

Subaltern (Dalit) Concern in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand

WSR to Untouchable and Coolie

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Anand is an objective delineator of Indian social reality and has dealt extensively in his novels with the most vital aspects of Indian life in all its social, political, economic and cultural manifestations. Though his novels are written in English they form an integral part of the significant trend of social realism in the Indian novel. His ideology is imbued with an acute social awareness and a distinctive sense of responsibility towards life. He desires a radical transformation of the Indian society and depicts the multiple tensions existing at various levels as between the feudal orthodoxy and bourgeois progressivism or between capitalist acquisitiveness and socialist collectivism. His novels encompass the wide spectrum of class and caste hierarchies from the highest princes and Brahmins to the lowest coolies and untouchables.

Anand's choice of untouchability as the theme for his first novel not only results from his rejection of the irrational basis of the caste system but is also related to the political necessity of a united front to fight the alien rulers during the colonial epoch. In the post-Independence era Anand's approach to the problem shows marked modifications. His concern for the miseries of Indian labourers is the shaping motif of three independent novels which share a thematic progression beginning with the sufferings of the coolie, through the subhuman existence of the plantation labourer to an idealisation of the politically conscious worker who strives for working-class solidarity and believes in emancipation through trade-union activities.

Mulk Raj Anand was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, who was a great Marxist. His socialism drew its inspiration from Gandhi and Karl Marx. He rejected the domination of one class over the other on the basis of superiority in the hierarchical order. He stood against the subhuman status granted to the low class people by the people in the 'centre' who do not choose to acknowledge (filth, squalor, cruelty, laziness and sensuality). His novels are a means to give voice to the subalterns.

The advocate of the downtrodden, and the underprivileged and a direct successor of Munshi Premchand, Anand exhibits in his novels an acute concern for the subordinates in terms of class, gender, caste, office and in other ways. He was gifted with a keen insight into the problems of farmers, clerks, prostitutes and such people who stand on the bottom rungs of the social ladder. Before his *Untouchable* (1935), Indian English novels were mainly based upon history or romance (for example novels of Bankim Chandra and Tagore), or on the middle and upper middle class life (as the novels of Sharat Chandra) but lacked the realistic and naturalistic fervor of Balzac or Zola. It was Anand's aim "to stray lower still than even Sharat Chandra"¹ and focus attention on the suffering, misery and wretchedness of peasant mother, he doubtlessly derived his commonsense,

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his sense of the ache at the heart of Indian humanity, and his understanding compassion for the waifs, the disinherited, the lowly, the lost – in a word 'Subaltern' or "Daridra-Narayana" (the Lord as incarnate poverty) as Iyengar terms it.

Although born in one of the higher castes, his father Lallchand Anand was working in the Indian Army, where Mulk Raj as a child mixed freely with the children of sweepers attached to his father's regiment and these early playmates and friends, with the intuitive recollections of imagination in reflective moments figured as heroes in his first novels as he himself calls them, "flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood." They obsessed his artist's soul to inspire him "to interpret the truth from the realities of life."² Anand has been in the words of M.K. Naik, "One of the many groping young men of my generation who had begun to question everything in our background, to look away from the big houses and to feel the misery of the inert disease-ridden, underfed and illiterate people about us."³ A son of coppersmith turned soldier and of a peasant mother, he had seen villagers groaning under poverty, sucked dry by the parasites of the capitalist class, being insulted and injured by the zamindars, the moneylenders and the businessmen. Therefore his heroes are the subalterns of the society – the downtrodden sweepers, coolies, the unemployed coppersmiths, the debtridden farmers, poor simple soldiers or persecuted and exploited women like Gauri. Poverty and sufferance are the badge of this class. They are "embroiled in the whirlpool of trouble, of famines and droughts and hatred and debts and misery."⁴ His subalterns are the victims of marginalization on account of their class, caste, gender and office. Like Hardy's rustics, they also feel that "The Gods are dead and we are living as dead in this dying world."⁵ They live and die unwept and unsung. They are small men, pursued by inexorable forces, which toss them this way and that till they break into pieces and are unable to fight these forces. His protagonists claim their identity with the heroes of Thomas Hardy, similarly crushed but indomitable and unconquerable in their spirits.

These subalterns form a class of their own and assert their forbidden freedom of the self. They resemble the poor colonized natives, who are speechless and powerless to fight against the imperialistic forces and the colonizers' tyranny. According to Fanon, whose work *The Wretchedness of the Earth* is seminal in post-colonial criticism, the first step for the colonized is to find voice and an identity in the imperialist society. The subaltern in Anand's novels resemble the dehumanized and marginalized natives of post-colonial period. The subaltern in his novels is a figure of pity and bestiality, of ignorance and humiliation, too weak to fight against the rigorous zamindar, inhuman moneylender and imperial masters. Hamstrung and harassed on all sides by irksome restrictions and obnoxious controls, the subaltern in Anand's novels presents a gloomy picture of care and wretchedness and stands aghast to find that assurances given to him have been proved to be false even in Independent India. He is unable to find a political will to attend to his grievances, to understand his basic needs and to provide him with the barest necessities of life. Anand feels an urgent need to restore these subalterns to human dignity and inculcate self-awareness, to pull them out of the abjectness, apathy and despair in which they are sunk. Perhaps, no elite approach, liberal feminism, or Marxist feminism, or Lacon's theory of "Woman's Body" can best underline the agony of the subaltern in his novels as a subaltern reading does. Anand's novels are an attempt to evoke humanitarian concern in the readers the world over for the underdogs and underprivileged of the Indian society – which despite all its uniqueness in its hierarchical gradation can be taken as a microcosmic specimen of a macrocosmic problem – the

problem of (rather faced by) the subaltern. The novelist succeeds in penetrating deeply into the protagonist's consciousness and delineates the inner working of his mind with empathy. *Untouchable*, Anand's most powerful novel, and *Coolie* are excellent examples in this respect. Even almost all his novels that followed them bring home to the reader his deep concern for the oppressed, the overburdened subalterns who are powerless to fight superstitions, social conventions, marginalization and humiliation which hinder them at every step in their search for better life.

Untouchable is a pathetic but heart-rending cry of the author against the cruelty and prejudices of the higher caste people towards the lower castes, the subalterns or dalits. It is his ruthless attack against the hitherto rigid but gradually crumbling caste-system in Indian society. Anand's daring effort of choosing the 'Dalit' as a hero covers the *terra incognita* for introducing "into creative narrative (...) whole new people who have seldom entered the realms of literature of India."⁶ Bakha is a latrine cleaner who is born into the family of Lakha, the Jamadar of sweepers. His powers and place in society are determined not by his ability but *ipso facto* of his birth in a subaltern or 'dalit' family. Anand describes Bakha's morning round of duties with a painstaking particularity, stressing upon the mechanical efficiency with which the boy carries on his essential services and the inhumanity and callousness with which the beneficiaries receive it as if it is a matter of no account whatsoever. Three rows of latrines to clean single-handed, and several times too; to bring cleanliness in the place of filth and possible disease: such is Bakha's daily toil which he turns into a mechanical acceptance, subaltern in Indian society. His father's counseling adds to it: "You should try and get to know them. You have got to work for them all your life, my son, after I die."⁷ He is not destined for education, "schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers."⁸ Detested by the high class people, he has to announce his arrival lest the upper class be touched and defiled. He has a good physique and Nature has bestowed upon him all countenance and conscience. The five basic elements have their equal share in him. The full warmth of the sun lends him the ability to work and to feel fast. Like every young individual, Bakha, too, has nourished some private dreams. Rejected, defeated and subjected to trials and tribulations, he is rescued by a Muslim tongawallah. Anand's portrayal of the wretched living conditions and unhygienic surroundings, and sub-standard treatment given to the low caste people parallels the pathetic pictures of Victorian oppression and injustice presented by Charles Dickens in his novels. In his quest for identity, Bakha seeks the sympathy of the Muslim smoker and the tongawallah, another subaltern in the caste-ridden Hindu society. His dreams are pathetically shattered by "a sharp, clear slap."⁹ His agony in not being allowed to visit a temple as "an untouchable going into a temple polluted it past purification"¹⁰ is an indignant attack on the heinous caste system which insulted and sidelined a Dalit or subaltern. His sister Sohini too is subjected to inter-caste abuses and recriminations when she approaches the well for water. But pathetically becomes the object of the priest's lust. Being a dalit, she becomes the first recipient of Pandit Kali Nath's generosity as she seems to satisfy his waves of amorousness."¹¹ He tries to malign her to come and clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. On her arrival, he holds her by her breasts when she bends in the lavatory of his house. Out of anger, she screams, he comes out shouting that, "he had been defiled."¹² It tries the patience of Bakha who is full of disgust, anger and indignation for the priest. Further, in a public fight, a little boy is injured, and trying to lift him up, Bakha is accused of 'polluting' the boy.

Moreover, when he returns home, at last, his father roundly rates him for idling away all the time, and sends him out of the house. Bakha's cup of frustration, misery and suffering is full and he is left with three options – to embrace Christianity, to follow Gandhian reforms, or believe in mechanized sanitation as they only answer possible. A dejected and disappointed Bakha is observed by colonel Hutchinson of the Salvation Army who explores Jesus Christ to Bakha and tries to convert him. But he is disillusioned by the colonel's wife who chides her husband for "messing about with all those dirty bhangis and chamars."¹³ Bakha's lesson of the social snobbery (which has distorted Christianity too) is over. Anand in him we find the proof of the truth, "Does, subaltern speak?" Dejection leads him to a strong optimism. We are reminded of what W.B. Yeats expressed in his poem, "*The Second Coming*." Surety, the critical phase of India's freedom struggle is over. India attained freedom and the narrow racial feelings based on caste and creeds have subsided over the years. We have come a long way. But the narrow walls of casteism, racial discriminations and other class and gender related prejudices still divide us and create frictions and cracks in the glorious homogeneity of our social make-up.

Anand's *Untouchable* is an attempt to project the humiliation and agony faced by a subaltern in the Indian society which is divided into the graded inequality and hierarchical anarchy; where the tall claims of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" have proved to be merely an Utopian dream. Anand has railed upon this centuries-old, and deeply-rooted inhuman practice which has denied a subaltern 'dalit' a right to be a fellow human being, a 'touchable.' The novel is a remarkable piece of art for the convincing photographic fidelity of the pictures drawn, cumulative ferocity and force of detail, and an uncanny accuracy of facts which combine to project "a picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy."¹⁴ Anand, through his subaltern hero, makes an attempt to subvert the conventional hierarchical order and challenges the phallogocentric ideology since it perpetrates marginalization of subaltern. He has given the subaltern Bakha a voice, an identity and a speech which is denied to him by the upper communities in the caste-ridden society. His main concern is to 'dismantle' the social order based on Manu's ethics.

His second novel *Coolie* is based upon the problem of class-struggle, social injustice and psychological conflict of the subalterns, the poor underdogs and the rich, the privileged ones. It is an indictment against the inhuman treatment given to the poor, against the denial of the right to happiness to a simple landless orphan, against the exploitation of the underprivileged and unjust social system. It is Anand's genuine effort to awaken the conscience of the people of the world against this injustice and exploitation of the lower people in rank or class – i.e. a subordinate or a subaltern of the Indian society. It is an appeal for healthy human values and a radical transformation of the miserable subalterns, the have-nots, an appeal for building a classless society built upon the principles of fraternity, peace, love and justice. "Anand's attacks on political as well as social and economic institutions are carried out mainly on behalf of India's poor, in the effort to destroy forces inimical to their development and to build a world of freedom and equality where human potential can flourish."¹⁵ If *Untouchable* is the microcosm, *Coolie* is more like the macrocosm that is Indian society. *Coolie* is a cross section of India – a symbolic combination of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the human, the good and evil. There is no time for us to pause, to think, to judge, for we are constantly shifted; a new situation engulfs us at every turn and

new cruelties and absurdities whirl round us. We are moving from Village to Taluka headquarters, from District headquarters to Presidency capital, then the national capital; "this is a progression indeed but only spatially, for the human situation hardly alters wherever we may be. Munoo is the exploited all the time, one way or the other, by one person or another; and his fate is typical of the fate of millions whose only distinguishing badge is patient sufferance."¹⁶ Munoo symbolizes the agony and humiliation faced by subalterns in Indian society, in one way or other. Sometimes this humiliation springs from the caste-considerations, at other times it is a result of the class and rank factors. Like *untouchables*, *coolie* too is a subaltern in Indian society, a term of derogation in India as elsewhere. Indian coolies form a class by themselves as there are Indian coolies in Africa, Burma, Ceylon, Malayasia, Indonesia and in other countries too. While a coolie's services are indispensable, his position in the ladder of social hierarchy is at a lower rung. Anand has picked up Munoo to awaken humanitarian concern towards a coolie and raise his dignity as a piece of flesh and blood, a human being capable of thinking and feeling; endowed with a mind, a heart, a soul.

A simple, poor orphan boy of fourteen, Munoo cherishes high dreams to study, to make machines himself but finds them shattered into pieces like those of any other subaltern in a society which forces him to earn his bread not by the sweat of his brow but by blood of his heart. He emerges as a symbolic articulation of the pain and penury of the downtrodden and the exploited masses of Indian society whose life is a long tale of humiliation, injustice and hatred, trauma and tension, poverty and perversion. His poverty poses obstacles in the path of his moving in the company of the rich, the privileged and he finds a water-tight division between the rich and the poor – the haves and have-nots: "Money is, indeed, everything; Munoo thought [...]. The babus are like Sahib logs, and all servants look alike: there must only be two kinds of people in the world; the rich and poor."¹⁷ The novel portrays Anand's concern for the subaltern and his mission to proceed on the path of social justice and awaken the conscience of the learned people to the problems of (rather faced by) subalterns – victims of social, political and economical injustice. Dayaram, Mr and Mrs Nathoo Ram, Ganpat, Chimta Saheb and Mrs Mainwaring, too, have only contempt for Munoo. They slap him, kick him, and abuse him. Let alone the rich and the privileged, even a hotel-server treats him as if he were leper, an untouchable. All because he is poor and inferior entity, a subaltern. The novel is classified into five parts, with the whirl of events. Munoo is tossed from insult to injury from the very beginning of the novel to the end when he dies of consumption-exhausted, weary and broken. Throughout he rarely acts according to his will rather passively receives the buffets and dead blows of circumstances as if to announce like Hardy's Henchard (in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*) "My punishment is not greater than I can bear." Suffering begins with his birth at his home and concludes with his life. He suffers in body and mind both.

He had heard of his father's death due to exploitation in the hands of the landlord, rendering his mother a penniless beggar to support a young brother-in-law and child in arms. The sight of his mother grinding grain between the scarred surface of millstones which she gyrated around and around, by the wooden handle, now with her right hand now with her left, day and night left deep and indelible marks on his delicate mind. He is exploited all the time. His fate is typical of the fate of millions of subalterns who are destined to suffer and die without having any power or pleasure of human life. He escapes the loveless life in his uncle and aunt's house to find a

job in Nathoo Ram's house which only proves to be a sort of madhouse where people are cruel because they cannot be happy. Munoo runs away from this prison to work in the house of Prabha Dayal in Daulatpur. But unfortunately his benefactor becomes bankrupt and Munoo is destined to work as a coolie in a green market and then at a railway station carrying things for others. The novelist presents a heart-rending account of the sufferings of Munoo and other coolies who are reduced to the grade of beasts to get job. To save money, he visits a temple and is exposed to the hypocrisy and corruption of a lecherous 'Yogi.' By accident he makes acquaintance with an elephant-trainer in a circus who helps him to reach Bombay, where he learns about the cruelty of the rich towards the poor. Life on the pavements or in the slums, service in the Sir Gorge White Cotton Mills, collision with human sharks and hyenas, the friendship of Hari and Lakshami all expose Munoo to the endless struggles of life. The sufferings of life do not make this subaltern heartless, he can feel the pricks of conscience and acute pain when Hari's son gets his right arm grazed by ignorantly touching the belt of a machine in the spinning shed. He questions his own existence, "Am I really ominous? My father died when I was born, and then my mother, and I brought misfortune to Prabha, and it seems, I have brought misfortune to Hari now. If I am ominous, why don't I die"¹⁸

The endless deafening roar of the machine, the poor wages, bad housing condition, the long hours of working and the callous exploitation from all sides torture him every moment. He is a poor subaltern whose badge is suffering and patience. The novel further unfolds his misadventures – his companionship with Ratan, his descent into the Redlight district, involvement in the 'labour trouble' and the Hindu-Muslim disturbances and his final journey to Malabar Hill to escape the hectic police action, where he is knocked down by a car and then Mrs Mainwaring, owner of the car decides to take him to Shimla and makes him her rickshaw-puller and page (and perhaps something more than that). Worn out by work he hastens to his grave. The thesis of a subaltern's sufferings, humiliations and exploitations ends with his life. Munoo is born in the hills to die in the hills. Here, Anand seeks to evoke pity towards the miserable plight of a subaltern in our society. Through him Anand has focused attention on the wretched plight of the millions of subalterns in India who are toiling, suffering, starving and dying of bitterness and despair – unable to carry on the burden of life-long sufferings. Through him Anand has aroused the conscience of humanity against the ruthless exploitation of the underdogs of our society.

Munoo, the protagonist of the novel, represents the proletariat that lives on the fringes of a society characterized by competition, not association. His realization of the existence of the two warring classes, viz., the rich and the poor, and the absence of nexus between the two, illustrates the crux of the Marxist thought. Friendless, alone, cut off from society, uprooted, from the wild-nature-escape of his homeland, and drifting like a straw on a current in alien lands, he tries to salvage his past bit by bit as far back as he can remember. He has lost his name, his place, his friends, his people, his freedom and even his sense of time and comprehension of reality. He is not at ease; he feels restless, sick and finally silenced into oblivion – a poor subaltern as he is.

Thus a study of the subaltern concern shown by Anand in his novels reveals that despite all tall claims of social reformation and technological advancement, nothing really changes for the subalterns in our Indian society. Despite our progress to a more developed world things remain the

same let the statistical data and sociological survey reveal another side of the problem. The exploitation of the lower caste by the higher caste is a bitter truth of modern society, and newspapers, media, television frequently and sharply focus on the atrocities and inhumanities inflicted upon these poor subalterns.

The development of a selected class of society at the cost of the deprivation of mass and common man creates serious imbalance in the social structure. The attitudinal clash between the high and the low, the haves and have-nots the privileged and underprivileged would always support the exploitation of the poor, the wretched the subalterns. Through Bakha, Bhikhu, Munoo, Gangu and Gauri, Anand has focused attention on the wretched plight of other subordinate position in society on the basis of class, rank, office and gender. They are the downtrodden and the exploited ones who are useful to the society but untouchable or abominable or subordinates because of their rank and class or gender. Bakha, Munoo and Gauri all are victims of subjugation and exploitation. They form a class of their own and sometimes assert their sympathy and humanity and their freedom of the self, unlike many subalterns. M.R. Anand presents in his novels their emotional sufferings, traumas and agony. Himself a son of a coppersmith turned soldier and of a peasant mother, he had seen farmers, peasants, coolies and the Dalits-Subalterns groaning under poverty, he had seen the vitality of their life sucked by the parasital zamindars, moneylenders and the businessmen. He had seen the debt-ridden peasants trembling with fear of their dark future – like Hardy's rustics pursued and dragged by the inexorable forces but unbowed and unbeaten by the hard blows of destiny. His novels present their emotional trauma in the socially and culturally coded structures and significantly celebrate the little freedom they wrench out of their subject positions in the long drama of pain and suffering. But their voice, which is a subaltern voice is always muffled by the elitist segments of the Indian hierarchical society. They rarely speak and seldom given a chance to break their 'silence.' The subaltern voice of Bakha, Bhikhu, Munoo, Gangu and Gauri is forced to stay on the periphery in their leap towards the center. In his novels Gauri suffers as much due to subalternity as Bakha and Munoo do.