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A Voice of Protest in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract

Literature is a means whereby immediacy of the life is recreated. As a social phenomenon and highest form of development of human sensibility, it is inspired by the socio-political events of an arena. Litterateur's take us on a journey to the world of their own creation that is the portrayal and the living document of the contemporary socio-political happenings of the societies. This implies the fact that, through their great artistic creations, they strive to bring us closer to the life and at the same time help us differentiate the real from the hyper-real and thereby shed the veil of our false ideology and preconceived mindset. Thus, literature is a mirror of life for we know writing never comes out in a vacuum rather there is always a full-fledged design behind every literary piece and every work has a proper socio-cultural, political, and economic environment. Every writer, therefore, assumes an importance of a hero for every time his pen spills ink, it is out of proper design: the design to stir the masses for something good, to question the status quo, to raise their voice against any dehumanising practice or oppression and in nutshell to righten the wrongs. People usually describe literary texts as the blueprints of the economics, family relations, environment, and attitudes. If we turn to the West, we have some prominent figures like Milton, Pope, and Wordsworth who left an indelible mark in reconstructing societies that would bear no room for the flaws. India in this connection did not lag behind. Here too we have literary figures like Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand who through their philosophic vision voiced some key concerns of the societies. Mulk Raj Anand's literature is the representation of his own age. This paper is an attempt to probe into the literature of protest of Mulk Raj Anand vis a vis his prominent novel *Untouchable* (1935), aimed at the rejuvenating and refashioning the societies.

Keywords- *Literature, Document, Ideology, Blueprint, Indelible, Philosophic Vision, Refashioning*

Literary men are very much sensitive to the influence of the ages. The literature, therefore, they produce is the emblem of the thoughts and sentiments of the human minds that are

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closely connected with and conditioned by the age. A writer is heavily influenced by the spirit of the age and constantly reacts to it more vividly and also vigorously through his/her pen. This brings us close to Shelley's observation where he reckons the writers (poets) as legislators or lawmaker, whose job is to guide the generations in the course of distinguishing between right and wrong. Wilson further contends:

Literature, may be viewed as a fruitful field for exploration and the study of man in society and culture. Literature exhibits multiple characteristics in relation to the area of the social sciences, since it may be considered as at once a part of culture and an artistic representation of that culture. It results from the individuals of a society, and thus indicates certain things about the individuals and their socio-cultural milieu. It acts upon the individuals of a society and thus may be viewed as a shaping force in personality, social structure, and culture. (*Untouchable*, 308)

From the Indian context, Mulk Raj Anand is one of the phenomenal fiction writers who have left an indelible mark on the novel in the Indian literature. He along Raja Rao and R K Narayan is readily acknowledged as the triumvirate of the English novel in India. These pioneering figures incorporated some close to heart themes into their works thereby addressed some key concerns of the societies. As the country was shedding itself from the colonial burden, there were some heinous socio-political issues that crept up and needed an address owing to the magnitude of the turmoil they conceived. The menace of superstition, caste system, poverty, illiteracy and many more issues posed a strenuous challenge to the entire fabric of the culture of India. Through the stroke of their novels, they raised the consciousness of the masses whereby they could judge the effects of these evil forces.

Mulk Raj Anand espouses some broader thematic dimensions in his fiction. Considering the fact that the society was torn into pieces owing to the political manoeuvrings, social disparities and the communal frenzy it was pertinent for the Indian English novelists like him to stir the seeds of the reform in the societies. Mulk Raj Anand in his novels took up the responsibility of making artistic presentations of the issues lying beneath the social structure. His works like *Untouchables* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1927) have been praised all over. Besides, his trilogy encompassing *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1941) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) show the individuals at war against the roles that the society is trying to impose on them. More importantly, they display the conflicting attitudes arising out of the contesting spaces of the societies. He observes:

I was just then writing *Untouchable*. I left London and went to Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in 1927. There I learnt some sincerity, truthfulness and simplicity. The Mahatma sent me to the people before I should write any more novels. From the time onwards my protest about the human predicament, under the empire, and in the atmosphere of our own decay, often resulting

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from blind acceptance of bad habits, and the taboos of the sage Manu and the Hadith traditions of Islam, became self-conscious. (*Untouchable*, 20)

This implies that the empathy that he shared with the fellow beings helped him to be himself yet at the same time share something with others involving multitudinous complexities. This can be better ascertained once we analyze his novel *Untouchable* that highlights the disintegration and the suffering of the downtrodden in the Indian society. This he shows through the universal figure of Bakha, a sweeper boy who is made to live a life of stagnation and undue humiliation. The novel encompasses a single day happening in the life of this teenage boy who represents his class in a pathetic way. The tragedy of the things is that even his father Lakha, head sweeper ill-treats him and makes him clean the latrines very early in the morning. Mulk Raj Anand puts it in a pathetic way:

“Get up, ohe you Bakhiya, ohe son of a pig!”

...Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoy will be angry.” (*Untouchable*,

15)

The high-caste people make further his life miserable once he encounters them in the course of performing the task assigned to him. He is even slapped for inadvertently touching a person of high caste, an episode that took place in Bulandshaher. Such a gesture, in fact, shivers his consciousness and he begins to analyze the wretched state he is reduced to. He observes, “For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!”(52). When her sister goes to the well to fetch water for her father whom we find dying with the hunger, she is made to wait till the upper castes have their pitchers filled.

Mulk Raj Anand minutely scans this kind of behaviour and becomes champion of their rights. The downtrodden found their apt representation in his novels that initiated a kind of social change where the power and the dignity were shared equally later. Bakha does not get his due reward for the work done by him but has to depend on crumbs and left food and there too much abuses and insults are heaped on for raising the voices of protest.

The novel also comes close to a realistic incident of his own life when he himself was taken to his home by sweeper boy Bakha, in a humane gesture after being hit by an accidental stone. There his mother rather than paying thanks to the boy scolded him for carrying him and touching him. This episode remained at the back of his mind and he relates it in a pathetic way:

I noticed that among my playmates were boys and girls who were considered superior if they were the children of the parents in big houses, and inferior if they were the children of the houses with shabby hutments. Our parents asked us to have a bath after playing with untouchable children from the hutments because we may have touched them. (*Untouchable*, 23)

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The novel seems more to the heart due to the location that it inhabits. The colony where the upper castes live separated from the shabby mud-walled houses clustered in two rows in which Bakha along his father and sister live is the emphatic representation of the deep truth of the human societies. Mulk Raj Anand describes it brilliantly when he says that there lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcasts 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 cakes. (*Untouchable*, 11)

Mulk Raj Anand was very much touched by the anomalies of his family and of the people in general. With the passage of time he experienced more pain in the societies and his mature mind impelled him to voice the dissent and concern about such wrongdoings. Most of the issues that are taken up in this novel are the result of his own experience in the course of his maturation in the unjust and harsh society. This pain that he feels in this society is highlighted through the mouthpiece of Bakha:

. . . All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us because we are sweepers, because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it to... I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an untouchable! (*Untouchable*, 58-59)

Conclusion

Through his great artistic competence, Mulk Raj Anand voices his dissent against the undue brutality and the discrimination of the lower class at the hands of the upper class. The novel holds a greater relevance even today for we still confront the societies where the dehumanising practice of relegating the others to the background and depriving them of the equal standard continues. The sole intention of his fiction is to bring the masses close to each other by criticizing the social maladies, human hypocrisies, and individual idiosyncrasies. Thus, he makes every effort to bring a kind of equilibrium into the societies by sounding a deathblow to the humiliation and deprivation of any kind.

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