

The Traumatic Plea of Bakha as Seen in the Novel Untouchable

SANIKA SAJAN

MA English Language and Literature
KristuJayanti College (Autonomous), Bengaluru

JUWEL ZACHARIA

MA English Language and Literature
KristuJayanti College (Autonomous), Bengaluru

MARIZA MARIAM KOSHY

MA English Language and Literature
KristuJayanti College (Autonomous), Bengaluru

Abstract

Indian novels in English or any other regional language have a distinct quality and uniqueness which calls for serious critical attention. Subaltern literature is a means through which the voices of the oppressed and marginalized people are heard. Mulk Raj Anand is a person who has a deep concern for humanity and has acted as a voice for the marginalized through his novels and writings. His novel 'Untouchable' presents a remarkable opening for the Indian English writer to investigate a new world of the subalterns. The protagonist Bakha is a representation of the untouchable community who suffer a lot due to their caste. The untouchables go through so much pain and trauma that one simply cannot understand it. This paper plans to project how the term subaltern can be applied in the Indian context and how the selected novel expresses the voices of the subaltern and the trauma they face. Bringing in the philosophy of Gandhi, the novel states a hope both for the untouchable Hindus and Indians, which takes effort to raise the the consciousness of the possibility to remove the caste system as well as the hierarchical system of the Indian culture.

Keywords: subaltern, untouchability, oppression, trauma, caste redemption.

Introduction

Postcolonial writers have been trying to bring to light the oppressed, marginalized or so-called Subalterns. The term 'subaltern' does not mean the same as it meant in 1982, as it is being defined by many theorists in different ways. Subaltern is both a noun and an adjective according to the Oxford English dictionary. As a noun, a subaltern is "a lower rank British officer" and as an adjective, a subaltern stands for the lower rank people in all respects. In present times the term subaltern is used as a synonym for minorities, subjugated people, colonial subjects, refugees, and children who are voiceless in the society. Referring to the southern Italian workers who were marginalized by the hegemonic politics of the Fascist party, Antonio Gramsci coined the term subaltern. In the Indian context, scholars like Ramachandra Guha, Gayathri Spivak and others applied the term in a broader perspective to South Asian subalterns from the colonial and postcolonial

periods. In India, mostly the aristocratic people like Brahmins, use religion to guard a strongly defined ordered structure of society to control the economically lower-class people. Normally the lower-class people are the most common victims as they accept suppression and they do not have the economic and political power to fight back against the upper-class people's dominion. Untouchability refers to the humiliations imposed, from generation to generation (Charsley, 2001). Untouchables are the castes whose touch is enough to cause pollution and impurity. Gandhi preferred the term Harijan (children of God) to call the Untouchables who toiled and dirtied their hands for others. It was B. R. Ambedkar who legally abolished this practice and established the word Untouchables. Dalit is the contemporary and preferred word for Untouchables meaning 'crushed foot', 'broken into pieces, or the 'oppressed' (Ghose, 2003).

Mulk Raj Anand belongs to the big trio of Indian English literature. He raised his voice against the caste and class systems of our country during the early 1930s. He was born in 1905 in Peshawar, now in Pakistan, but then in the Northwest Frontier Province of India. *Untouchable* is Anand's first novel which depicts a day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy, and brings out the impact of the various events that shows the amount of subjugation he faces and the trauma that follows.

Discussion

The novel '*Untouchable*' examines the hopelessness of the outcastes or Dalit people and their anger against the upper caste. The oppression and trauma faced by the untouchables is one of the major issues discussed in the novel. These people are illiterate and live in separate places where they did not mingle with others. The protagonist Bakha son of Lakha is a unique creation in the realm of Indian English literature. He is a poor eighteen-year-old sweeper boy who represents his community, their hardships, sufferings and sorrows inflicted by upper-caste Hindus.

Mulk raj Anand has successfully shown how untouchables are not accepted in the society and are ill-treated by people of higher castes. The story revolves around a day full of abuses of Bakha which start with the loud call of his father for going to work to clean latrines for the upper-caste people. This makes him think about how his work separates him from high-caste people and how the people of his community are considered physically impure. The plot describes how Bakha faces difficulties going out to the city because of the hostile behavior of the upper caste people. The first incident which instills a realization in Bakha about his caste is the scene where he accidentally touches a Hindu man in the street and is punished for polluting him. Several other events follow which make him realize the fact that he cannot do anything about being an untouchable. The incident where Sohini is molested by the priest traumatizes both Bakha and Sohini, but he cannot raise his hands against the priest as his religion doesn't allow him to do so and instead the priest accuses them of entering the temple premises. Bakha knows that if he changes his feelings into actions, he

would be punished and insulted by his own people. He rebels inwardly but does not translate his rebellion into outward revolt. His conscience does neither accept nor surrender to social injustice.

Even the good intentions of Bakha are considered to be bad, for instance, Bakha was playing hockey and scored a goal. This was not liked by the opponents so they started throwing stones and hurting him. While throwing the stones, a small boy came in between and Bakha with a kind heart saved the boy from getting hit. But the small boy's mother accused Bakha of planning to kill her son. The worst experience occurs when Lalaji, a household maid slaps him on his cheek and forces him to maintain silence. Anand presents a dreadful picture of Bakha's suffering and says, it is not a slap on the cheeks of a child but on the face of hundreds of unfortunate Dalits of India struggling under the domination of the higher castes. These incidents have significantly suppressed the sensibility of Bakha to generate the aggression in his mind and it makes him conscious of his identity as a Scavenger's son. He faces a lot of traumas because of the oppression he faces but all he can do is stay mum about it as he is voiceless. Bakha cannot complain about his caste or the misery of his life but he still retains self-confidence and identifies himself with his profession. Unlike his father Lakha, Bakha refuses to accept the absurdity of blind orthodoxy.

Bakha's earlier exposure to unhealthy and unhygienic living conditions makes him aware of the wretchedness of his own life. The most painful situation in *Untouchable* occurs during the efforts of the wilful suppression of Bakha's uncompromising enthusiasm for life. He dreams of good dresses, enjoyment in the company of Sahibs, reading books, and watching movies. Bakha is caught between two worlds, he cannot break free from tradition and yet the pull of modernity is strong upon him and this gives tensions and conflicts in his life. He stands for social change. He insists upon dressing himself in an English outfit bought second-hand and even goes to bed in the same. In Bakha's set of values, the white sahib is far superior to a caste. He is a true product of a society in transition. In contrast to his dreams, these experiences of deprivation and subjugation generate the feeling of revolt

and mental torture in an innocent boy like Bakha. The amount of subjugation faced in a single day is this traumatising, one cannot simply understand the depth of emotional turmoil that the Dalits have to face in their entire lifetime.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand as a social critic conveys a strong message through his novel *Untouchable* and raises his voice against caste segregation in Indian society. The novel provides a scathing indictment of the caste system and exposes the callousness and hypocrisy of the same caste system. He wrote about the real situation of Subalterns, their mentality and reality. The caste system has played great destruction to the people of our country. Although the Indian government abolished the practice of untouchability by law the mental, social, and traditional outlook of the people remains the same. Bakha realizes that the only way to eradicate untouchability is by the

introduction of the flush system. With the introduction of the flush system, it is unclear if Indians will be able to accept untouchables as equals. The inspiring image at the book's conclusion, of Bakha silhouetted in the Indian returning home to tell his father about a machine that will undeniably change their lives, provides a ray of optimism.

Reference

1. Mulk Raj Anand, 'Untouchable ' Critical Evaluation by Dr. Raghukul Tilak. Rama Brothers India Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi 2011.
2. Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Penguin, 1935.
3. Ghose, S. *The Dalit In India*. Social Research, 2003, pp. 83-109.
4. Charsley, Simon. "'Untouchable': What Is In A Name?". *The Journal Of The Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol 2, no. 1, 1996, pp. 1-23. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/3034630.