



## THE FIERY VOICE OF THE OPPRESSED: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S 'COOLIE' AND 'UNTOUCHABLE'

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### Abstract:

*Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), the fiery voice of the people, incontrovertibly remains a father figure in Pan- Indian English literature – one who has made a successful social interpretation of Mother India. He has indeed deeply felt the pulse of Indian society. Anand is distinguished as a novelist for his proletarian humanism, social realism, naturalistic approach, creative stamina and his 'mulkese' realistic language. He selects the lowest classes to represent them in his novels. He pleads for the oppressed, the have-nots, the exploited and, in a word, 'the marginalized' in the society. The present article is a humble strive on the part of the researcher to focus on the post colonial aspects of the writings of Anand in the light of his two epoch-making novels – 'Coolie'(1936) and 'Untouchable'(1935)*

### KEYWORDS:

humiliation; oppressor; exploitation; sub-humanization; denigration; marginalized; subaltern; untouchable; indictment; decadent orthodoxy, passive heroism; social apathy.

### INTRODUCTION:

#### Commenting on his own ways of writing Anand once said:

“I immersed myself in the sub-world of the poor, the insulted and the injured, through continuous pilgrimages to the villages, to small towns and big towns' bastis”.

This comment undoubtedly inputs a sense of professionalism to his recurrent theme of suffering and humiliation of the poor in British India. Two factors are found responsible for the misery of the poor. One is social vices bred by pride and power. The other curse is political oppressions of the rulers. The novels of Anand focus on both the factors with equal zeal. 'Coolie' and 'Untouchable' can be regarded as works with a definite political end in view. They reveal the vicious vogue of exploitation of the helpless people in the country under foreign rule. The ruler is successful to impress his subjects by an artful display of eternal glories. Often the ruled falls into his trap and surrenders to the splendour by worshipping his oppressor. The colonial lords cherish the sense of superiority as a sacred principle. They regard it their duty to treat the natives as slaves. With racial malice exists the keen sense of class division even in the rulers.

Needless to mention that Anand's novel 'Coolie' vividly depicts the picture of society in which the evil of colonial rule appears in various forms. It portrays the social class distinction between the rich and the poor and also presents the kaleidoscopic but sad and pathetic life of Munoo. It is a human tragedy caused by poverty, exploitation, cruelty, greed and selfishness. It is not the fate or Almighty who is responsible for the tragedy of Munoo, but the society in which he is brought up. The poor are the hungry and sick, weak and

helpless at all places whether small towns and villages like Bilaspur and Sham Nagar or in a city like Daulatpur or in a cosmopolitan city like Bombay. They have no sense of self respect, no dignity. They are bitten from pillars to post and are compelled to live like animals in the most unhygienic surroundings. They are constantly exploited and ill treated and they have been reduced to the state of 'Subaltern'.

The novel is a saga of millions of 'marginalised' people who fight a fierce battle against the 'killer demon', starvation set on them by their masters. It is always a callous and blind combat to liberate oneself from the clutches of death. Constant fear and weariness brings about a state of spiritual apathy in the victims. The flourish of all sorts of vices in the mind of man is the direct outcome of the colonial oppression. 'Coolie' depicts the picture of both these social and spiritual evil.

In the first chapter of 'Coolie' Munoo grows up in a village in custody of his uncle while his parents die fighting against poverty and oppression. The second chapter shows the boy in the humiliating employment of a servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram. He breaks away from his suffocating life only to fall into another in the Bilaspur pickle factory in the third chapter. Spirit of adventure, passion for life and high aspiration lead the boy to the distant metropolitan city Bombay in the fourth chapter. Here Munoo experiences the wretched existence of the factory workers and the sudden eruption of communal violence. After this in a terrible climax, destiny offers him a comparative relief in the last chapter for some time only to be overcome finally by a tragic denouement as Munoo succumbs to a deadly disease caused by malnutrition and overwork.

One thing here is worthy of mention that Munoo's terrible disgrace and misery arise from the British policy of exploitation. The colonial or the capitalist ruler encouraged mal-distribution of wealth so that they can purchase loyalty of a selection of people by social and economic privileges. Thus came into existence a class of rich natives nourished by the masters' favour. They learn to hate their poor countrymen in imitation of the English. As exploiters they were no less terrible than the British. Anand has given right focus on this class of people and their role in running the lives of the coolies. The English owner of the cotton mill pays low wages to its workers, makes no arrangement for a decent living and often cuts pay in order to ensure profit. Anand depicts Nathoo Ram, Raibahadur, Todar Mal et al as people corrupted by British policy.

Saros Cowasjee's comment on how the British rulers corrupted the Indian spiritually apart from robbing them economically is relevant in this regard. He states-

"The episode (Mr. W.P. England's visit to the house of Nathoo Ram) illustrates Anand's conviction that the British government not only exploited the country's natural resources, but debased the characters of the Indians who were in its service. It created a body of sycophants ... becoming a ready tool of exploitation in the hands of their masters. And they lost their sense of humanity and human decency"

As a picture of the Indian life ruined by British Imperialism and colonial tendency, 'Coolie' is to a large extent, a novel with a political theme. Anand has emerged to be a true post colonial writer when the critics have brought the charge of propaganda against him. Anand's work often contains an open indictment against the British rulers. Hari Om Prasad rightly comments:

"Mulk Raj Anand is considered to be the doyen of Indo-Anglian literature. With him India has received an unceasing champion of the cause of the poor and the lowly whose writings arrest the critical attention of the learned people towards the inhuman, hated and unjustified conditions of the down-trodden and the deprived of Indian society."

'Untouchable', the first novel of Anand which relates the story of Bakha- a 18-year-old sweeper- is a powerful critique of India's caste-based social system. It is basically a tragic story of the individual caught in the net of the age-old caste system. Throughout the novel one incident of abusing the 'sub-human' Bakha followed by a host of insultings. The entire 'sunaltered' family of Bakha is nailed down. Each scene of 'denigration' is worth reading, a bit more sensitively.'

'Untouchable' depicts, in the 'stream of consciousness technique' a day in the life of Bakha. The ebony skinned and sprightly sweeper boy is one of the sons of Lakha, the Jamadar of the sweepers. As the day dawns, his work of latrine-cleaning also begins. He is a steady and efficient worker: "Each muscle of his body, hard as rock when it comes to play, seemed to shine forth like glass". And though his job was dirty, he remained comparatively clean. Symbolically this may suggest his initial self-pride which would later receive multiple blows from the superior agents of the society. His sister, Sohini is also dexterous after her fashion. One day she goes to the village well to fetch water. Kali Nath, the priest of the temple, more as a cure for constipation than in an access of generosity, agrees to draw water from the well for the assembled outcasts. Having drawn a pail of water with considerable difficulty, he sees Sohini, feels attracted to her youthfulness, and driving away the others, pours the water into her pot and suggests that she should come to the house later in the day to clean the courtyard. When she goes there, he makes improper suggestions to her, and as she starts screaming, he shouts "polluted" and gathers a crowd of indignant high-caste people. Meanwhile Bakha also comes upon the scene, having swept the streets. He is furious, but after sending

Sohini away, he tries himself to collect bits of bread at the houses of well-to-do. In this he is much less successful than Soohini usually is, and he returns home and bitterly tells his father: "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt."

In the afternoon, Bakha 'attends' the marriage of Ram Charan's sister – the girl of a higher caste whom he could not marry. Ram Charan the washer man's son Chota the leather worker's son and Bakha forget for once the 'minutiae' of sub-low-caste differences, and share the sugar-plums, and plan to play hockey in the evening. As Havildar Charat Singh's, again, caste is forgotten; the Havildar treats Bakha affectionately and gives him a hockey stick. Playing hockey against the Punjabis, Bakha scores a goal, which starts a free fight. A little boy is injured, and trying to lift him up Bakha "pollutes" him according to the boy's mother. When he returns home at last, his father roundly rebukes him for idling away all the afternoon, and drives him out of the house.

Bakha meets Colonial Hutchinson, the Christian missionary, who takes him home, but his shrewdest wife shouts at him and he runs away in fear. He goes to the 'Gole Maidan', and hears with rapt attention to a speech of Gandhi, the savior of the untouchables. He is very much encouraged by his words. He also listens to the view of the poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar that the problem of untouchable can be solved, if the modern flush-latrines is introduced. Then the sweepers can be free. The poet concludes,

"...from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society"

Bakha is deeply impressed, feels more hopeful of the future than at any time since the day-dawn, and returns to his house to tell his father about the Mahatma and about the machine that will "clear dung without anyone having to handle it".

Defending this epilogue in his forward to the book, E.M.Forster rightly says:

"It is the necessary climax, and has mounted up with triple effect. Bakha returns to his father and his wretched bed, thinking now of the Mahatma, now of the Machine. His Indian day is over and the next day will be like it, but on the surface of the earth, if not in the depth of the sky, a change is at hand."

'Untouchable' is a forceful indictment of the evils of a perverted and decadent orthodoxy. It is also a great work of art which presents reality with photographic fidelity. It tries to stir the sympathy of the readers for the waifs and outcasts of society or to be more specific for the marginalized section of the society.

#### CONCLUSION:

Anand's novels are a powerful portrayal of the social, economic and political upheavals of his time. But the focal point is that times and again he sympathized with the oppressed. Being a great champion of the modern 'Subaltern Theory' he had a tilt towards the poor and the down-trodden. With goodness of his heart he shares joy and sorrow of common men and women in both the novels 'Coolie' and 'Untouchable.' The 'Other' in the form of Munoo ('Coolie') or Bakha ('Untouchable'), or Gangu ('Two Leaves and a Bud'), finds its own voice to sing his own song. These unsung heroes had one thing in common they belonged to the teeming millions who, according to Anand, were the victims of civilization and its offspring like poverty, colonialism, capitalism, urbanization, industrialization, communalism, casteism etc. For Bakha and Munoo happiness was but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain. Both the characters suffered from some sort of spiritual and mental crisis but could not raise themselves up to ameliorate the gloom or to establish their self-identity. Bakha could not come to terms with three solutions he was given. His hopes were never realized. Similarly, Munoo's urban life turned out to be hellish. He died while suffering from tuberculosis. According to Saros Cowasjee, Anand "could not show that victory which was a marked feature of proletarian literature of the thirties in Europe". A stoical acceptance of fate marked Anand's characters.

But Cowasjee's words can be set aside by saying that even in the stoical acceptance of fate by the heroes of Anand there is a sense of passive heroism in them because sometimes "silence is more eloquent than words." His novels proves instrumental, with a missionary zeal, in arousing the conscience of the people by showing the endless struggle of the oppressed - the poor and the destitute. M.K.Naik observes: "The author's compassion for the exploited and the down-trodden is pure and intense but does not degenerate into blind hysterics or dull preaching; one of the aspects of exploitation is presented in 'Coolie'. This is exploitation of the Indian by the white man and poor by the rich."

The relevance of Annad's novels in India will remain inevitable so long as we are unable to relieve ourselves from the curses of poverty, untouchability and social apathy. Anand does not recognize pure art or 'art for art's sake', but he believes in the social significance of literature. To echoe own words- "...what is a writer if he is not the fiery voice of the people..."

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