



Exploring Subaltern Voice and Subalternity in MulkrajAnand's Untouchable: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Untouchability is a very serious problem in Indian society and Mulk Raj Anand gave voice to the untouchables through his novel titled “Untouchable” which focuses on the pain and sufferings of subalterns inflicted by upper caste Hindus. The Indian English writer has got a great opportunity through the novel to explore the untouched world of subalterns. It brings hope for both India and untouchable Hindus with the principles of Gandhi to raise consciousness to remove caste and hierarchy from Indian culture.

The paper is aimed to study the subalternity of subaltern voices which is highly debatable in Indian society, not just for its economical and religious code, but also for the oppression to support lower caste sections in both modern and ancient India.

They are suppressive and common victims and they don't have the political and financial strength to fight back the supremacy of upper-class people. They cannot speak out their situation before the world and they have

limited opportunities to change their fate and stand out, which is controlled by the upper caste. They used to lack education, consciousness, and equal rights to grow.

“Untouchable” by Mulk Raj Anand is more compact than other novels written by him. Published in the year 1935, the novel is based on Bakha, an 18-year-old sweeper boy. He was the son of a jamadar, Lakha. He was born in the 20th century and is affected by new influences within.

Keywords: *Untouchability, Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchable, subalternity, subalterns, modern India, upper caste Hindus, Indian English writer, Indian culture, Gandhi*

1. Introduction

The meaning of the term “subaltern” has changed since 1982. It has now become a broad perspective which covers subjugated women, minorities, colonial subjects, refugees, child laborers, and the illiterate. The postcolonial writers have always been looking forward to making the marginalized, oppressed, and subalterns aware. This awareness will help them to stand out in society from the margins. Subalternity is a highly debated matter in the Indian subcontinent, especially in India, not just for economical and religious code, but also against the oppression to support the lower-caste and subaltern groups in society.

The issue of untouchability basically came out from Hinduism and it later blew out into the origin of Indian societies. The privileged sections of society, Brahmins, defended the strongly defined structure in the name of religion to suppress the financially lower-class people. The caste system has been practiced by the hierarchical structure and determined by profession that is imposed to an individual since birth. The subaltern status is mainly imposed on the lower-class and lower caste sections. They don't have the political and economic power to challenge the supremacy of upper-class people. Hence, they accept suppression and become common victims of modern society.

They don't have the voice to voice their condition and speak up before the world. “Subalternity” is the concept that includes not just the untouchables, but also all the marginalized and poor people. These subalterns are less likely to change their fate in society due to the upper class which ends their options like equal rights, education and consciousness. Literature is the only way to fight for them and bring openness to them. Indian English writers have been successful in marking those issues.

1.1 Background

Mulk Raj Anand is a very famous Indian English writer of his period. He comes from the precise range of "Big Three " in "Indo-Anglian fiction". He became a novelist in the decade of 1930 and raised the voice against caste and class systems of India. He was born in Peshawar (which is now in Pakistan). When he was born on December 12, 1905, Peshawar was the capital of "North West Frontier " in India before the partition of the country. He is known as a great novelist because he has represented the subjugated and deprived voices to give them their existence.

"Untouchable" was his first novel published in the year 1935, which is based on miserable conditions of subaltern groups of society who try hard to change their existing condition by getting into the center from the margin but their attempt fails in reality. In this novel, the depiction of subalterns is an important part for critical analysis. Mulk Raj Anand echoed the real condition, reality, and mental state of subalterns. Subalternity takes place on the basis of class, caste, and gender in the context of Indian culture. The caste system has literally destroyed the people of India. This situation was totally different under the British empire. The caste system is an indispensable part of India and untouchability is its by-product and social evil.

The Kshatriyas, Brahmins, Shudras and Vaishayas are the castes which make Hindu society. Brahmins represent the highest class as they are taken almost near to God. The Kshatriyas are called the protectors of the country as they were warriors in ancient times. The Vaishayas have lower position to the Kshatriyas in caste hierarchy and they were the producers of wealth and interested in money. The Sudras are meant to perform cleaning, sweeping, and other menial jobs as laborers. The scavengers and sweepers were known to be untouchables as they perform filthy works. They were employed to clean up human waste with their hands and it was believed that their touch could contaminate high caste.

Swami Vivekananda made efforts to remove this social evil. According to him,

"The caste system is opposed to the religion of Vedanta. Caste is a social custom and all our great preachers have tried to break it down. From Buddhism downwards, every sect has preached against caste and every time, it has only riveted the chains." (Vivekananda, 1983).

Gandhi also believed that citizens of India need freedom not just from Britishers, but also from the caste system. He made tough decisions and traveled across India to spread his message of brotherhood and love and called the people of India not to engage in the caste system. At Sabarmati Ashram, Mulk Raj Anand met Mahatma Gandhi in 1932 and told him about the social evil of the caste system which he wanted to raise through “Untouchable”. Gandhi advised him to revise different parts of his novel by saying, “One must not write anything which was not based on one’s experience.” (George & Jörjj, 1994).

1.2 Literature Reviews

For Mulk Raj Anand, his literature was not just for the sake of art. He loves the beauty of nature not just for himself, but also for life. It is worth noting that the works of novelists include humanism, idealism, and realism in various proportions. He wanted to convey a specific sense to his people. He was a social reformer who wrote for society. He always wanted to uproot the frailties and failings of society. He was deeply rooted in humanism as a realist who is compassionate for the poor, the downtrodden, and the backward. He had command over his language and mastery over people’s language as he narrated his works with love and sympathy towards victims (Khuman, 2010).

Considering the previous theoretical framework, Kachru (1965) focused on the language of Indian English speakers in social contexts of India. First, he considered restricting Indian English writings from the standpoint of language after a “sociologically-based” linguistic framework. Later, he considered collocations of Indian English and some important syntactic devices that are used by Indian English writers. The author has discussed some important features of Indian English which make it stand out in India from British English or American English.

With the rise of interest in diasporic, transnational modernisms, and postcolonial English writings, it is also proven that Anand is gaining presence for his roles in various literary traditions and his impact on modern literary theory. Bluemel (2007) seeks encouragement from the modest rival of Anand and argues that he is important for critical analysis of British literature, colonial resistance, and British anti-war writing traditions. According to the researcher, “Across the Black Waters” by Mulk Raj Anand deserves close attention as it opens all the concerns.

Mulk Raj Anand (2004) discussed the origin of drama, role of imagination in drama, evolution of dramatic forms in India and difference from Roman and Greek dramas, Lalit Kala concept, development of classical theater and “Sutradhara” and union of audience and actors in Indian form.

According to Morse (2015), Anand’s impatience was named as “realism” and his affection for literary modernists like Woolf and Joyce was tempered with a hope for social embeddedness and immediacy of realism and that Anand was encouraged to pair cosmopolitanism with realism.

1.3 Research Gap

Mulk Raj Anand is a fiction writer in India known for being committed to the lives of common people of India leading Indian folktales and other forms of art, and fighting for independence of India. He found his purpose and subject matter in the lives of Indians. He started his writing career with “Untouchable”, which became a foundation stone for the subalterns. This article explores how Mulk Raj Anand has discussed subaltern and subaltern voice in his debut novel.

1.4 Research Objective

- To discover Mulk Raj Anand’s perspective towards subalternity in his novel “Untouchable”

2. Research Methodology

With his significant skill, Mulk Raj Anand portrays frustration, helplessness, agony, and anxiety of Bakha to the extent that he has embodied his own creation. Anand highlighted inhumanity faced by subalterns in the society through “Bakha ” in “Untouchable”. The novel is based on the events that happened on a day in the life of Bakha, a low-caste boy, at a small town Bulleh Shah. He used to clean latrines in three rows single-handedly and several times a day, in order to keep the place clean and free from disease and filth. Bakha is dedicated and efficient in his work.

He desperately wants to study. In his spare time, he used to sit and try to figure out how it felt when he could read. He also bought the first primer but his attempt of self-education doesn’t go beyond the alphabet.

He also wants Babu’s son to teach him lessons after work. He buys cheap sweetmeat for four annas while going to sweep the temple courtyard and market road on the way. He thought that he had 8 annas and he

could buy some sweets and taste them because he was not sure whether he would be alive tomorrow (Cawasjee, 1977). This study explores the portrayal of subalternity in “Untouchability” written by Mulk Raj Anand by collecting data from all secondary resources like research papers, journals, publishers, and other relevant sources.

3. Analysis of Study

Untouchable is more than just a novel. It is Anand’s protest against the social evil of casteism which has grabbed the eyes of people. He stated his purpose behind writing his debut novel “Untouchable” –

“Untouchable was in its sources a ballad born of the freedom I had tried to win for truth against the age-old lies of the Hindus by which they upheld discrimination. The profound thoughts of the upper orders in ancient India about caste were often noble. Someone in the great Mahabharata had cried, “Caste, caste - There is no caste!” And I wanted to repeat this truth to the “dead souls” from the compassion of my explanation in the various Hindu hells, in the hope that I would, myself, come clean after I had been through the sewer, as it were.” (George, 1994)

Untouchable is based on an 18 years old sweeper, Bakha, in the pre-independence era. It also determines the pain of working-class people or outcasts and their frustration and rage against upper-class people. The story shows the compromised relationships and grave among the subalterns, Muslims, upper-caste Hindus, and British and Christian colonizers. The novel explores a significant opening for Indian English writers to test a new world of subalterns. It gives hope for India and untouchable Hindus and promotes Gandhi’s principles to raise consciousness to remove the social evil of caste and hierarchical system from the culture.

The character’s outlook represents the audience exploring the world. Anand shows the tension and agony of people for being lower caste and the entire social structure where they are suppressed. Meanwhile, Anand brings out the role of deep-rooted dogma, religion, imperialism, and poverty to show the ways lower caste is being dominated in the Hindu society. He also drips out “untouchability” as the curse. Bakha is a subaltern boy who is a different creation in an English Indian novel. The author brings him to the limelight and voices him. He shows how this subaltern boy suffers problems when he tries to go out from a separated village where he

lives to a city, the humiliating and hostile behavior of Brahmins, upper caste people, and priest of the temple who bother his innocent mind. Bakha is suffered by both psychological and physical humiliation, which is portrayed as it is.

Actually, the condition of this sweeper is even worse than the slave. A slave may change his job, his master, and may even set free. But a sweeper is born in a miserable state that he cannot leave and he is bound to be a sweeper as his identity (Forester, 1982). Bakha is a fictional hero and a part of Anand's childhood when he befriended an outcast boy. This bond inspired him to come up with a lively character who wears dirty clothes, has soiled hands, sweaty face, and comes from a subaltern society. Anand portrayed him as a future of modern India, despite the fact that he comes from a subaltern class. Unlike Lakha, Bakha has not compromised with his situations. He was born in the 20th century. He wanted to adopt a modern dressing sense. He bought a pair of second-hand boots from a sepoy and old breeches. He wished to look like an English foreigner (Iyenger, 1973).

Being an untouchable, the journey of Bakha for one day starts with his father's alarming call to go to work. He was employed to clean up latrines for upper-class people. His job was to clean the latrines for five rounds. After his job, he comes back home in a contemplative, miserable mood, as how his job of sweeping roads, cleaning latrines, and sweeping the courtyard of temples made him down by the upper caste. He often wonders why he is separated from upper class people by his karma and how the people of his community are "untouchable" and contaminated, despite purifying and cleaning the environment and society.

They can clean others' dirt, but they cannot clean upper-caste people's minds. The upper-caste people don't like their touch. He is saddened and utters in his mind, "It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-Untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the world! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (Anand, 2001). The pains and miseries that Barkha suffers is due to the fault that he is born in subaltern class. He suffers oppression and humiliation as part of his daily life. He is greeted with words like "polluted" or "impure" wherever he goes.

He wishes to improve his social status and realizes his circumstances when a Paanwalla throws some cigarettes at him in a way that a butcher throws some pieces of flesh to hungry dogs sniffing around his shop (Anand, 2001). In addition, an upper-class housewife throws some chapatis at him as if she is throwing the same to an animal and a sweets shop owner throws some jalebis like a cricket ball at him (Anand, 2001). He

feels down everywhere he goes due to this subalternity. Bakha comes home after getting all the food stuff on the way and, Lakha, his father scolds him for bringing a few chapattis.

His father dreams of previous memories when he used to bring plenty of food that is collected from marriages. He also reminds of the previous incidents when he was not allowed to enter the house by Hakimji, when he went to bring medicines for children. Lakha was untouchable and he was not allowed to enter the house of any high-class family even when they were in some problem. Anand has clarified his humanistic approach when Lakha remembered his previous experiences, “I tried to fall at the feet of every passerby and prayed to them to tell the Sarkar, your honor, that my child was suffering. But Sarkar this is the time of kindness, be compassionate at this time, another time you may take even my life. Only, save my child.” (Anand, 2001).

4. Results

Anand discusses untouchability as the curse which is constantly haunting several generations. Lakha was not allowed to enter the premises of a medical shop as he was a sweeper and he was forced to see medicine bottles from outside. Bakha struggled both outside and within the society. Anand has deep sympathy with the lower class and he shares their agony and pain through his novel. He explains Bakha's suffering, “My aim is not negative, merely to shock, but to stimulate consciousness at all levels” (Cawasjee, 1977). Hence, Anand has portrayed such miseries of Bakha and his subaltern people in a humanistic way.

Lower-class people were not even allowed to use a common well to bring water in India as it is believed by the upper-class people that their touch would contaminate the water. According to the novel, the lower-caste people used to wait at the platform to get water by some upper-class Hindus. It is their generosity that they pour the water in their pitchers. Due to this reason, untouchables remain dirty, thirsty, and filthy by this intolerable practice. It has been described by Anand as, “The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw the water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream.” (Anand, 2001).

Anand explains how these subalterns cannot enter the temples too. The novel explains the “Temple incident” in which Bakha and Sohini, his sister, are being accused of infesting the temple badly. Bakha was

wondering what had really happened as he didn't commit any crime. The sacred and calm environment is suddenly shocked by cries, "Polluted! Polluted! Polluted!" (Anand, 2001). People scolded Bakha to get out of the place, "Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purification ceremony. Get down, get away, dog! ... 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" (Anand, 2001).

Being a social critic, Mulk Raj Anand conveys a strong message with "Untouchable" and protests against caste discrimination in society. Even though the practice of "untouchability" has been eradicated legally by the government of India. But it has not changed the social and traditional outlook and mentality of people. India still needs freedom from the caste system. Indeed, the novel shows Anand's way to distill social metaphor which takes a lot of postulates of Indian culture in its sweep. This dialectical art is based on the opportunities to achieve spiritual restoration. Anand handles the situation of untouchability in this novel through Bakha as he wants to have Indian society which is casteless where there is no place for untouchability.

5. Conclusion

Being a social critic, Mulk Raj Anand leaves a strong message to all the readers and raises voice against caste discrimination in society. He told the reality of subalterns, their pain and their mental state. Subalternity takes place on the basis of class, caste, and gender in the context of Indian culture. The caste system has badly affected the lives of people. Anand leaves a note of idealism and faith at the end of the novel. Bakha's mind is raised while hoping that the flush system would come soon and subalterns can be free from this social stigma and achieve dignity, which is their right as members of classless and casteless society. He fervently hopes for the beginning of his relevance in society and his work would be set free from the label of "untouchability".

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