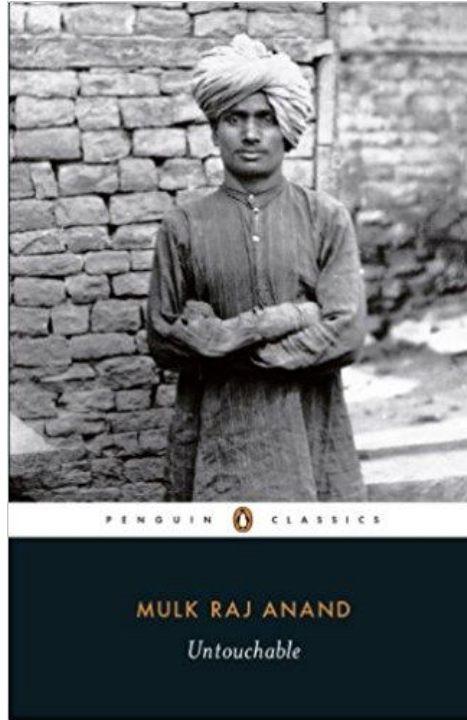


**Portrayal of Bakha and Bhikhu as Victimized Heroes:
M. R. Anand's *Untouchable* and *The Road***

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.



Abstract

This paper is an attempt to project the novel as literary phenomenon almost something new to India a bit away from the respectable position the Epics, Lyrics, dramas, short-stories and fables have enjoyed and glorified in India with a focus on the contribution of some novelists like Chandra Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan in general and Mulk Raj Anand is particular. It beautifully analyses the dominant role of M. R. Anand in the current literary scenario of Indian English Fiction as a literary stalwart whose literary skill lies in his handling of a variety of social problems rather impressively in a humanistic manner, steering the Indian English Fiction to the unexplored regions where the tears and sweats of the oppressed & suppressed sections of people remain unheeded by most writers. It neatly examines the portrayal of Bakha and Bhikhu as

victimized heroes as projected by Mulk Raj Anand in his *Untouchable* and *The Road* respectively with his remarkable application of the Stream of Consciousness technique.

Keywords: social problem, victimization, bottom dogs of society, pathetic life, untouchables, literary phenomenon, social realism, artistic narration.

Novel as Literary Phenomenon

The novel as literary phenomenon is something new to India. Epics, Lyrics, Dramas, Short stories and fables have their respectable ancestries, going back by several centuries, but it is only during a period of little more than a century that the novel – the long sustained piece of prose fiction- has occurred and taken roots in India. The Indo- Anglian novel since its genetic has passed through three main phases. The first one is the phase of the historical novel which was short- lived, while the second phase was the Socio-political novel with a stress on social realism that was ‘long – lived’. The third phase is the phase of the psychological novel revealing a concern for the inner life of the individual. The earliest Indian novels written in Bengali are supposed to have been the foster mother of Indo-Anglian fiction. Some Bengali novelists like Ramesh Chandra Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Rabindranath Tagore proved a great influence on the early Indo- Anglian novelists. Raja Rao enriched the Indian fiction with highly poetic prose and artistic narration. Following Raja Rao, the novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayaan, D.F. Karaka, Ahmed Abbas and Ahmed Ali and many others contributed rather immensely to the growth and development of the Indo-Anglian fiction.

Mulk Raj Anand, a Literary Stalwart

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the prominent writers in the field of Indian English literature. His reputation as a literary Stalwart – lies in his heading of a variety of social problems impressively in a humanistic manner. It is he who has steered the Indian English fiction to the unexplored regions where the tears and sweats of the repressed class people remain unheeded by most writers. He has won renown for himself as the chief spokes man of the Indo- Anglian literary naturalism with a proletarian bias. He is of the view that human behavior is determined by its social environment. The society, not character, is the destiny of man. His *Coolie* (1936) is possibly the foremost folk epic of the Indo – Anglian fiction. In the words of Dr. A.V. Krishna Rao, “It is a typical novel of this oppressive trend (pro-

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proletarian) in modern society and becomes multidimensional with its philosophy of naturalism and the contemporary national ideas. But beneath the pervasive pessimism, there is an essential undercurrent of optimism and need for drastic reform of the rotten society” (P 254). His early novels *Untouchable* (1936), *Coolie* (1936) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) which won him fame and name do novel him to be the champion of the underdogs. Quite distinguished from other Indian writers by his sense of commitment, humanism, realism, creative vigour and abundant sympathy for the bottom dogs and dregs of society, in a writing career spread over almost forty years, he is said to have produced more than a dozen novels, half a dozen collections of short stories and mimeos other works on subjects ranging from art to cooking and his fiction is nothing but a characteristic product of the modern Indian ethos of all the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* is the most Compact and artistically satisfying. It is the shortest of his novels and most revealing and rewarding of the lot. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar comments thus:

“Untouchability strikes us as the picture of a place, of a society and of certain persons not easily to be forgotten; a picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy. As a novelist addressing himself to the task of exposing certain evils, Anand ... has been as effective almost as’ Dickens himself” (p. 72).

Untouchable and The Road

Untouchable is Anand’s maiden but powerful attempt to probe in the wretched practice of untouchability from which the low-born people in the caste hierarchy suffered much during the pre-independence period *The Road* deals with the present unchanged condition of the Chimars in the post independent era. Both the novels sincerely present the pathetic life of the “untouchables” thereby calling forth pity and love towards the outcastes in the minds of the readers.

Emotional Output of Writers

Generally speaking, ‘the novel’ is nothing but the emotional output of a writer’s imagination in which his thoughts and feelings are projected through characters and anecdotes. The characters can be developed systematically and the incidents can be graphically described as the novel form demands no time limit. The representation of life

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mingled with the author's rich imagination makes the novel enjoyable and invites the readers to share the joys and sorrow of the characters. A novel can be informative, educative and entertaining as well. One is aware of the powerful appeal made by prose fiction as a genre to a larger section of the reading public. The novel had its origin in England in the later half of the eighteenth century and passed into its modern form with Richardson and in America, it came into being with W.H. Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*.

Started as the source for entertainment both in England and America, the novel gradually became sociological, psychological and humanistic in the hands of the modern writers such as Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The first Indian English novel was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* only with the Civil Disobedience Movement of the nineteen thirties; the Indian English novel reached new heights, handling such significant themes as struggle for freedom, concern for communal and societal problems and the miserable condition of the economically exploited people.

The Trio

The Indian English fiction evolved into a new dimension in the hands of the trio-group; "Anand the Marxist, progressive or committed writer; Narayan the comic genius or writer pure and simple; and Raja Rao the religious or philosophical novelist" (Narasimhaiah 106). Mulk Raj Anand is said to have raised the status of the Indian English novel by projecting the very heart of India rather sincerely in his fiction. His literary world comprises the socially and economically suppressed peasants, coolies, sweepers and those suffering at the hands of the unsympathetic zamindars, money lenders, landlords and the so-called business bugs. Prem Chand in Hindi and Sarat Chandra in Bengali write about the pitiable condition of the downtrodden and the oppressed. Shyam M.Asnnani remarks that Anand has attempted a similar thing in English and rightly holds:

"In the field of Indo-English fiction, Anand is perhaps the first to have written of this 'motely crowd' who had hitherto be largely ignored by other contemporary writers"

Anand, a Novelist of the Downtrodden

As a novelist of the downtrodden, Anand in all his works has been pleading for help to raise the oppressed people to human dignity and self-awareness and strongly opposed class

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distinctions and aristocratic system of society which create barriers among the people. He is “Dickensian in his ultra-sensitivity to the existence of social evils in protean forms” (Paul 6).

Anand’s debut as a writer may be stated to have rightly started with the publication *Untouchable* in 1935. Despite the fact that Anand wrote fifteen novels depicting the disharmony of the Indian Society at many levels, it is his *Untouchable* which got him great reputation and placed him along with the famous writers of the world.

Untouchable

Here in the novel *Untouchable*, M.R. Anand skillfully describes the evil of caste system and the pathetic plight of the outcastes through the principal character, Bakha. He is an eighteen year old sweeper boy in the outcastes’ colony, Bulandshahr. His duty is to clean the three rows of public latrines several times a day without break. His next job is to collect and burn up the heaped refuse in a chimney. Instead of being thankful to him for his cleaning the dirt, the society disregards him as dirt, treats him badly and squeezes him economically. The outcastes are prohibited from taking directly from the well, entering the temple and they are denied education also. Throughout the day, on many occasions, Bakha is exposed to both verbal and physical abuse and humiliation for doing nothing the so-called duty-cleaning and sweeping the dirt. At the end of this momentous day, Bakha hears the speech of Gandhi who visits the little town and feels very much encouraged by his words. He also listens to the view of the poet, Iqbal Nath Sarashar that the problem of untouchability can be solved, if the modern flush latrines are introduced. Now Bakha happily returns to his house to tell his father about the Mahatma and the machine. E.M. Foster observes:

“His Indian day is over and the next day will be like it, but on the surface of the earth if not in the depths of the sky, a change is at hand” (10).

The Road

Anand’s continued emotional involvement with the problem of Untouchability is obvious from the fact that he returns to the same theme twenty-five years later in *The Road*. When he goes to live in Haryana, twenty miles from Delhi, he finds that still the low caste people are treated like subhuman creatures. *The Road* reveals the inhuman attitude of the

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caste Hindus towards these untouchables. The story revolves around the young outcaste, Bhikhu who is engaged in laying a road which will connect the village of Gowarthan with the nearby town that will be useful for transporting milk. Bhikhu and his friends which working on the road are continually subjected to pressures and insults. The high caste Hindu boys, Sajru and Lachman, subtly urged by their elders burn town the huts of the untouchables. Dhooli Singh, the caste Hindu who sympathises with these outcastes and helps them constantly, gives them shelter in his house. However, the construction of the road goes on according to the plan. Slamed by their deed, the guilty elders and their sons effect a brief reconciliation and Sajnu and Lacman join the enterprise. Still prejudice keeps them apart. When the road is completed, Bhikhu continues to be insulted by his caste superior, Sajnu. Finally he decides to go to Delhi where there would be no caste discriminations.

Man's Hatred, Cruelty and Lack of Tenderness and Compassion

Both the novels *Untouchable* and *The Road* not only analyse the problem of untouchability but also deal with man's hatred, cruelty and lack of tenderness and compassion towards his fellow human beings. The novelist has beautifully presented that too, in a humanitarian spirit in these two novels how the dignity of man gets devalued because of his wicked practices and tries to create in the minds of the readers an awareness of the degradation of the society as well as the individual self. Mulk Raj Anand himself once said thus:

“Man's fate, today, is no longer in the hands of the gods, but is often in conflict with the evil in other men” (P 4).

The practice of Untouchability in the Hindu society arises out of “the ideas of ceremonial purity” (Singh 124). Anand's *Untouchable* is the result of his reaction against the curse of untouchability in the traditional Hindu society during the Gandhian era, whereas *The Road* graphically portrays the slightly changed conditions of the outcastes during the early nineteen sixties. The practice of untouchability has been legally banned and the government has initiated job opportunities for these suppressed people. Yet “the cast Hindu refuses to accept the fact that the untouchable is a human being, but insists on treating him like a subhuman creature, to be ignored, or bullied or exploited as the occasion demands” (Naik

29). Being a Sweeper in the Hindu society is worse than death. E.M. Forster remarks rather aptly:

“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 cannot escape” (p. 8).

The outcastes are considered to be the source of pollution in the society because of the nature of the work done by them, sweeping and cleaning the dirt. Instead of being thankful and sympathetic to such people who do the dirty but useful work, the society treats them as if born under a curse. Bakha’s awareness of such a miserable lot is highly poignant in *Untouchable*, when he says:

“They think we are mere dirt,
because we clean their dirt” (P 89).

In *Untouchable*, the high caste Hindus do not allow the outcastes to use the nearby brook because by their, they think, the brook would get polluted. They are not even permitted to draw water directly from the well. Anand describes their cry for water, the essential need of man, when a sepoy crosses them:

“Oh, Maharaj! Maharaj! Won’t you draw us some water, please? We beg you. We have been waiting here a long time, we will be grateful” shouted the chorus of voices as they pressed towards him, some standing up, bending and joining their palms in beggary, others twisting their lips in various attitudes of servile appeal and object humility” (*Untouchable* 30).

The sweepers are dependent on the bounty of the caste Hindus not only for water but for their daily food also. In the afternoons, Bakha, his brother Rakha and his sister Sohini have to go to collect bread from the houses of the silversmiths and from the barracks. Bakha cries like a beggar:

“The Sweeper has come for bread, mother!

The Sweeper has come for the bread” (*Untouchable* 76).

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He patiently waits till the woman of the house comes out and gives him something. When at last the woman makes her appearance, she only throws at him rather rudely a couple of chappatis from the balcony. Besides getting the rotten food, Bakha invites some curses from the high-born ladies for the defilement that is done by his sitting on the doorsteps. In sharp contrast this, the same lady is extremely solicitous towards a Sadhu who is also begging for food. She offers him in great politeness delicious food with hot vegetable curries with the request that it may be accepted by him. Veena Singh rightly comments:

“The basic necessities of life like food and water are used as powerful symbols to delineate the relationship between the caste Hindus and the untouchables. The caste Hindus uses them as weapons to humiliate the untouchables and erode their sense of self-respect” (P 125).

As the upper caste society considers these outcastes to be impure forever, it insists on a ceremonial purification, whenever the pollution takes place. The caste Hindus believe that the purification can be performed by bathing and conducting special poojas with sacrificial fire. In *The Road*, Chaudhri Thakur Singh, highest of the village by caste and rank, bitterly reports to the priest, Pandit Suraj Mani that the stones of the Shiva’s sacred hill have been broken by the untouchables for the construction of the road. The priest appeases him suggesting thus:

“Then we can hold the yajna, if you folk can collect enough ghee to burn, so that the incense can rise to heaven and Inder Bhagwan can send down a storm to wash off the road” (*The Road* 3).

In *Untouchable*, when Bakha wants to buy cigarettes from a pan-shop, the shop keeper points to him a spot on the ground near him to place his coin. Then he sprinkles water on the coin to purify it and puts it into his cash box. The cigarettes are thrown to Bakha “as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop” (untouchable 48). Likewise, the jelabis are cast away from the confectioner to Bakha as a cricket ball. The sweepers while walking along the road have to shout:

“Posh, Posh, Sweeper coming,

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Posh, Posh, Sweeper coming,
Posh, Posh, Sweeper coming,
Posh, Posh, Sweeper coming, (*Untouchable* 57).

so that the caste Hindus may save themselves from pollution through physical contact with an untouchable. But unfortunately Bakha once fails to make this cry and slightly dashes against a high caste Hindu. Polluted by his touch, as any how he is to bathe and purify himself, the man gives him a sharp, clear slap. The society is very rigid in observing the ceremonial pollution, whatever be the situation.

When Bakha is ill with fever in *Untouchable*, his father, Lakha goes to the dispensary of Hakim Bhagawan Das to get medicines. Being in an excited state, he holds to the feet of the Hakim pleading for saving his son's life. The Hakim shouts at him with rage:

“Chandal! by whose orders have you come here? And then you join hands and hold my feet and say you will become my slave forever. You have polluted hundreds of rupees worth of medicine. Will you pay for it?” (*Untouchable* 92).

The man-made hypocritical notions make the people's heart dry and cynical. In *The Road* Bhikhu gets drinking water from Rukmani, daughter of Thakur Singh. Rukmani, instead of pouring water into his cupped hands, unknowingly gives him the brass cup. On seeing this, Sajnu, her brother becomes angry and shouts kicking the cup out of his hands thereby injuring Bhikhu's lips:

“How can you touch the brass cup and soil it forever! Have you no thought of your status?” (*The Road* 3).

Moreover, school education was forbidden for those outcastes. When Bakha weeps and cries to his father to send him to school, Lakha tells him that schools are not meant for the sweepers because

“--- the masters wouldn't teach the outcastes lest their fingers which guided the students across the text should touch the leaves of the outcastes' books and they be polluted” (*Untouchable* 44).

In *The Road*, Pandit Suraj Mani assures Bhikhu to take him to the temple school on the condition that he should sit outside the courtyard and learn the lessons from there. The outcastes are strictly restricted from entering the temple, though they are also Hindus by birth. To them, the temple is “a secret, hidden mystery” (*Untouchable* 67). In *The Road*, the castes Hindus threaten Lakshmi, mother of Bhikhu, not to enter the shrine and she very abjectly accepts her lot. The high caste Hindus brainwash the low-born people with their hugger-mugger Vedantic Principles. In the words of Pandit Suraj Mani, “And people suffer enough for the guilts of the past. To be sure they ought to suffer before they can rise to a higher caste in the next life or recognize the divine. The temple teaches them Dharm. They cannot enter the house of God” (*The Road* 37). Veena Singh remarks:

“Religion is another means of exploiting the untouchables and of widening the gap between them and the caste Hindus” (p. 126).

Moreover, the low caste girls, besides their hard labour for the society, are to face sexual assaults by the high caste Hindus. Having been submissive for centuries, the outcastes are highly damaged in their mind and soul. They have lost their sense of self respect and dignity. Further, they meekly accept their tragic fate. As M. K. Naik has put it, “Eternal servility is the price of untouchability” (p. 30). Lakha in *Untouchable* says that it is their religion which prescribes untouchability. He advises Bakha to respect the caste Hindus and do all they order him without protest. Lakmi in *The Road* urges Bhikhu to love the high caste people, even if they hate him. In the words of Satyanarain Singh, Bakha is “haunted with a peculiar sense of helplessness and wretchedness-perhaps a hangover of the old slavery, built into the caste hierarchy” (Singh 135). Like Bakha, Bhikhu too suffers from this sickness in *The Road*. On seeing the burning fire set by the caste Hindus in their premises, Bhikhu stands helpless. Anand describes his inability effectively:

“Strong and sincere but calm, he was too spiritually pure to hate; and had learnt, through long submission, to endure evil and violence from the upper castes, without

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protest, only hoping that through work and more work, he would be liberated, somehow, he did not know how” (*The Road* 45).

The recurrent humiliations from the high caste people evoke the sense of self-pity and loneliness in the minds of Bakha and Bhikhu. If it is their birth that makes them crushed in the hands of their caste superiors, it is their curiosity and questioning nature that separates them from their own parents and caste brethren. The ways in which Bakha and Bhikhu are treated result in the crisis for identity. Bakha and Bhikhu face on endless monotony, until the former listens to the encouraging words of Gandhi and the latter runs away to Delhi on the road he himself has built to soothe his wounded heart and to build up his own identity as a human being which is new to him. In addition to their being exploited in the name of God and caste, they are suppressed economically by the privileged classes.

To Conclude

To conclude, it may be said that M. R. Anand is a social realist and his art is an amalgamation of Tagore’s humanism and the deep concern of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Prem Chand for the oppressed and the downtrodden people. His commitment to the well-being of the underdogs of the traditional Hindu Society gets revealed in his sympathetic treatment of the untouchables, especially the sweepers who are unjustifiably turned non-entities by their filthy, but indispensable job. The success of Anand’s ability lies in transmuting the feeling of untouchability through Bakha and Bhikhu. In *Untouchable* and *The Road*, Anand movingly presents the sorry state of the outcastes in which their survival with dignity is not possible at all.

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