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MARGINALITY IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*



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ABSTRACT

Indian English writing has a long standing of more than hundred and fifty years. However, unlike the beginners, the writers of the early twentieth century began to write in Indian English with Indian themes and sensibility. The writing of this period suited the Indian sensibility. These writers also made a distinct and significant contribution to the Indian writing in English. Amongst them were the three trend setters, Mulk Raj Anand (b.1905), Raja Rao (b.1909) and R.K.Narayan (b.1907) who were distinguished not only for their own work but as the inaugurators of the form itself. The period after World War I became an object of academic discourse, the advent of structuralist and post-structuralist discourse in recognizing those spaces of marginality surrounding black writing, women's writing, gay writing, and colonial writing etc. Then comes the use of the term 'Marginalized'. Recently many marginalized voices have been raised in literature in English such as Gayatri Chakravarty exploring the issue of Subaltern Voice in *Can Subaltern Speak?*, Homi Bhabha argues in favour of pathos of "Cultural Confusion", and the series of writers discussing the questions of their identities through Dalit Literature. There are many writers from the centre who have written a lot about marginalized lives and there are several Dalit writers also writing from the margin. Here, the marginal writing is an engagement with a social commitment, and marginality, especially in the form of caste discrimination remains a living Indian reality. However, much before this instigation, Mulk Raj Anand, apart from his other novels such as *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1939), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), *The Big Heart* (1945), *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), *The Road* (1961), wrote his early celebrated and trend setting work *Untouchable* (1935)

which deals with the then problem of untouchability, segregation, racial discrimination and class-caste prejudices. It was his first hand attempt showing that Dalits were mostly indigenous people who were traditionally considered at the bottom of the Indian Sanskrit system of social stratification. *Untouchable*, the story of a young boy, follows a day in the life of Bakha, an 18 year boy, is set in the outcastes' colony outside of an unnamed town during the British occupation and is narrated by Bakha himself. The novel established Anand as one of India's leading English author and was inspired by his aunt's experience when she had a meal with a Muslim woman and was treated as an outcast by his family. The plot of this book, Anand's first, revolves around the argument for eradicating the caste system. Bakha is a hard working boy who never disobeys his father despite his repugnance for him and his lifestyle. The present paper is attempt to show how Mulk Raj Anand presents this 'Marginality' with Bakha and other characters of the *Untouchable*. This single day in the life of Bakha exposes the harsh life and struggles of the so-called Untouchable people. He doesn't like to do toilet cleaning and wish to study and be a learned man but suffers a lot and is abused mentally and physically. However, he comes to some solutions to this malpractice such as either accept Christianity that has no caste system, and no longer be an outcast, or in the words of Mahatma Gandhi educates everyone on Untouchability or the introduction of a machine (toilet-flush machine) ending the age old untouchable business.

KEYWORDS :marginal, untouchable, dalit, discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand, for the first time in the history of Indian writing in English, raised voice for the marginalized through his novels such as *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *The Road* and this paper is an attempt to show how Mulk Raj Anand wrote about the marginal and the marginality from his *Untouchable*.

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction is exclusively concerned with India. He is passionately involved with the villages, the ferocious poverty, the cruelties of caste, the wrongs of women, and with orphans, the untouchables and urban labourers. He writes in an angry reformist way, like a less humorous Dickens and a more emotional Wells of the personal sufferings induced by economic injustices. It is really economics he is writing about, even when the subject is caste.

His sharp well-organized early novel *Untouchable* was very highly thought of by E. M. Forster. It is a fascinating combination of hard material, intense, specific theme and throbbing Shelleyan manner. The action, occupying a single day, is precipitated by a great 'catastrophe, an accidental touching in the morning. Anand begins the novel by presenting the outcastes' colony describing as:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses but 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 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 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 cake...(01)

Anand, in his following introductory pages of the *Untouchable* goes on discussing the structure and the actual life of the outcastes and the marginal by just remarking how 'the absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink.' (01)

Bakha is a hard working boy who never disobeys his father despite his repugnance for him and his lifestyle. Generally his day begins with the cries and shouts of his father calling him 'Get up, ohe you

Bakha, you son of a pig' and order to '...attend to the latrines or the sepoy's will be angry'. (05) The another character of the novel who suffers emotionally like Bakha is his younger sister, Sohini. Like Bakha, she is also an unwelcome on the open public front. When she reaches the well to fetch water she is not a welcome at all and Gulabo taunts her saying, 'Go back home, there is no one to give you water here...you prostitute! Wanton! You bitch!' (17) However, like her father and two brothers she has also learnt to keep silent in front of such so called upper caste people. When the Brahmin Pundit recognized this sweeper's daughter who had seen her before cleaning the latrines in the gullies in the town 'the fresh young form whose full breasts with their dark beads of nipples stood out so conspicuously under the muslin shirt' (21) tries to appease him with her physical presence.

This Bakha had worked in the barracks of a British regiment and, "had been caught by the glamour of the 'white man's' life". However his wish of going to school could not be satisfied as his father had told him that 'schools were meant for the *babus*, not for the lowly sweepers'. (30) Bakha usually called these British as tommies and treated them him with respect despite his caste. He liked to imitate them by simply imitating them, 'the *fashun*', "by which he understood the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots, etc." The early part of the novel shows us that how Bakha tries to come up above his caste by westernizing but how he receives insults from his friends for this imitation. His friends used to chide him for dressing like a sahib and trying to appear to be something he is not. However, it seems to be the only way for Bakha to remove himself from his caste.

Another incident that shows Bakha about his marginal existence happens in the market road when Bakha stops for buying a *bidi*. When he stopped facing the shopkeeper with great humility and joined his hands and begged to know where he could put a coin to pay for a packet of 'Red Lamp' and reacted as per the instruction by placing his anna there, the betel-leaf-seller dashed some water over it from the jug with which he sprinkled the betel leaves. 'having thus purified it he picked up the nicked piece and threw cigarettes at Bakha, as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop'. (34) Immediately following this incident when Bakha follows the lane towards the centre of the town and when he encounters the Bengali sweetmeat-seller's shop his mouth begins to water for *burfi*, the sugar candy that lay covered with silver paper. 'Eight *annas* in my pocket...dare I buy some sweets? (36) thought Bakha and demanded 'Four *annas* worth of *jalebis*' (37) and found the confectioner smiling over him with the crudeness of his taste as *jalebis* are rather coarse stuff. However, ignoring all this and as his mouth started watering he was much engulfed in the *jalebis* where the first incident of humiliation episode of the novel with Bakha occurs when a high-brew fellow accuses him: 'Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin!'...'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 will have to go and take a bath to purify myself....you swine, you dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach!' (38-39)

This fellow went on shouting and slanging Bakha saying 'Dirty Dog! Son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig! ...this dirty dog bumped right into me! So unmindfully do these sons of bitches walk in the streets! He was walking along without the slightest effort at announcing his approach, the swine!' (39)

Hereafter, the humiliated Bakha is seen shouting his arrival for the people. Quite automatically he began to shout: '*posh* keep away, *posh*, sweeper coming, *posh*, *post* sweeper coming, *posh*, *post* sweeper coming!' (42) and immediately followed by his heart touching dialogue:

'...absued, abused, abused. Why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That's why they don't touch us, the high-castes.... For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable!

Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an untouchable!' (43)

More humiliation was in store for Bakha before his day is out. His curiosity takes him to a local temple, where he climbs the steps to get a glimpse of the wonders inside. When Bakha saw, peered, stared hard, and realized that the morning service had begun as he heard the loud soprano of 'Om, *Shanti Deva*...ending in the last hoarse shout of triumphant worship: '*Shri Ram Chandar ki Jai*' (51) immediately out of nowhere a cry "Polluted! Polluted!" was heard by Bakha. He knew that Untouchables are not allowed inside the temple for purity reasons. The priest shouting, "Polluted! Polluted!" gathered a huge crowd and they all berated Bakha saying they would need to perform a purification ceremony. The priest shouted:

"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 purificatory ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog!' (53)

Simultaneously, at the same time Bakha ran down to the courtyard where his sister Sohini told him with sobs and tears, 'That man, that man... made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning a lavatory of his house there... and when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled'. (53) Bakha, at this point of state, got a shock as the priest claimed, "I have been defiled by contact". Bakha, enraged by this, began to burst with anger and fire but being a marginal and untouchable he could do nothing as the priest and the crowd both had dispersed. This universal example of the hypocrisy of the then so called upper caste people and their attitudes towards the untouchables is very minutely presented by Mulk Raj Anand. Anand, through the character of Bakha and Sohini, shows how these high class and castes people consider them impure and make them do all the menial labor but how they are not allergic to have sexual relations with them. This perceptive ideology of impurity is exposed in this novel. The story goes showing more examples of the harsh treatment of untouchables and gives us even bitter illustration of the life of the untouchables. His mind goes on brooding the question of real religion, real caste, the existence of God and other such things. However, at the end of the day Bakha finds himself following a crowd of people who are going to hear Gandhi speak in town. People said 'Gandhi was a saint,...an avatar (incarnation) of the gods Vishnu and Krishna... and the *Sarkar* (government) is afraid of him' (129) Bakha listens to Gandhi's speech very attentively and heard him saying:

'As you all know,... we have ourselves, for centuries, trampled underfoot millions of human beings without feeling the slightest remorse for our iniquity...I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. This view of mine dates back to the time when I was a child...!' (137)

This Gandhi's speech strikes Bakha. Gandhi, in his speech told the untouchables to stop accepting this treatment from the so called superiors. He advised to refuse the leftovers of the high castes and suggested that the road out of untouchability is to purify their lives; they need to improve their hygiene, and get rid of their vices.

To conclude, it can be said that Mulk Raj Anand, through his *Untouchable* raises some question marks over marginality and asks us to expel tradition of untouchability and the exploitation of low-caste people in India.

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