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Literature, Politics and Activism in Mulkraj Anand's "The Untouchables"

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ABSTRACT: Untouchable, is not only a novel but a work of social relevance. And when a novel has its social relevance that means it's a social novel. A social novel, sometimes also referred as social problem novel. It may be a work of fiction in which a prevailing social problem such as of gender, race, or class prejudice, is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel. But if the social problem discussed in the novel or any literary work is still prevailing in the society then the relevance of that particular work is still sought. Untouchable is a novel in which the burning issue of its time has been dramatized. As name suggests, untouchability remained the central issue in the novel. Mulk Raj Anand rose to the fame after the publication of Untouchable in 1935. Its social relevance can be measured by the fact that apart from a writer Mulk Raj Anand is also accredited as a social reformer. Most of his literary work remained attributed to the social cause especially to point out the social evil rooted in the society. Whether it is Untouchable, Coolie, Two Leaves and a Bud, Across the Black Waters, or The Sword and the Sickle all were dedicated to the downtrodden, deprived, socially and economically backward people of labour class, of lower strata of the society or the people of lower and abandoned caste and class. The author showed his personal sympathy to these sects of society. Indian society is a caste ridden society where caste based discrimination is an age old problem. From the ancient time to the modern, casteism remained a sensitive issue. The hero of the novel Untouchable, Bakha is an untouchable, around whom whole of the plot revolves. He is introduced to us on the very first page of the novel, as a young man of 18, who is in the profession of manual scavenging, cleaning the public latrines and considered as untouchable in the Hindu society. The one who cleans the dirt of the society is considered as unclean and untouchable and is treated inhumanely. In Indian society, the presence of caste based discrimination cannot be denied even today.

KEYWORDS- Mulkraj, Anand, untouchables, novel, casteism, social, politics

I. INTRODUCTION

In Mulk Raj Anand's finest and most controversial novel he conveys precisely, with urgency and barely disguised fury, what it might feel like to be one of India's Untouchables. Bakha is a young man, a proud and even an attractive young man, but none the less he is an outcast in a system that is now only slowly changing and was then as cruel and debilitating as that of apartheid. Into this re-creation of one day in the life of Bakha, sweeper and latrine-cleaner, Anand poured a vitality, fire and richness of detail that have caused him to be acclaimed as his country's Charles Dickens as well as this century's greatest revealer of the 'other' India. 'It recalled to me very vividly the occasions I have walked 'the wrong way' in an Indian city and it is a way down which no novelist has yet taken me . . .' E.M. Forster 'One of the most eloquent and imaginative works to deal with this difficult and emotive subject'[1,2,3]

Right to Equality is embodied in Articles 14–16 which basically talks about the principles of equality (Social Equality) before law and non-discrimination. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them. The practice of untouchability has been declared as an offence punishable by law under Article 17, and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 has been enacted by the Parliament to further this objective. The Right to Freedom is enclosed in Articles 19–22. It guarantees individual's rights those are considered as essential by the Constitution makers. These include the freedom of speech and expression, freedom of assembly without arms, freedom of association, freedom of movement throughout the territory of India, freedom to reside and settle in any part of the country of India and the freedom to practise any profession. All these freedoms are subject to reasonable restrictions that may impose on them by the State, listed under Article 19 itself. As the constitution of India has given the rights to equality and free not only to human beings but to other creature at that time being normal human how one can stop the other from enjoying the basic rights. In the name of cast and creed from times immemorial till present era people are facing discrimination. The plight against the lower cast was practiced by the upper class to dominate them. Lower class experienced all sorts of the deprivations. In the movie Sudra we have the depiction of dehumanization

and exploitation done by upper class. If one is created equal than how one can be treated and degraded like the animals. In the name of Untouchability, Dalits experiences nearly 140 forms of work & descent-based discrimination at the hands of the dominant castes. Here are a few: Prohibited from eating with other castes members ♣ Prohibited from marrying with other castes members ♣ Separate glasses for Dalits in village tea stalls ♣ Discriminatory seating arrangements and separate utensils in restaurants ♣ Segregation in seating and food arrangements in village functions and festivals ♣ Prohibited from entering into village temples ♣ Prohibited from wearing sandals or holding umbrellas in front of dominant caste members ♣ Devadasi system - the ritualized temple prostitution of Dalit women ♣ Prohibited from entering dominant caste homes ♣ Prohibited from riding a bicycle inside the village ♣ Prohibited from using common village path ♣ Separate burial grounds ♣ No access to village's common/public properties and resources (wells, ponds, temples, etc.) ♣ Segregation (separate seating area) of Dalit children in schools ♣ Prohibited from contesting in elections and exercising their right to vote ♣ Forced to vote or not to vote for certain candidates during the elections ♣ Prohibiting from hoisting the national flag during Independence or Republic days ♣ Sub-standard wages ♣ Bonded Labor ♣ Face social boycotts by dominant castes for refusing to perform their "duties" ♣ [5,7,8]

II. DISCUSSION

Mulk Raj Anand was the first Indian writer in English to protect Dalit literature through his novels 'Untouchable', 'Coolie' which generated an awareness of social situation of the Dalits in the society. Dalit writings were founded on the Gandhian ideology, anti-black ideology and ideals of nonviolence. Dalit literature is based on the status of Dalits and their sensibility which gave a new dimension to literature. It started as literature of protest in the late nineteenth century in western India to overthrow the dehumanizing character of traditional Indian culture and values and bring humanity together. The purpose of Dalit writers was to portray the exploitive, helpless, enslaved, subalterns/Dalits under the hegemony of the upper and middle class Hindu and bring about improvement of the Indian society and the enhancement of its people's well-being. The Dalit writer questioned the Hindu practices of orthodox sects and the practice of caste system and Caste identity," in Indian society. One critic said, "It is the duty of the Indian writer to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and assist the spirit of the progress in the country". In other words Dalit writers portrayed changing social reality, which constituted socialist realism. [9,10,11] Anand had pioneered the writing of Indian literature to demonstrate his keen desire for political change and social transformation. According to Anand, Dalit Literature has a distinct ideological purpose. Seeing the people suffering from poverty and squalor around him, Anand devoted to the cause of the "poor and disadvantaged" through creative narratives of those people who never entered into the realms of literature. He wanted to write "an epic" of their "suffering". Going beyond politics and social reforms he developed art in ideology, a truly humanist art, to help raise the "the serfs, the coolies and other members of society to human dignity and self-awareness" Bakha is a humble scavenger, who is seeking his freedom in a hypocritical, cruel, deceptive and inhuman caste ridden Indian society. He hopes for a change of attitude in the large segment of Indian society but is doomed to suffering. The novel is an effective protest against the stigma attached to. To Anand, the problem of Bakha is social problem of national importance and as a writer he is committed to eradicate the evils of society. For Anand, novel is a powerful literary medium of artistic integrity and human relationships that can bring about social change and bring people together. This paper will investigate social, political and cultural processes as minority narrative. "Untouchable" is a story based on the life of the downtrodden, despised and oppressed section of Indian society, the outcastes – those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. This story is based on a single day in the life of Bakha, a latrine cleaner and sweeper boy. We follow him round on his daily chores cleaning up the shift of the rich and powerful, who despise him because of strict social rules governing ideas of purity and pollution. When he walks down the streets he has to signal an alarm with his voice as he approaches so that the „pure“ are forewarned to avoid even allowing his shadow to be cast upon them. On one occasion he does „pollute“ a caste Hindu and is chased, abused and attacked all day long for this defilement. [12,13,15]

There is a comprehensive classificatory scheme of the „varna“ system in the classical Hindu Vedic literature that underlies the concepts of caste which continues to exert a powerful and pervasive influence over Indian life. Within the greater scheme of Hindu society, Bakha endures enormously and appropriates himself within his own culture in search for an identity. He attempts to adopt the "fashion" of the Tommies, (and becomes) "possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life". The novel ends in the hope that some sort of resolution, or at the very least, some emergence of social change will occur. The protagonist suffers morally, socially and economically. The exploitation of simple and ignorant people, the blood sucking high castes especially custodians of religion, in the form of priest etc. is really heart-melting. The Dalits, who are brutally tortured by the upper class considered to belong to the lowest among them. In that society, sweeper caste is counted neither in Hindus nor in Muslims. Bakha reveals: 'They think we are dirt, because we

clean dirt (page 7) The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others, when he touches them. They have to purify themselves. Thus he is a disgusting object to orthodox as he walks along to public roads and it is his duty to call out and warn that he is coming. No wonders that the dirt enters into his soul and he feels himself at moment to be what he is supposed to be. . The sensitive Bakha realizes his position and subsequent humiliation created by this episode. The coin of an untouchable can carry the seed of cancer disease. This seems to be the belief of the high-caste society. In another incident, Bakha buys jalebis and when he was busy in enjoying his jalebis, unknowingly he hits Lalaji, that was deadly sin. And the reaction was, a big crowd gathered and shower of abuses, and Lalaji gives him a slap. Bakha reviews his own life and realizes that a person who touches dung and cleans latrines has no right to touch others.[17,18,19]

III. RESULTS

You are born in a cage and it was well- conceived before your birth that you will spend the entire life in the cage without going out and {the hypothetical You} don't have any form of freedom whatsoever for not conceding to the rules laid for you. If this is too much to ask for from a person then I will throw it up to you to decide if caste system in India is congruent to it if not symmetrical. When I was in school in our history classes, we were told that this 'caste system; stems from puru-shukta of the Rig-veda which asserts the claim for this hierarchical categorisation an ancient precedent which says that its origin is from Brahma: architect of the world in Hindu mythology, from his mouth originates the Brahmin, from the arms the Kshatriyas, from the thighs the Vaishya and the last in the crude bi-furcation i.e. originating from the feet are the Shudras.[20,21,22] Commonly it is called as Chatur-Varna theory. But the catch here is the expletive 'untouchables' aka later called as Harijans' Sons of God' by Mahatma Gandhi are even below the four-strata categorisation or it can be implied that they aren't even considered worthy of having being included in the segment let alone having been recognised on their own and this malice called 'Caste System' have perennially existed since time immemorial, later to give it more social acceptance people asserted defined roles that each category should or will perform like the Brahmins will teach or study whereas the Kshatriya will fight, Vaishya will trade and the Shudras will serve the above three categories here also as I mentioned leaving the eponymous 'Untouchables'. One should and must feel aghast and callous seeing this categorisation in modern parlance considering you are a humane and liberal. But Caste system is not as simple as it seems because its more labyrinthine than I stated above, as Prof. Romila Thapar has said 'Varna was theoretical and ideal but 'Jati' is functional' meaning there are various categorisation and sub-categorisation within each bracket. Feeling convoluted, actually there is more but it's enough a background for what's coming.[23,25,27]

This novel which I am going to discuss upon in this post although published in 1935 resonates today's India but only partially I said so, because of two factors that aren't the same when Mulk Raj Anand wrote it, that are , India has now been declared as Open-Defecation free state by Narendra Modi although the veracity of it is questioned by many reports[1] that were conducted by independent organisation but the good news is the situation has improved and has been improving for better since 'Swacch Bharat Abhiyan' campaign[B] was launched which took upon itself to eliminate open defecation and improve solid waste management(SWM) and also manual scavenging isn't there in today's India though I cannot speak about any aberration, if there is any, at all and the situation of the untouchables have taken a paradigm shift for better. Then you will ask what is in this novel[28,29] that resonates with today's India? There are many things but the most prominent being, mentality hasn't changed much. I will take into account both the perspectives that is there in this book both of the lady who treated Bakha badly and also of the Charat Singh who gave him the hockey stick and acknowledged his role in the society and admired his hard work. There was one very important lesson, I learnt from this novel that is 'Men aren't inherently bad or exude ill-will because they want to, it(bad behaviour) can probably be because of the fear that society will not accept this and ostracize them for being good to those whom they(society) cumulatively thinks as bad'. This can easily be corroborated with many instances that happen in the novel for instance as previously mentioned Charat Singh, when he came to relief himself from nature's call he talked with Bakha nicely and so did the Priest who told his sister to come and get the courtyard cleaned although the underlying motive was in contrast with what was portrayed but it essentially presents an acknowledgement towards the work they were doing, people always take for granted those person who they think will never leave, It doesn't mean that they can do that work without those people, implying 'the tacit assent always remains there'. The adage of 'questioning everything' can be seen is Bakha's behaviour wherein he questions the very essence and basis of untouchability and the various means and sanctum given by those on the higher strata.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

This novel brings in the forefront many such instances where lack of power and authority is apparent like when following the diktats of his father, Lakha even if he(Bakha) doesn't want to, or when Sohini(his sister) has been wronged and sexually assaulted by the priest, he wants to confront the priest but refrains from doing it, one reason purported is that his sister stops him to do so but what's the underlying fear that he can't oppose a brahmin because the conditioning has been such that you can't challenge them because of their pre-possessed power or the conflict between his brother and him or when to escape all this conflict he goes out he meets the chief of the local Salvation Army, a British man named Colonel Hutchinson who tries to tilt his religious beliefs by pointing out many flaws and lacunae in it and asks him to find solace in Christian philosophy, this is unequivocally an instance of proselytization though it wasn't attained and that too when the protagonist is going through so much in his life, this was where I considered him as a poor soul, as life was being so harsh on him was my impulsive emotional reaction, that instance made me realise that when in sorrow, people are very gullible and will seek every nook or cranny to find peace if not a talisman to disentangle the convoluted life they are living. As it is oftenly reiterated that its only in difficult times, people steer towards god and that was what was being retorted when Bakha starts walking with Colonel Hutchinson. Despite all these gloomy instances, Bakha is presented as a strong personality as he finds those small instances where he can cherish his life viz. when he goes to town and buys candies and savours it not for long though or when Bakha enjoys those sweets which his friend brings for him on occasion of her sister's marriage, he relishes those that made me realise that the moments of enjoyment or happiness per se are fleeting or having a very short life span and its bound upon you to find and enjoy those rather than complaining that it didn't last for long. At the denouement the words of Gandhiji on emancipation of untouchability gives him a hope that there will be light at the end of the tunnel. Hope is all we have was the last lesson I took from that novel.[30]

V. CONCLUSIONS

I feel in a novel 'themes' are important or the so called larger issues holds the substantial value than the plot. It is because the story can be of anyone, maybe the reader or the writer, it can resonate with anyone within that category. What matters for us as a society is to understand the thematic issues it purports and find ways to eradicate those issues faced by the characters rather than feeling bad with that particular character and carry the hangover ever after. Hatred shared by the upper class segment towards those who do menial jobs, in-equality in the society be it because of the economic reason or social reason not accepting them or assimilating as ourselves is another reason for them being feeling isolated but the discrimination by birth is so inhumane. It is at this backdrop that after India became independent it made sure that Un-touchability be abolished and Article 32 made sure their grievances are addressed if basic entitlements are not given to them as enshrined in our Constitution and for their upliftment from those years of oppression and repression, the system of reservation was endorsed which many think is one of the various ways that many meritocratic students are not getting seats in the institution where they could have if it wasn't there. But contrary to that we also speak of inequality that is rampant in the society and feel gloomy and depressed when we come across poor be it in any terms(social, economic, mental) but we don't realise that the type of inequality that is there in the society is because of people not getting equal play field to perform and that too if they somehow manage to get it we as a society don't accept them meaning we practise social exclusion implicitly if not explicitly. And there is another thing, reservation is a quick fix so that the bridge can be filled instantaneously because redistribution isn't feasible and also isn't pragmatic enough in today's society atleast. And the percentage of reservation given for the downtrodden people isn't enough to bring into place what we have done to them meaning it can't be healed by the miniscule percentage of reservation given to them. That being said we should atleast be happy that these are instruments of upliftment and should not be considered as hindrance but as a way forward to bringing back their lost status.[31,32,33]

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