When he visits the town to sweep in turn of his father, he touches someone in ignorance, and the touched person, an upper-caste Hindu shouts at him, ““Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new *dhoti* and shirt I put on this morning!” (38). Listening to these abuses Bakha gets confused that what has happened. A crowd gathers on the spot and encircling Bakha favouring the touched man. Bakha had taken *jalebis* to eat which fall while rushing up and mix up in dust. He curses himself for being untouchable. While returning to his home, he visits a home in silversmith’s alley for food. He shouts for food and when no one listens as he was tired sits on the doorstep. When the lady of the house sees him there, she shouts at him, “Why did you sit on my doorstep, if you had to sit down at all? You have defiled my religion! You should have sat there in the gully! Now I have to sprinkle holy water all over the house!” (63). Thereafter, she tells him to sweep the gutter; she busies herself with the home chore. When she reminds him that she has to give food to Bakha, she throws it towards Bakha from the upper storey instead of handing it over to him after coming downstairs. As per Hindu religion the entry of a sweeper pollutes the home, and it needs purification. Bread is thrown at him most disrespectfully. Another prevalent social evil regarding the norms of fetching water from the public well has been introduced through the experience of Bakha’s sister Sohini. She was on the eleventh number, and all of them were the untouchables. The untouchables are not allowed here to step up the well. They are not allowed to touch anything of the well. They are just supposed to wait at a marked distance for the mercy of some upper Caste Hindu, and sometimes half-day passes while waiting.

The opening of the novel provides the local colour with the description of the outcastes’ colony as:

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 washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters, and other outcasts from the 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 odour 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 be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. (1)

Besides the ugly, filthy, miserable and unhygienic description of the lowest people of Indian society hinting at their poor economic conditions, the novelist acquaints with certain typical Indian habits like drinking sips of tea after blowing air on it. If Lakha drinks tea voicelessly it gives no flavour to him. Bakha's uncle says that the Englishmen do not enjoy the full flavour of the tea as they do not blow on it.

Thereafter, the novelist brings into light the hypocrisy of the Brahmins who declare themselves polluted on a mere touch of an untouchable, and need purification through the character of Pundit Kali Nath, an old priest. When eleven untouchables were waiting for some upper caste person at the well to give them water, Pundit Kali Nath happens to pass from there, and all of them request him to give water but he gives water to Sohini only. He has seen her earlier too while cleaning latrines, and now he scans her body, her full blossoming breasts. He tells her to come to clean some part of the temple after leaving water at home, as she asks her father, Lakha who permits her without any second thought. When Bakha was there to sweep in the temple, the cry, 'Polluted, polluted, polluted' (52) disturbs him. The Pundit shouts at Bakha "Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service. You have

defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purification ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog!” (53). Bakha was running towards his sister who was standing in fear behind the priest on steps. The priest here argues falsely to cover up the incidents before the people who have gathered there after *arti*. He instigates the crowd there that they are also polluted from a distance as he says, “A temple can be polluted according to the Holy books by a low caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it, and here he was actually on the steps, at the door. We are ruined. We will need to have a sacrificial fire in order to purify ourselves and our shrine” (53). All this he says to divert from the issue of his lustful deeds. Sohini was just sobbing, Bakha angrily shouts, “Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if . . .’ ‘He-e-e just teased me’, she at last yielded. ‘And then when I was bending down to work, he came and held me by my breasts’” (54). Listening to these words of his sister, Bakha loses his control, rushes towards the Pundit to kill him, but Sohini drags him back and pacifies him. Pin drop silence prevails there. The Pundit Kali Nath’s character exposes the dual standard of the Upper caste people or the priests who wish instant gratification of their desires without any barriers of caste or class, but never wish to get it exposed anyway to save the dignity of their profession or caste even at the cost of lies leaving no stone unturned to turn the situations in their favour.

Despite living in abject poverty, and experiencing the victimization of the slime of untouchability, the novel presents the fancies of the young generation towards the English lifestyle and manners. Bakha is the typical representative of it. While spending sometime in the British Cantonment, Bakha has observed their life closely and is impressed with the glamour of their life. He keeps fancying, “I will look like a Sahib” (3). Following his dream of looking and living like an English man, he manages to buy a jacket, an overcoat and a blanket from perquisite; he also manages to buy a chair although broken the “only article of furniture of

European design” (14); his habit of drinking tea with noiseless sips without blowing on it; his attempts to possess the solar hat; his intentions of getting the trousers from the Christian Priest Colonel Hutchinson; his wish to learn spoken English; and enjoying cigarettes with his friends Chota and Ram Charan all become representative of the actualization of his dreams.

The only character in the novel who shows kindness, human values, compassion, and humanity is Hawildar Charat Singh, one of the best hockey players of the regiment, who inspires Bakha and other children at playing hockey. Although he mocks at Bakha’s western dress, however, he says, ‘Come this afternoon, Bakhe. I shall give you a hockey stick’ (9). He knows about Bakha’s passion for hockey and when he hands over the hockey, he tells him not to reveal it to anyone and motivates him to practice with friends. He is the only person who has selfless motives in interacting with Bakha and other kids.

Colonel Hutchinson, the priest is the representative of the Christian missionaries in India. He is much liked by the untouchable colony dwellers. After tormented experiences of the day, and thereafter being reprimanded by his father for wasting the afternoon, Bakha turns extremely upset leaves home, leaving playing hockey sits under the *peepal* tree near the latrines holding his head in his hands pondering over his destiny and faults in a hope that he would be joined by his friends Chota and Ram Charan for consolation, but after a long time he hears an unfamiliar voice, “‘*turn udas*’ (You are sad)” (113) when he looks up he finds Colonel Hutchinson standing in front of him, he feels surprised at the broken Hindi and the sympathy being showered by an English man. He instantly recognizes the missionary who gets mixed with the natives and have converted many natives to Christianity with his freely mixing up with the natives and by impressing them with Hindi although broken one. He says “‘ I am padre [priest] and my God is *YessuhMessih*’ and ‘If you are in trouble, come to the Jesus in the *giriya ghar* [Church]’” (115).

Bakha baffles by the identity of Jesus as the priest says that, 'Life is found in Jesus' (116) as he is his God. Anyhow, Bakha follows the priest towards the Church not because the priest could have convinced him to convert to Christianity, but just in a hope that the English man can gift his trousers. Although Bakha thinks at times that there would be no issue in his conversion if gets satisfactory answers to his questions from the priest, the priest could not convince him in the first meeting.

Thereafter the novelist acquaints the readers with the active role of Mahatama Gandhi for liberating the nation from the British rulers and his attempts at bringing reforms in the majoritarian Hindu society. Mahatma Gandhi who is the leader of the mass natives is banned from talking on the issue of *swaraj* or self-governance. "Mahatma Ji is not speaking about *swadeshi*, or on civil disobedience,' put in a congress volunteer authoritatively. 'The government has allowed him out of goal only if he will keep strictly within the limits of his propaganda for *harijans* (men of God, as Gandhi chooses to call the Untouchables), for the removal of untouchability'" (131-132). Bakha comes to know from the people in the congregation that the British government is afraid of him as he intends to depart them from India. When Mahatma appears before the congregation, the devotees shout slogans like, "Mahatama Gandhi-ki jai'. 'Hindu-Mussulman-Sikh ki-jai, Harijan ki-jai'" (133). This shows that how the native people had brought themselves under one umbrella irrespective of their distinct religions. Mahatma Gandhi had become their voice for the larger welfare of the natives approaching self-governance. He appeals before the upper Hindu castes to pay due respect to the *harijans* to root out the stigma of discrimination from the society, and to move ahead to achieve the bigger goals for the nation by promoting the indigenous articles.

The above collage of varied word images introduces the readers to the multi-coloured facets of life in Colonial India. It acquaints with the hierarchical set up of the society where the untouchables are not treated as humans, economic helplessness of the poor, lustfulness of the upper caste men and at the same time their being hypocrite, western culture's glamorous influence on the native young generation, family relationships, gossips of the village women, parents' watch on their kid's company, the kindness of officers with untouchables, Christian missionaries on their mission by winning the confidence of the natives, at the same time the stronghold of Mahatma Gandhi on the hearts and minds of the native people to remove untouchability, to discard foreign clothes, to promote *swadeshi*, and to obtain self-governance irrespective of caste, class and religion. Mulk Raj Anand transmits the readers to 1930s British India with a minute and vivid description of multifarious issues.

Works Cited

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