

# MULK RAJ ANAND'S HUMANISTIC VISION

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Mulk Raj Anand, an outstanding writer with a deep concern for humanity, is known for the themes arising out of political, economic, social and cultural factors, which are based upon social problems such as casteism, customs, dead habits and the sufferings of mankind. He follows the creed of humanism and tries to project the problems, conflicts and aspirations of the 'underdog' in Indian society in a sympathetic manner.

Social realism is synonymous with a sense of protest, but in case with Mulk Raj Anand, it becomes something typical, for he does not slight all things Indian, nor does he worship everything Indian. As a staunch Socialist, he hates exploitation whether it is British Imperialism or the Indian caste system; the administration should be possessed with 'the wisdom of the heart' in abundance. For the sake of progressive social realism, protest against the anti-human forces is a vital necessity, hence Anand's protagonists protest against the social evils, metaphysical dogmas and anti-human prejudices which take the situation beyond tolerance. Anand expects every citizen to ask: "What are we to do with our lives? Where are we going? Whither India? [and the].. young must fill themselves with a holy anger against wrongs, struggle to evolve their own individual personality and to unite for the minimum manifesto of good politics" Such an inquisitiveness is not without purpose, for if it prevails a better social order or change is at hand; that is why E.M. Forster remarks :

No god is needed to rescue the Untouchables, no vows of self-sacrifice and abnegation on the part of more fortunate Indians, but simply and solely—the flush system. Introduce water-closets and main drainage throughout India, and all this wicked rubbish about untouchability will disappear. Some readers may find this closing section of the book too voluble and sophisticated, in comparison with the

clear observation which has preceded it, but it is an integral part of the author's scheme. It is the necessary climax, and it has mounted up with triple effect. Bakha returns to his father and his wretched bed, thinking now of the Mahatma, now of the Machine. 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 (Preface to Untouchable, p. vii).

The theory and practice of utopian vision and social realism intermingle in an incredibly strange manner, when the three great novels, namely Untouchable, Coolie and The Road, fall under the purview of critical study and analysis. In the first novel, what happens externally in the life of the protagonist, Bakha, is social realism; and what goes on within his mind along with the two solutions, i.e. conversion to Christianity and Gandhian philosophy is utopian. In the second book, Coolie, Munoo's escape from rural to urban world, exploitation as a child labourer, infernal life in the factory and sexual abuse prior to death by consumption, constitute social realism. On the other hand, a child's dream of enjoying a better life, a Coolie's joining the strike in anticipation of a classless society is Utopian in nature. A survey of The Road reveals the vivacious spirit of Bhikhu, the protagonist, stretched out to zenith, while the upper caste Hindus fail to dampen the invincible soul of an untouchable. The title itself is a manifold symbol of road to prosperity, road out of infernal region, and the road paved by the victims themselves.

As the term 'exploitation', in context with Mulk Raj Anand's novels, assumes social implication, the meaning needs lexicographical clarifications. According to Oxford English Dictionary, the word "social" is: "concerned with the mutual relation of men or classes of men." The word "exploitation" indicates using persons "for one's own ends." Considered in psychological perspective, social exploitation suggests the utilization of a person or persons by others for their "own ends", which, being neither economic, nor political, may be those of mere ego, prestige, honour, status, physical enjoyment etc. Further, the utilization of another person for one's own ends of thrilling bodily union is not motivated by economic or political factors, hence such exploitation also falls under the category of social exploitation, and this is the most despicable part of social realism.

The concept of underdog is typically Indian; for the lowest caste was looked down upon as 'Shwapak' (the being of a canine existence). This word has a broader expanded metaphor in connection with Mulk Raj Anand's novels, as A. Jaganmohan Chari observes :

In India, as everyone is aware, the underdog is either casteless or his caste is of no consequence because of his fall in religious, social and economic status (For instance, Bakha, the casteless untouchable and a Brahmin boy, who works as a servant in Coolie). He can be broadly described as an untouchable. He is pitted against the casteman as in Anand's novel a priest or a caste Hindu (Untouchable), an educated Babu, a rising entrepreneur, a big industrialist, a vain self-styled ruling class individual (Coolie), and an imperialist power (Two Leaves and a Bud). In the other novels of Anand too, we find the typical confrontation: Peasant versus the money-lender and the landlord in The Village, brutalized Indian soldier with his Oriental aversion to war versus the British rulers with their western craze for war in Across the Black Waters and so on.

At the very outset of presenting a critique of Untouchable, one is confronted with the emergence of social realism manifested in the form of religion based social exploitation, for India, being a religion animated country, has a unique sense of untouchability, and sees nothing worth objection in looking down upon the lower castes and does not like even to touch the sweepers or to be touched by them. According to the Manusmriti (Code of Manu), they are not allowed to enjoy the basic facilities of human existence :

[Chandals and sweepers should live outside the village, should use certain earthen pots instead of utensils, should have dogs and donkeys as their property, and should put on clothes taken off from the dead bodies. They should take their meals in separate pots and wear the ornaments of iron. They should move from place to place everyday. One should not talk to them during the night].

It is in the same corollary that Bakha, the protagonist of Untouchable, is destined to live in the outcaste colony "where there are no drains, no light, no waters of the marshland, where people live among the latrines of townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere: of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night pitch dark."

What happens in the novel is an account of the protagonist's sad plight as realized in an Indian Inferno, for it was only at Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram that the book took its final shape, as Anand himself has observed: "the book poured out like hot lava from the volcano of my courageous imagination." It is only after Anand has undergone the cathartic cleaning at Gandhi's Ashram that he has started writing his confessional statements which "unleashed in Anand a torrent of specific memories of his childhood." The protagonist narrator is the creation of the balanced genius of Anand, who skilfully grafts the Joycean technique of 'stream of consciousness' to his narrative and densely packs it with incidents and situations such that they acquire the lineaments of an epic as well as symbolic centrality of a fable. The book has been treated as 'dirty', for it was refused by nineteen publishers, but the interest was created only when E.M. Forster gave his observation :

Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian, who observes from the outside. A European, sympathetic, could not have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written a book because he would have been involved in indignation and self pity (Preface to Untouchable, p. vii).

The novel begins with the spiritual crisis in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy of eighteen years. His life begins with abuses which he receives from his father Lakha and cleaning of a row of latrines. Three rows of latrines to clean single handed that is Bakha's daily toil. His sister, Sohini, goes to a community well to fetch water, but she becomes embroiled in the unsuspected caste recriminations. Pandit Kali Nath draws water for her from the well and asks her to see him in the evening. When he makes improper advances at her in the courtyard of the temple, and she helplessly screams, the priest cries out 'polluted', 'polluted', 'polluted'. A crowd throngs upon the scene. Bakha tries to gauge the pitiful predicament of his sister, but remains a mute witness because of caste barriers, though he very much wanted to pull the priest out and beat him up. He comes home and tells his father in an indignant tone: "They think we are mere dirt, because we clean their dirt" (Untouchable, p. 70).

The story unwinds itself through denouncements in the life of the hero, Bakha, who is disturbed by the subhuman treatment meted out to Sohini, but he

remains calm and composed in spite of himself. In an event, he is slapped by a caste Hindu for 'polluting' him. He does not announce himself and 'pollutes' a caste-Hindu unconsciously. The torrent of abuses wounds him psychologically and he thinks over the humiliation of man by man, for which irrelevant and anachronistic social order is responsible. Bakha did not mind scavenging; he could hit back, but his anger got subsumed into passivity. The only satisfaction he got was that a majority of outcastes were subjected to same kind of dehumanization. On the other hand, Tommies treat him as a human being; he recognizes the kindness of the British army officers, who provide him temporary escape from the routine drudgery of life.

The conclusion of the novel is utopian in nature as S.A. Khan observes :

At the end of the novel, Anand suggests three solutions, which apparently seem too facile to be accepted as effective in reorienting the social perspective: Bakha could become a Christian with the help of the Salvation Army Missionary, Hutchinson; he could hang his hopes on Gandhi's promise of eradication of the evils of untouchability; and the last, but not the least, the introduction of the water-closet, as promised by the poet, which makes the task of the sweepers easy. All these solutions are utopian in construct and seem to lack the efficacy about a social change; but for Bakha they provide a bastion of hope and a redemption from the despicable drudgery afflicting the Indian society. Thus, the novel ends with a resounding note of optimism implied as it is in Bakha's adolescent dreams, when he sees an apostle in Gandhiji, Bakha's dream may come true or may not, but this life of unending toil goes on ?

However, there is suggested a fourth solution by a revolutionary leader, Bashir, who becomes the exponent of social liberalism. It is hoped that there will emerge not only a 'casteless society', but 'classless society'. Bashir, the Barrister-at-law thinks of a Marxian materialism and crystallizes Anand's Marxian affirmation for a gradualist social liberalism. S.A. Khan asserts :

Social in-equalities should be wiped out if at all the caste hierarchies are to be removed. In fact, Anand envisages a radical social transformation through revolution, not through the process of continual evolution, which is slow and unsure. The poet, obviously endorses the novelist's ideas of the social utopia, as it were.

Seen through another perspective, the incidents from Untouchable unveil another aspect, namely social realism, or depiction of Indian society based upon caste system and subsequent tortures, as K.R.S. Iyengar gives his concluding remark on the novel :

Untouchable strikes us as the picture of the 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 (it must be conceded) has been as effective as Dickens himself.

The novel presents a series of insulting situations, which make Bakha conscious of his real social self and of being denied human treatment, because he is an untouchable and is born to be exploited at every level and by men and women of every caste and creed. At the outset, there is a description of outcastes' colony, where even an animal cannot live. Anand describes vividly :

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate, from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washerman, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes 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 the 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, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in (Untouchable, p. 1).

Yet, as Bakha was a modern Indian child, he enjoyed dreaming of becoming a Sahib, by imitating them, which he called 'fashun'. "And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. He had been told they were sahibs, superior people. He had felt that to put on their clothes made one a sahib too"

(Untouchable, p. 3). This is a utopia arising out of suppressed feelings of exploitation and social injustice. Bakha tries to carve a way of betterment out of his self effort as he says, “I will look like a Sahib..... And I shall walk like them. Just as they do, in twos, with Chota as my companion” (Untouchable, p. 3).

Even Bakha’s autumn morning begins with abuses hurled upon him by his own father. It is on domestic level and furnishes a background for a series of insults on social levels also. His father, Lakha, is in his passions while doing so, as portrayed by the novelist: “Get up, ohe you Bakhya, you son of a pig,’ came his father’s voice, sure as a bullet to its target, from the midst of a, broken, jarring, interrupted snore. “Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoys will be angry” (Untouchable, p.5).

Contrary to this, Bakha gets quite a different treatment from Havildar Charat Singh, who passes a complacent smile to see a scavenger boy in a western uniform, as he asks, “You are becoming a gentleman, Ohe Bakhya! Where did you get that uniform” (Untouchable, 8). The pleased army man asks Bakha to come to him that afternoon and promises to give him a hockey stick, which makes Bakha wonder if the stick will be a new one. The novelist analyses the situation critically :

Charat Singh’s generous promise had called forth that trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers, the weakness, of the down-trodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indigent, suddenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog suddenly illuminated by the prospect of fulfilment of a secret and long-cherished desire. He saluted his benefactor and bent down to his work again (Untouchable, p.9).

Bakha meets with insulting situations when he enters the market. When he stops at a shop with the purpose of buying a packet of ‘Red Lamp’ cigarettes, he puts the coin of an anna on the wooden board. The shopkeeper washes it with water and throws it into the counter. The packet of cigarettes is thrown at Bakha, “as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop” (Untouchable, p.34). Another humiliating scene follows. Bakha is hungry and reaches a sweet-meat stall and asks for jalebis worth four annas. The shopkeeper hurls the packet containing jalebis at Bakha, who catches it like a cricket ball. Bakha feels anger because this confectioner also splashes water on the coins so that they may be

purified. Having munched jalebis, he observes signboards and is lost in a type of educational utopia, as Anand says :

The big signboards advertising the names of Indian merchants, lawyers and medical men, their degrees and professions, all in broad, huge block of letters, stared down at him from the upper stories of the shops. He wished he could read all the luridly painted boards. But he found consolation in recalling the arrangement he had made for beginning his lessons in English that afternoon (Untouchable, p.38).

Another serious and humiliating event of exploitation of underdogs takes place, when Bakha, in a very elated mood, unknowingly touches a Lallaji, walking along the street. The ‘touched’ man starts abusing him for being polluted. He feels sorry and apologizes to Lallaji, but in vain. Premila Paul describes realistically:

The Lallaji and the crowd continue to scold him mercilessly. Bakha is confused, paralysed, and feels like collapsing. Meanwhile, encouraged by the crowd, the ‘polluted’ man deals a resounding slap on Bakha’s cheek. Bakha stands aghast, his turban fallen on the ground and his poor jilebis scattered in the dust. A tongawalla tries to console Bakha, who moves on, his eyes filled with the fire of vengeance, and his frame burning with rage and horror.

The significance of this torrent of abuses and physical tortures on the protesting mind of Bakha is that he becomes conscious of his position in the world, in spite of “smouldering rage in his soul” (Untouchable, p.42). The protagonist, Bakha, is restless, for he does not get any support from the crowd, because it consists of caste-Hindus only:

Not one of them spoke for me. The cruel Crowd! All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused? The santry inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That’s why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That’s why they don’t touch us, the high-castes. The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhammadan. They don’t mind touching us, the Muhammadans and the sahibs. It is only the Hindus, and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the

word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (Untouchable, p.43)

The climax of the sin of untouchability is to be found in the temple episode, when the priest touches an untouchable maiden, and, in utter hypocrisy, creates the scenario by crying ‘Polluted, polluted’. Bakha was unnerved, for he had touched none, but he soon knew the entire event. “The lanky little priest stood with upraised hands, a few steps below him. His sister, Sohini, [for that was the woman whom he had seen behind the priest] lingered modestly in the courtyard” (Untouchable, pp. 52-53). However, Bakha was made aware of what he had done. The worshippers were blaming him for not keeping the required distance, as they were shouting: “A temple can be polluted according to 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” (Untouchable, p.53)

But the reality was otherwise. That something that had happened to Sohini, Bakha’s sister, was not known to the crowd, became clear by the story that the touched sister told his brother at the door of the courtyard:

‘That man, that man,’ she said, ‘that man made suggestions to me, when I was cleaning the lavatory of his house there. And when I screamed, he came out shouting that he had been defiled. . .’

‘Tell me, Sohini,’ he said, turning fiercely to his sister,  
‘how far did he go?’

She sobbed and didn’t reply.

‘Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if. . .’ he shouted.

‘He-e-e- just teased me,’ ‘she at last yielded.’ ‘And then when I was bending down to work,’ he came and held me by my breasts.’

‘The son of a pig!’ Bakha exclaimed. ‘I will go and kill him!’ and he rushed blindly towards the courtyard. ‘No, no. Come back. Let’s go away,’ called Sohini after him, arresting his progress by dragging hard at a lapel of his overcoat (Untouchable, pp. 53-55).

All this shows, not only humiliation, exploitation, even the sexual harassment of the downtrodden, as they are not allowed by Caste-Hindus even to maintain their chastity; alongwith a sense of smouldering revolt, as Premila Paul observes:

Anand's heroes are never contented with their lot; they protest against it in a bid to escape being trapped by it, whether or not they actually succeed. Bakha's dormant passions are set ablaze when Sohini's honour is at stake. The cruel crowd that corners Bakha is unable to face the retaliation of a suppressed individual. But as Bakha is weighed down by the yoke of ancestral serfdom, his protest remains incipient.

Thus, Untouchable, if read between the lines, presents a strange confluence, where two channels of utopian vision and social realism intermingle in such a way as to make the subsequent flow a compound in which social realism is vitalized to march forward by an undercurrent of utopian imagination, which thence forward becomes invisible like Saraswati river at Allahabad; perhaps this is the nucleus that makes M.K. Naik pass his epoch-making judgement:

In Untouchable, Anand's fictional genius sprang up fully armed like Pallas Athene from the head of Jove. Never again was he to write a novel in which content and form were so perfectly fused, a triumph of creativity achieving the maximum of effect with the minimum of means.

While Henry Fielding calls novel 'a comic epic in prose,' what he fails to comprehend is that an epic in prose may have a tragic intensity also. The same lot awaits Mulk Raj Anand's novel Coolie also, when M.K. Naik comes forward with his thesis that "Coolie is the odyssey of Munoo an orphaned village boy from the Kangra hills, who sets out in search of livelihood." What the learned Indian scholar forgets to put in his ken, is that Homer's Odyssey is the tale of Royal return to Ithaca, and the course of events leads to the fundamental dictum- 'all's well that ends well', but in case of Coolie there is a struggle on surface reality and the narrative ends with a note of pathos, as Evangeline Manickam observes:

Finally, an accident brings him back to the hills, to Simla, where he works for an Anglo-Indian lady, as her rickshaw puller. Munoo is only sixteen when he dies of

tuberculosis. In his death Anand evokes a reader response similar to Dickens' evocation, at the death of little Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop. It is a sadness that comes at the prolonged suffering and needless death of the young and the innocent.

The runaway odyssey of Munoo, the protagonist of Coolie, is given a starting push by the villainous existing social order, which is responsible for the catastrophe. This is not in observance with the rules of Greek tragedy, in which the displeased deity or Destiny becomes responsible for tragic end. H.U. Khan is right to remark:

It is a human tragedy caused by poverty, exploitation, cruelty, greed and selfishness. It is not fate or Almighty who is responsible for the tragedy of Munoo, the hero of the novel, but the society in which he is brought up. He is a victim of social forces in his life like the tragic heroes of the great novelist Galsworthy. Munoo, the hero of the novel, is a universal figure who represents the miseries of the poor and the downtrodden. Social forces of exploitation and poverty determine the life of Munoo in the novel.

The novel Coolie was published in the year 1936 and its hero is an orphan boy Munoo, who is hated by the society; his relatives do not accept him and his masters are bent upon torturing him. At the outset of the novel he is a boy of 14 years. He is a student of sixth class in a village school of Bilaspur. The village is situated on the Kangra Hills, watered by the river Beas. There is a pastoral touch in his activities, for, alongwith his friends, he grazes cows throughout the day. It is his habit to sit under Banyan tree and to enjoy the fruits of the season.

The joys of his innocent child life are ended very soon, when his uncle Daya Ram proposes to take him to Sham Nagar, a town at the distance of ten miles. Daya Ram and his wife Gujri think that Munoo is old enough to earn his own livelihood. The curse of orphanage loomed over the mind of Munoo. His father was unable to pay the debt to the landlord. He could not suffer the shock and died. His mother put day and night together to work hard so that she could support the poor boy. Munoo had been told that the landlord had taken away his father's five acres of land. The poor father had died a slow death of bitterness. The mother was left in utmost poverty to support a young brother-in-law, Daya Ram and a child Munoo in her

arms. “In spite of these sad memories and ill-treatment of his aunt and uncle Munoo is happy and contented. His happy idyllic life comes to an end when he is asked by his uncle and aunt to go with them to Sham Nagar for seeking some job there for their livelihood.”

Munoo’s uncle Daya Ram, a peon in the Imperial Bank of Sham Nagar, is successful in getting a job for Munoo, as a domestic servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, who is Sub-accountant in the same Bank. Bibi Uttam Kaur, the termagant wife of Nathoo Ram treats Munoo badly and the poor child runs away and boards a train, but he himself does not know which way to go. In the train Prabha Dayal, a coolie turned into a philanthropist and Seth, who owns a Pickle Factory at Daulatpur, takes Munoo to his place and employs the orphan alongwith providing a living in his own family. This is Munoo’s ‘Illyria’, as Seth Prabha Dayal’s wife treats him kindly and Munoo leaves no stone unturned to please Ganpat, the supervisor, lest he returning chide.

Munoo realizes that he was not born to be a domestic servant for ever, and in the great expectations of earning good wages, goes to the railway station to work there as a coolie and thus the title of the novel is justified. As he holds no license, he cannot work there and there is a trans Mall Road experience with English shops and Bungalows on both sides. “It is an entirely different world for Munoo to realize. The wealth and elegance of the English part of Daulatpur is thus used by the novelist to heighten by contrast the poverty and degradation of the teeming millions of India.”

Exploitation, the basis of social realism is seen in its various and manifold aspects in ‘The Road, the depiction of unhygienic conditions being at their prime; the surprise is that this pathetic truth comes out from the mouth of the temple priest: “Those people are condemned by their Karma to work out their doom among the flies and the dust of their huts. The reek of their thatched roofs and stuffing heat, is punishment enough for them” (The Road, p. 40).

Not only this, the caste-Hindus, moved by their conservatism, do not consider the outcastes even worth touching and think that their holy shrines should remain out of bound for these downtrodden people. The novel focuses itself on the plight of untouchables, as a child says to his mother, “Ma, ‘they have never allowed us to enter the temple, the boy said, ‘and they will not let you do so today” (The Road, p.1).

It is interesting to note that social exploitation is religion-based and its motivating factors are greed, lust and an ambition to achieve an upper status; such motivations are helped by hypocrisy, physical torments and the exploited people's unresisted sense of enduring their destiny. "The effects comprise the revolt of the suppressed castes and enlightened characters against the higher castes and the proselytization of the untouchables by the followers of other religions."

The sense of greed arising out of religious exploitation is symbolized in the character of Pandit Suraj Mani, who "feasts on death anniversaries falling due somewhere in the village everyday" and speaks "things with double meanings" (The Road, p. 19) to cheat the people; to the extremity of wonder, he does not hesitate from extracting delicious food from the untouchables, it being an altogether a different matter that the poor outcastes are denied their entry into the temple: "The temple teaches the Dharma, they cannot enter the house of God. I will never allow them there. But they can make dry offerings for the preservation of the Dharma, which may emancipate them. . .their women are devoted and give what little they can" (The Road, p. 41).

Mulk Raj Anand, an outstanding writer with a deep concern for humanity, is known for the themes arising out of political, economic, social and cultural factors, which are based upon social problems such as casteism, customs, dead habits and the sufferings of mankind. He follows the creed of humanism and tries to project the problems, conflicts and aspirations of the 'underdog' in Indian society in a sympathetic manner.

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