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VIEWING THE DOWNTRODDEN IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S FICTION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *UNTOUCHABLE* AND *COOLIE*

Abstract: The paper examines through the characters portrayed in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie* the effect of the caste factor and the class factor in the life of the downtrodden in pre-independence India and explores the comparability of woes and sufferings of a low-caste untouchable and a high-caste poor. It is found that both these factors contribute almost equally to the miseries of the downtrodden comprising the untouchables and the poor irrespective of their social classes. Further, the paper views where the high-caste poor stand in the society, by examining the nature of dishonour they suffer from in comparison to that suffered by the untouchables. It appears that woes and miseries of a high-caste poor are no less acute than those of an untouchable, and even though there seems to be a possibility of finding a solution to the problem of untouchability, the problem of poverty seems to be more vexed and complicated with no cognizable solution in sight because of the increasing complexities in the class factor.

Key words: *caste system, class system, untouchables, high caste poor, downtrodden*

Introduction:

Two distinct social systems, the caste system and the class system, stratify the Indian society creating a multitude of complex and intriguing social problems. The caste system is based on birth origin and hereditary profession whereas the class system is based on affluence, education and power. Each of the two systems gives rise to a social hierarchy in terms of relative social authority, status and dignity, from lower to higher. The age-old caste system applies to the Hindus only whereas the class system applies to the entire population irrespective of caste, creed and even religion. The caste system divides the Hindus into four main categories known as the *varnas*, namely, Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors and nobility), Vaishyas (agriculturists, traders and artisans), and Shudras (tenant farmers and servants) in descending order of social dignity and status. Again each varna comprises a number of castes with variations in status and dignity in society. But all these categories and subcategories do not include all the Hindus. A section of the Hindus is excluded from this categorization and called the *ashprishas* (*untouchables/outcastes*), and placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, making them do the dirtiest work like scavenging and toilet cleaning and bear all the social disgrace. The untouchables are considered the lowest caste in the Hindu society. But this is not the end – each caste is graded into subcastes with varying status and dignity in the society. So the caste system is a very complex network of social divisions of the Hindus – a Hindu inherits the label of his/her caste by birth origin and this label is unalterable even by changing his/her hereditary profession or raising his/her economic

condition, and accordingly it becomes impossible to get rid of the social stigma he/she has to face because of his/her caste affiliation.

On the other hand the class system was originally a two-tier system comprising two classes only – the rich and the poor, somewhat comparable to Marx's bourgeoisie and proletariat. But in the mid-nineteenth century the imperial ideology of expansion of English education in India with the chief aim to produce 'Indians by blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, in intellect' (Macaulay, Clause 34)) creates a new class of Indians gaining government jobs for their English education and being attracted to British culture and thinking. This class of people, later called the middle class, makes the existing two-tier system a three-tier one comprising the lower class, the middle class and the upper class determined by the criteria of affluence, education and power. But with passage of time this class system expands enormously dividing each class into numerous subclasses making it impossible to demarcate the classes or the subclasses. The way of living or the standard of living of a person serves a useful gauge to measure or to have an idea of, his/her status in the class hierarchy. The people in the lower strata of both the hierarchies constitute what is called the downtrodden - the people who are oppressed, exploited or treated badly by those in the upper strata of the hierarchies, and who are often struggling for social justice.

The two systems, the caste system and the class system, give the complete but complex classification or stratification of the Indian society. While describing the complexity of the caste-class relationship K. L. Sharma remarks:

Caste and class are viewed as the two most significant dimensions of social stratification. They are considered closely interrelated, almost inseparable, basic processes of social life. It is one thing that caste is viewed as a sole model for analysing Indian society or class is used for analysing caste and power, but it is quite different in real life as caste and class are not only highly differentiated internally, complexities of their expression and articulation signify the vast ramifications of structural social inequality. (Sharma 1)

The complexity of India's social classification intrigues the colonial British from the beginning and they chose to handle cautiously any social issue during their rule. The early British view, somewhat imprecise, of the Indian social system finds expression in T. C. Hodson's remark quoted by Kevin Hobson:

As late as 1937, Professor T. C. Hodson stated that: 'Class and caste stand to each other in relation to family to species; the general classification is by classes, the detailed one by castes. The former represented the external view whereas the latter the internal view of the social organization.' (Hobson 1)

However Hobson himself does not stand by Hodson's view and he gives his own view thus:

The difficulty with definitions such as this (Hodson's) is that class is based on political and economic factors, caste is not. In fairness to Professor Hodson by the time of his writing, caste had taken many of the characteristics that he ascribed to it, but during the 19th century caste was not what the British believed to be. It did not constitute a rigid description and social level of

a given group and it did not bear any resemblance to the class system. (Hobson 1)

The sufferings of the downtrodden are the thematic concerns in Anand's famous novels, *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, with pre-independence settings. The protagonist of *Untouchable* is expectedly an untouchable while that of *Coolie* is a high-caste poor.

Born on 12 December, 1905, in Peshawar (now in Pakistan) Mulk Raj Anand had his education in Khalsa College, Amritsar, University College, London, and Cambridge University from where he earned his Ph.D degree in Philosophy. Anand authored nine novels in English during 1935 to 1961, *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) being the first two. For his very realistic and sympathetic portrayal of the downtrodden in these two novels he earned the reputation of being called Charles Dickens of India. Mulk Raj Anand together with R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao is considered a pioneer in the field of postcolonial Indian fiction in English. Anand died on 28 September, 2004, in Pune.

Untouchable

Bakha, the protagonist in *Untouchable*, is a sweeper boy, a scavenger, a latrine cleaner, and therefore an untouchable. Anand touchingly narrates a day in the life of Bakha, from morning till his return to his home in the evening, bringing to focus the social miseries and injustice an untouchable has to suffer from during the day. Bakha gets up from bed in the morning and begins the day swallowing a volley of scornful abuses from high caste Habilder Charat Singh of the nearby cantonment where Bakha goes to work every day:

Oh, Bakhya! Oh, Bakhya! Oh, you scoundrel of a sweeper's son!
Come and clear a latrine for me! Why are not the latrines clean, you
rouge of a Bakhe! There is not one fit to go near! I have walked all
round. (Un 17)

Bakha tolerates and digests all such harsh and derisive abuses to begin the day because he is conscious of his caste status, because he believes he is destined by birth to get such treatment from the upper caste Hindus. The rigour of casteism has made him dumb and unable to protest.

When in his early childhood Bakha told his uncle that he had a dream of becoming a *babu* like those doing white colour jobs in the cantonment, the uncle replied that to fulfil his dream he would have to acquire education first. But when he reported his uncle's advice to his father he was very much disappointed, rather stunned, by what his father said to him: 'Schools were meant for the *babus*, not for the lowly sweepers.' (*Untouchable* 30) Bakha became very much depressed when he came to realize that 'there were degrees of castes among the low castes and that he was at the lowest.' (30). This realization came to Bakha when the washerman's son Ram Charan, himself an untouchable, boastfully told Bakha that he was a Hindu where Bakha was a mere sweeper. All this made Bakha in his childhood very much caste conscious, forced him to abandon his dream and reconcile to the life he was living. Such was the effect on those labelled untouchables by the society.

That morning after completing his work in the cantonment Bakha proceeds to the town, then to the temple to sweep and clean the courtyard. While on his way through the town the tempting look of the *jalebis* displayed in the Bengali sweetmeat shop attracts him, but when he wants to buy some, he is bewildered as he is asked by the shopkeeper to place 'four nickel

coins on the shoe-board for the confectioner's assistant who stood by to splash some water on them' (37) to purify the coins touched by an untouchable.

Bakha has to gobble one humiliation after another all throughout the day. When on the street Bakha accidentally brushes against a high-caste man, the man wails and swears at him with the foulest possible words for polluting him and his new clothes by his touch. Bakha's reaction finds expression in these words in the novel:

Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralyzed. ... The fellow's eyes were flaming and red-hot.' (38)

When the crowd standing around him takes sadistic delight in watching the incident, Bakha remains crest-fallen:

To Bakha, every second seemed an endless age of woe and suffering. His whole demeanour was concentrated in humility. ... His legs trembled and shook under him ... across.(41)

In such a society how can an untouchable imagine to pull off the stigma of being an untouchable? At the temple more humiliation awaits Bakha for being an untouchable. Out of curiosity Bakha climbs just five steps out of fifteen to have a peep into the temple which the untouchables are debarred to enter into, when a Brahmin below shouts, *polluted, polluted*, at the top of his voice followed by a warning from one of the crowd present there:

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 purifactory ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog. (53)

While the crowd is talking about *defilement from a distance* by the appearance of an untouchable on the steps of the temple, a priest is heard yelling that he has been '*defiled by contact*' (53). Bakha comes to know later from his sister Sohini who appears there what the priest means by defilement by contact:

... that man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled. (54)

This is a kind of real defilement of the temple – defilement by those who talk about defilement from a distance, who are posted there to maintain the *purity* of the temple in the real sense of the term.

The irrationality in the ideology of casteism causing social discrimination that exists for generations leaves the Bakhas in the Hindu society mentally crippled and incapable to protest the irrational. Even Bakha's father Rakha who accepts casteism as a norm advises him not to question the superiority of the high-caste Hindus: 'They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us.' (71)

But still Bakha has a dream; he rears a hope – the hope of seeing themselves as equal Hindus with other Hindus in the society. With this hope in mind Bakha joins the audience of the two speeches, the first delivered by Mahatma Gandhi, and the second by a young radical poet Iqbal Nath, as part of anti-untouchability campaign in the town that day. However, Gandhi's

speech does not impress him much and leaves him in confusion when Gandhi goes on appealing, throughout his speech, the high-caste Hindus to be sympathetic towards the untouchables without offering any practical solution to the problem. On the other hand, Bakha appreciates when the poet advocates the use of mechanical devices like flush system for cleaning toilets to get the dirty jobs done relieving the so-called untouchables from doing such work and making them free from the stigma of untouchability. The poet's ideology seems to be akin to that of B. R. Ambedkar on complete annihilation of caste with his assertion: 'Caste is a monster ... You cannot have economic reform unless you kill that monster'.(Ambedkar 233)

Bakha returns home with a ray of hope – the hope of beginning a new day, not as a sweeper, but as someone else leaving the dirty jobs to be done by machines, whispering to himself:

I shall go and tell my father all that Gandhi said about us, and all that the poet said. Perhaps I can find the poet some day and ask him about his machine. (148)

Anand's *Untouchable* is a superb narration of how the caste factor affects the feelings, woes and miseries, hopes and dreams, and in general, the life of an untouchable. But Anand's description of the evening when Bakha is returning home strikes an optimistic note:

The sun descended. The pale, the purple, the mauve of the horizon blended into darkest blue. A handful of stars throbbed in the heart of the sky. (148)

The handful of stars in the dark blue sky is symbolic of Bakha redeeming his hope of a new morning in his life.

Coolie

In *Coolie* proletarian misery and wretchedness are viewed through the eyes of a naive fourteen year old orphan Munoo, from a remote village in the Kangra hills, whose sufferings, though himself a high-caste Rajput, a Kshatriya belonging to the warrior caste, are no less acute than those of Bakha in *Untouchable*. While Bakha suffers from stigma of untouchability, Munoo suffers from that of poverty. What Munoo inherits from his parents is their impoverishment and tragedy as a result of landlordism and usury system:

He had heard of how the landlord had seized his father's five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when the rains had been scanty and the harvests bad. And he knew how his father had died a slow death of bitterness and disappointment and left his mother a penniless beggar, to support a young brother-in-law and a child in arms. (Coolie 2-3)

Munoo's parents are victims of class exploitation, something like exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, because they do not have money and power. When his parents perish, young Munoo sets out in search of livelihood, and moves from village to town, and from town to city, to distant places like Mumbai and Shimla, almost aimlessly and with uncertainty. His high-caste status does not help him raise his status in the society.

His journey seems to be full of thorns at every step; he is given a very low status in the society wherever he goes to work. Nobody cares about his caste status and treats him well

while he earns his livelihood working as a domestic servant or a factory menial or a *coolie* or a *rickshaw* puller. At every stage he has to suffer from ill-treatment, oppression and exploitation, and consequently from frustration and desperation.

Munoo experiences the first bout of ill-treatment and oppression at Babu Nathoo Ram's house where he is put as a household servant by his bullying uncle who appropriates his wages. The dirty abuses thrown upon him by Nathoo Ram's insensitive wife for the slightest folly of his make him conscious of his social position:

He realized finally his position in this world. He was to be a slave, a servant who should do the work, all the odd jobs, someone to be abused, even beaten, though as yet it had not come to that. He felt sad, lonely. (31)

He had to eat on his hands, being considered too low in status to be allowed to eat of the utensils. The insult stung him. He could hardly swallow his food. (32)

Dejection in the mind of Munoo, a high-caste but a downtrodden, is comparable to that of Bakha, an untouchable. He realizes that for the high-class people, he is like an outcaste, and that all this happens because of money, because of poverty. He finally realizes that money is all that matters in this world:

‘Money is, indeed, everything,’ Munoo now thought, and his mind dwelt for the first time on the difference between himself, the poor boy, and his masters, the rich people, between all the poor people in his village and Jay Singh's father, the landlord. (55)

Munoo's consciousness of belonging to high caste, but still working as a lowly domestic servant, makes him reflect thus:

I am a Kshatriya and I am poor. And Varma, a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial, because he is poor. No, caste does not matter. The Babus are like the Sahib-logs, all servants look alike: there must only be two kinds of people in the world, the rich and the poor. (55-56)

Munoo equates poverty to casteism, as both of them bring miseries to the downtrodden. Although of high caste, Munoo has never been considered a part of Nathoo Ram's family and he is forbidden to play with his children. When one day Munoo innocently flouts the order of his master and bites his daughter while playing, Nathoo Ram becomes furious, and slaps him hard with his thin hands and kicks him with his boots, and hits him with a thick stick blow after blow that makes him sweat. This startles Munoo :

‘... the boy's soul surged up in rebellion and hate, a hate of which he had not thought himself capable. He was startled. But he dared not revolt.’ (59)

It is hard to find any difference in the reaction and behaviour of the high-caste man whom untouchable Bakha accidentally touches in the street and those of Nathoo Ram when Munoo

bites his daughter while playing. It seems that caste and poverty are equally responsible for the miseries of the downtrodden.

To get rid of his miseries he runs away aimlessly and without destination from Nathoo Ram's house and boards a train where he comes into contact with a man Prabha Dayal, a coolie-turned-factory partner by his hard work and vision, who hails from Kangra Hills, Munoo's birth place. Out of sympathy and compassion for belonging to the same place Prabha gives Munoo a job in the pickle factory of which he is a partner of Seth Ganpat who is already in a higher slab in the class ladder. However, Prabha's endeavour to climb the class ladder brings his downfall being a victim of the Seth's jealousy and conspiracy against him making him mentally and economically broken, and he is left with no other alternative but to leave for his home place Kangra Hills. Prabha's misfortune has its obvious shadow on Munoo – Munoo loses his job, and then he begins the life of a *coolie* to earn his livelihood.

But Munoo soon gets disgusted working as a coolie, and looks for other avenues for a living: 'The only question that shaped in his mind was how to find work and where'(139). Munoo somehow manages a free ride to the city of Bombay(Mumbai) to try his luck there with the help of an elephant-driver of a circus party. Emerging from Victoria Terminus in Bombay the image of the dream city in Munoo's mind changes abruptly – it gives the impression of a 'strange, hybrid, complex, cosmopolitan' (152) city, and the warning of the elephant-driver while on the train flashes in his mind:

The bigger a city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adam ...
You have to pay even for the breath that you breathe. (152)

Munoo is completely disillusioned by what he sees and finds in Bombay:

'So even here the coolies sleep in the streets!' he suddenly realized, and the memory of the words of the coolie who had said that money was strewn about the streets of Bombay sounded falsely hollow in his brain. His throat was parched and dry with thirst. His limbs sagged. Before his mind's eye, arose the grim of the night coming and finding him alone and friendless in the streets. (155)

The very first day in the city exposes before Munoo humiliating class distinction in the urban society. Munoo enters into an upper class restaurant and asks for a drink of cold soda. The manager sternly instructs him not to sit on the chairs but to sit on the floor and then gives him the drink:

The sharp, cool, sweetish taste of the soda water tingled in Munoo's mouth and brought tears of acid into his eyes. He would have liked to have sipped it slowly and enjoyed the full flavour of the drink in comfort. But he was nervous and feeling extremely guilty for having intruded into the rich man's world. So he gulped the water down as fast as he could. And placing the glass in a corner, he made to go. (157)

Munoo's experience in the restaurant resembles that of Bakha in the Bengali sweet-meat shop - their experiences differ very little in nature, the caste factor and the class factor have almost equal impact on the downtrodden. However, Munoo has to continue his struggle for survival, and manages to get a menial's job in a cotton mill, Sir George White Cotton Mill, with the

The other novel, *Coolie*, asserts that poverty, i.e. the class factor, is equally responsible for bringing woes and miseries to a section of the population. The story of the novel shows clearly how poverty makes the downtrodden helpless and powerless, and therefore voiceless – voiceless to protest against injustice and infliction of ill-treatment they suffer from. For the protagonist Munoo, caste adds rather an emotional weight to his miseries on realizing that his high caste is of no use to minimize his miseries – Munoo's high caste does not ensure him a respectable status in the society because he is poor. The author seems to be clueless how to eradicate or minimize class discrimination, suppression, oppression and exploitation. The novel rather ends in a pessimistic note showing premature death of the protagonist.

The novels give the impression that of the two evils, poverty and untouchability, the first is worse than the second. It seems that there is a possibility to overcome the second, whereas no solution to the first is in sight. This is because the social class structure is becoming more and more complex with the emergence of multitude of classes and subclasses with the passage of time and the economic disparities between the classes widening abnormally making the struggle of the downtrodden harder and harder.

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