



Coup D'oeil of Quelled Subaltern Voices in the Select Novels of Mulk Raj Anand

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ABSTRACT

The canvas of Indian fabric is stained by the acts of misdemeanour towards the poor and the down trodden. Subaltern is a latest Latin word coined by Antonio Gramsci to identify the cultural hegemony which excludes and displaces specific people from the socio-economic institutions of society, in a bid to deny them basic rights in colonial politics. In our society, caste is a major determinant of a person's position in the pyramidal power structure. Along with these markers of power; gendering and sexualisation also play significant role in keeping them down at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Anand, renowned as a major critic of the colonial hegemony, pays attention to their marginality which is the handiwork of the indigenous power structure thriving on patriarchy, caste-system and class-based privileges. His novels chronicle the diverse methods by which the de-sexualisation and unrelenting tyranny over these wretched men and women are perfected. Various contemporary authors of fiction have chosen to dwell on the subject of subjugation and torture of the Dalit and poor in our society. What seems to surprise me, as an onlooker, is the silent enslavement of these innocent lots; instead of outrage, at such an insolent state of affairs. The recent temple episode of Madhya Pradesh and the in-campus suicide of a youth at IIT Bombay have once again compelled me to rekindle the desire and want of equality for all, irrespective of any class, creed or sex. As a scholar of literature, I choose Mulk Raj Anand's novels to voice my thought. Anand's novels go behind the veil and expose the murky ideologies, the dubious traditional beliefs and futile male prejudices which provide sustenance to the vicious Indian society. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse Mulk Raj Anand's exploration of the subalternity of men and women in his novels 'Untouchable' and 'Coolie'. These novels underline the marginality of Dalit and poor as they are made to suffer under the prevalent class structure, thriving on rich and poor divide.

Key words - Subaltern, marginality, hegemony, patriarchy, tyranny, subjugation, ideologies, brutal, dubious, thriving.

'You cannot build anything on the foundation of caste. You cannot build up a nation. You cannot build up a morality.....' Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

Subaltern is a term which is associated to someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It carries in its fold the marginalized, the subjugated and the oppressed. It is a Latin word which was first used by Antonio Gramsci to identify the cultural hegemony that abandons and displaces distinct people and social groups from the socio-economic institutions of society, to deny their voices in colonial politics. In simplified words; it is a strategy that the ethnic or minority groups can use to present themselves. It is sometimes advantageous for them to bring forward their group's identity to achieve certain goals. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay 'Can the

Subaltern Speak? concludes without a hitch that Subalterns can't speak. The reason for this muteness, according to her, is that as soon as they try to acquire a voice, it becomes mandatory for them to move into a dominant discourse to be understood. Therefore, they must elevate their position which also means that they are no longer speaking from their existing position, i.e. they are no more subalterns. Thus, Gayatri reaffirms that the Subaltern is a silent position. This class includes peasants, workers and other low caste groups who are denied access to the hegemonic power in our society.

Mulk Raj Anand is recognised for his depiction of the lives of the poorer castes in the traditional Indian society. He is considered one of the pioneers of Indo-Anglian Fiction to gain huge international readership due to his indifferent style and choice of subject. His novels have acquired the status of classics of modern Indian English literature. The subjects of his novels are poor down casted people of India who form a huge mass. Untouchability, poverty and wretchedness, labour class, religious and narrow fanaticism, condition of women, economic insecurity, hunger, etc. follow suit. His works are noted not only for their perceptive insight into the lives of the oppressed but also for the analysis of their deprivation, exploitation and misfortune. He doesn't strive to separately write about the low caste people and their miseries, but being an integral part of our social fabric, their plight is automatically registered. His themes are socio-economic. He is essentially confronted between tradition and modernity. Anand became known for his fiery novel '*Untouchable*' in 1935 followed by his other works on the Indian poor '*Coolie*' in 1936. His novels are, in fact, a saga of untold distress of these aphonic masses to which he intends to provide a prominent voice. His novels flag the naked existence of human exploitation and misfortune of the poor and the down casted; and through them the misery of India speaks.

For any nation to live in peace and harmony, it must device a balanced social structure. The composition of Indian society possesses a complex social order wherein caste is a major determining factor of a person's location in the hegemonic power grid. The politically powerful makers of the society have very tactfully laid the poor working class and the low caste at the lowest position. Anand, renowned as a major critic of the colonial hegemony, pays concern to the marginality of these men and women which is the handiwork of the indigenous power anatomy thriving on patriarchy, caste-system and class-based privileges. His novels '*Untouchable*' and '*Coolie*' chronicle and register the diverse methods by which the de-sexualisation and unrelenting tyranny over women and low caste people are perfected. He is also a saviour of the caged women of Indian society as he has voiced their plight quite realistically. According to Indian mythology and the great Indian religious texts; the female identity, is bestowed great honour, but in real life, the picture is distorted by humiliation, depersonalisation and subjugation. The author is shocked at the behavioural pattern of these segregated and thwarted sects, who bear the pain in silence. Bapu Gandhi called them '*Harijan*' and said that untouchability is a crime in the eyes of God. Hence, we stand a sinner if we inflict pain on the God's chosen ones.

Mulk Raj Anand's '*Untouchable*' is an appalling revelation of the lives of the downtrodden who were inhumanly thwarted and neglected. The novelist ruthlessly condemns the man made barriers between the caste Hindus and the untouchables. The novel follows a single day in the life of Bakha, a toilet-cleaner, who accidentally bumps into a member of the higher caste, triggering a series of humiliations. The most spine-chilling and embarrassing moment ensues when he meets his sister Sohini who, sobbingly, narrates the horrifying tale of an attempted molestation on her at the hands of Pandit Kalinath, the temple priest. Agitated and angered, the brother tries to shield his sister's mutilated honour, but couldn't as the society treats him as an outcaste who deserves to be insulted and has no right to vocalise his grievances. The protagonist desperately hunts for liberty and salvation from the tragedy of being born into a low caste family, but by the end of the day the only solution that surfaces is the flush system, which when introduced, would free him from the task of toilet cleaning and reduce his agony. In the meantime, while the system is in process, he has to nurse his mutilated injuries silently as the estranged society doesn't give a damn to his injured soul and punctured spirit. The recent chilling temple event at Khargone, Madhya Pradesh, connects the present to the past and exposes the hypocrisy of the upper strata of our society. The social media is burning with the recent episode of discriminatory attitude towards a Dalit boy in the vicinity of a college leading to his death. Not to forget Rohit Vemula of Hyderabad University. Such insane and inhuman behaviour is intolerable.

Mulk Raj Anand's *'Coolie'* is in a slightly different vein. In this novel the theme of hunger, class consciousness, industrialisation, communalism, racism and many more ugly 'isms' are dominantly engraved. The novel dominantly deals with labour problem of textile mills and pitiable conditions of the domestic servants. It is the story of Munno, a hill boy, caught into the turbulent web of life which is ridden by perennial exploitations. In the description of the protagonist's life after leaving his village, the author has offered the readers an evocative portrayal of the shocking treatment meted out to those who are socio-economically disadvantaged by the powered and the privileged. The novel offers a critique of the type of labour that robs a life of all its joys and dignity. Consequently, Munoo's childhood ends pathetically when he becomes a servant. Thus, the novel is remarkable for its humanism, for its indictment against society that breeds such prejudices and cruelty and for its realism and narration. In McDowell Linda's opinion,

'Anand's European view gave him strong sense of the general contours of human conflicts and revolutions whereas his Indian sensibility enabled him to express this general scheme of movement without losing his whole hearted sympathy with people as they were, people with a long rich tradition' (Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding....., p.18).

The other factor which promotes oppression in our society is patriarchy wherein misogynistic men are stereotyped as *'strong'* and *'dominant'*. They are, in fact, the sole bread earners of the family and hence, have a say in matters pertaining its welfare. In order to emphasise and highlight the terms untouchability and patriarchy and show its significance in the smooth sailing of the social system, deliberate efforts are made to coin certain conditions that are difficult to negate. These men, enjoying an upper say in the society, form a pattern that holds them superior to others, especially women, who are termed feeble and mute. Sohini, in Anand's *Untouchable*, fits the role of a *'patient'*, *'docile'* and *'submissive'* woman. She is an untouchable girl whom we find patiently waiting for a higher caste Hindu to draw water for her from the well as she herself is not allowed to, for her touch would defile the water and its surrounding areas. Unlike Sohini, Bakha too is the staunch victim of the *'can't touch'* theory.

Sohini is a beautiful girl with a *'sylph-like form'*. Bhakha admires his sister's beauty but is also threatened by the fact that it is likely to allure lusty men towards her. Anand describes her beauty in the following words;

'She had, a Sylph like form, not thin but full-bodied, within the limits of her graceful frame, well rounded on the hips, with an arched narrow waist from which descended the folds of her salwar and above which were her full, round, globular breasts, jerking slightly, for lack of a bodice, under her transparent muslin shirt' (Untouchable, p. 46).

Pundit Kali Nath, the shrewd priest, decides to extend help by drawing water for Sohini to reward her patience. Indian society extols and hails women who seldom raise their voice or turn a deaf ear to the abuses hurled at them. Owing to this pathetic situation, a woman is taught to toe the lines dictated by men of higher caste and ingrain in them the feminine virtues in order to appropriate the role of an ideal woman. Sohini suffers in silence because she is a woman and her condition turns out to be more pitiable because she is a Dalit woman. In *Coolie*, Hari sympathises with his wife who seems to suffer from natural weaknesses of her sex. But despite her assumed lacunae she readily joins her husband in the factory and works for the same hours. In his novel *'The Road'*, the author presents the female marginal's who are eager to contribute their share of labour in the construction of road that would connect their village to the city. Unfortunately, such is the moulding of our society that a woman willingly submits herself to the exploitations without raising concern. She can't expect to be treated on equal parameters even if she strives for.

Anand's inclusion of Sohini's assault in his novel is for a specific purpose. He was actually trying to give his audience an honest and clear picture of the wrath rained upon any untouchable female living in pre-Independent India. Her assault and her suppressed voice portray the ugliness of the caste system. The irony is that the stigma of being born an untouchable does not die until the person's death. The *'Varna'* or caste system in India is a kind of caste hierarchy that has the Brahmins on the top and Shudras at the bottom. Forget about touch, even the shadow of an untouchable is meant defilement for an upper caste Hindu that requires immediate ablution. Bakha and his people have to announce their approach, lest they happen to bump into a high caste Hindu. *'Posh, keep away, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming'* (p.98) is the warning

Bakha has to shout whenever he approaches an area populated by high caste people. The man who tries to assault Sohini sexually is a Brahmin by caste. In normal conditions he can't touch her as it would pollute him but when his desires run high he has all the liberty to ravish and ruin her. What a mockery! Pandit Kalinath asks Sohini to clean the lavatories in the temple. He fondles her breast while she is busy working and when she repels his advances, he accuses her of polluting him and shouts '*polluted, polluted*' in a bid to lay the blame on the poor girl. Height of hypocrisy!

Bakha wants to avenge but he cannot touch the Brahmin priest who tried to assault his sister or even enter the temple since this would turn the entire society against him. Being an untouchable, neither Bakha nor Sohini are allowed to enter the temple premises as their touch would violate its sanctity. What a ridicule of God's creation. He did not get dirty by creating them but the high caste Hindus will get polluted even if their shadow falls on them. In this context E.M. Forster has rightly pointed out in the Preface of '*Untouchable*':

'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 can't escape and hence 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, and rearrange their plans for the day. Thus, he is disgusting as well as a disquieting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming...' (p. 8).

Bakha is a proud man at heart. He cannot bear someone casting dirty glance at his sister but has to keep all the anger curtailed as he is just a poor underdog. There were millions of untouchables in British India who had to bear the same oppression. Anand has dared to step into the untrodden genre to rip apart the soiled fabric and provide justice to this neglected lot. Speechless at his stature, Bakha contains his fury and leaves the place. Being treated worst than animals is a part of Bakha and Sohini's daily life but this incident is more than that. Bakha experiences intense pain of his life. The design of the social pyramid has reduced the lower class people to such a derogatory position that their welfare is nobody's concern. They have no right to live a dignified life in the society and their existence is a burden upon others. Anand has brought out this pain quite realistically through the thorny journey they undertake. They can't do anything but feel powerless over their condition and console each other. The novelist has portrayed the assault on Sohini to rip asunder the mask from the face of the Brahmins in the society who call themselves the descendants of Gods and the custodians of Hindu religion. Can God be so ruthless and cruel? It is just the depiction of a single day in the life of these characters which has not only moved the readers so intensely but also filled their hearts with pity and sympathy. The mere thought about the lives of those who have to go through the ordeal daily, as a routine, brings shivers down the spine. Such a horrific and humiliating life is beyond imagination. Dwelling upon the plight of women, Sylvia Plath utters, '*I must get my soul back from you; I am killing my flesh without it*' (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*).

These women sometime are not only inhumanly treated by the Brahmin but also their own higher caste community. After this humiliating incident Sohini realizes that Dalit women are the epitome of object for male's pleasure in home as well as in public. If we look back at the pre-historic time, it dawns on us that the plight of women, especially the marginal ones, has been quite miserable. One might come across various such examples in Ancient epics where Dalit women were used as maids and as massagers of male body. They were compelled to believe that God had made them for those purposes, so raising their voice against the custom was not commanded. The concept of *devdasi* is not to be forgotten, here. Thus, the victim's utterances about her rights are technically ignored. India is a land of long tradition and spirituality which has a dark history of caste discrimination and superstition. In this context, caste system plays a metaphorical role which reminds the readers that a woman has no space in the male dominated society in which she first becomes a slave to her family and later to the patriarchal mind set. Anand has, through the character of Sohini, portrayed the plight of Indian Dalit women who are treated as slaves in the male chauvinistic society. Thus, they undergo twofold humiliation. After her marriage, a Hindu woman tries to live up to the expectations of patriarchy. Manu in '*Manusmriti*' has said that the role of a wife is to simply perpetuate the social order and enable the men to gain immortality through their sons, '*Offspring, the due performance of religious rites, faithful service and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and for oneself depend on the wife alone*' (Chakravarty Uma, *Gendering India*....., p.72).

In his novels, Anand also explores the different aspects of caste prejudices which work against the interests of untouchable women. According to Andre Beteille, the word 'caste' refers 'to an ideal model, a plan or design of society whereas jati refers to the actual social groups with which people identify themselves and on whose basis they interact with each other' (Alan Bernard and Jonathan Spencer, *Caste in Routledge Encyclopedia*, p.112.) Moreover, caste has been closely associated with a variety of ritual practices and with religious beliefs about a person's station in life. It is a material reality with a 'material base'; it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today. According to Uma Chakravarty,

'Caste is not merely the opposition between pure and impure but at a fundamental level it incorporates other kinds of oppositions such as domination and subordination, exploitation and oppression, based on unequal access to material resources...' (Gendering India, ..., p.21).

In *Coolie*, Munoo's mother works hard for her family and dies a slow death which clearly points to the boredom involved in the life of a woman caught in domestic slavery. Home is where a woman's spirit is domesticated and her life gets lost in the endless chores of the household. The woman of the household lists up all her activities in one single breath but does not quite evade the emptiness in her life. Munoo could never forget the sight of his mother grinding grain between the scarred surfaces of mill-stones which she gyrated round and round by the wooden handle. Also, the sight of her lain dead on the ground with a horrible, yet sad, set expression on her face had sunk into his subconscious mind with all its weight of tragic and utter resignation. Bakha, in *Untouchable*, remembers his mother with much affection who fits into the role of a 'generous, giving, always giving' woman. The stereotyped all-sacrificing portrait of an ideal mother is given wide currency in Hindu society but it hardly leaves any room for an independent woman to live on her own terms.

Another factor that runs parallel to caste system is the class system which strongly governs the society. Anand's *Coolie* is a social tragedy in which it is not God but the society which is solely responsible for Munoo's troubled life. Poverty and exploitation hit him so hard that he is unable to bear the blow. So, the tragic flaw lies with the social milieu which shapes the destiny of a common man. Poverty is the first and foremost cause of the protagonist's tragedy. The realisation dawns on him in his first episode at Sham Nagar. Picture this:

'Whether there were more rich or more poor people, there seemed to be only two kinds of people in the world. Caste did not matter. I am a Kshatriya and I am Poor, and Verma, a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial, because he is poor. No, caste does not matter. The Babus are like the sahib-logs, and all servants look alike: there must only be two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor' (*Coolie*, p.69).

In this novel, therefore, it is class system of Indian society which is in question. Poverty gives birth to exploitation. At Sham Nagar Munoo is beaten so badly, like a slave, that his glorious romantic vision of urban life is shattered to pieces. Bibi Uttam Kaur is his tormentor in chief. Capitalism and Industrialism are the strong forces of exploitation and they are clearly seen in Daulatpur and Bombay episodes.

'It was dark and evil life. He rose early at dawn before he had his full sleep out, having gone to bed long before midnight. He descended to work in the limp, as if all the strength had gone out of his body and left him a speechless ghost of his former self' (Varshney, Mulk Raj.....,p.107)

In the Bombay episode Munoo's exploitations are universalised. Like Hari, he too is a victim of money-lending, horror, insecurity, low wages, slum life, and inhuman treatment. The chapter is a complete exhibition of the tragedy of the labouring class. Anand admits that it is not only capitalism and industrialisation but also communalism; which exploits Munoo. A worker's strike is easily broken by casual rumours of communal disturbances which diverts the wrath of the labourers from the mill to the religious factions among themselves. The fires of communal hatred are further fanned by the politicians, who have their own axes to grind. In the entire process, the misguided and exploited labourer unfortunately loses his job, his livelihood and sometimes even his life. The social forces which are at work in bringing the tragedy of Munoo are beyond his control. He drifts aimlessly. His destiny is controlled by the social force which governs and victimises him. It is his death which relieves him of the social cruelty, exploitation and poverty. The young man dies of tuberculosis and thereby ends his struggle for existence.

Anand, in his works, deals with the ritual and religious basis of caste and class discrimination in Indian society. In *Coolie*, a fat yogi dons the mantle of God himself to impregnate the wives of the merchant class for the birth of 'sons of God'. The notion of impurity is crucial to the ideology of the caste system because it is required to keep the low-caste in a state of permanent subordination. Edward Said has quoted that the role of an intellectual is to 'speak truth to power'. In other words, an individual will have to take a stand against the dominant power structure in society in order to survive the throttling system. Mulk Raj Anand, all through his literary career, has used literature as a means to address the societal ills. In his *Apology for Heroism* (1946), he stated his belief in socialist realism. He writes, 'Any writer who said that he was not interested in a condition humane was either posing, or yielding to a fanatical love of isolationism' (p.81). Being true to his socialist realism, Anand portrays the characters, in his novels, as getting steadily cornered in a social system marked by caste, class and patriarchal privileges.

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