

The Gandhian Influence on Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable"

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The writers in the early decades of the 20th century were deeply influenced and inspired by Gandhi. He provoked intellectual turmoil and awakening amongst the intelligentsia. His exhortation to the Harijans to shun the bad habits and get integrated into the mainstream of the Indian nation slowly but surely. Caste was a group system based on services and functions. He regards untouchability as "the greatest bolt on Hinduism". He utters that he did not want to be reborn. But, if he were to reborn, he would wish to be reborn as an untouchable, an outcaste so that he may share their sorrows, sufferings and affronts levelled at them, in order that he may endeavour to free himself and them from their miserable condition

Key words: untouchability, outcaste, influenced, caste system, integrated, Hinduism, miserable.

Introduction:

Mulk Raj Anand is the most conspicuously committed writer, started the new trend of realism and social protest in Indian English Fiction, he portrays the doomed lives of the downtrodden and the oppressed in his writings. His "Untouchable", a powerful novel which entirely has an influence of Gandhi's struggle to eradicate the system of untouchability which was rooted in the Indian Society. Anand came across a poignant story about a sweeper-boy Uka written with utmost simplicity by Mahatma Gandhi in 'Young India', inspired and led Anand's the first draft of the novel, called Baka was turned to be shaped into "Untouchable".

Anand was allowed to meet Mahatma in three months time at Sabarmati Ashram in the boiling heat of Gujrat In April 1929 to show his novel which he had written. It was

opposed by Gandhi as it was depicting the love- affair of a boy and girl. Anand explained to him that it was about Bakha, a sweeper-boy, an untouchable. He was suggested by Gandhiji to write a straightforward pamphlet about Harijans. He defended himself by saying that he wanted to tell the story just as Gandhiji had narrated his story about the sweeper Uka.. He cut down more than a hundred pages, especially those passages in which Bakha seemed to be thinking and dreaming like a Bloomsbury intellectual. Following Gandhiji's advice, Anand revised the entire novel during his three month stay in the ashram. Out of two hundred and fifty pages, only hundred and fifty pages were left. He read the revised version to Gandhiji who gave his approval to it. His stay in the ashram rejuvenated Anand that he practised there awakened his conscience and converted him to a life of sincerity, simplicity and truth.

Untouchable has no story interest: it is just an impassioned plea for a social cause. And it is this singleness of purpose i.e. exposing the evil of untouchability and analysing its social, moral, psychological, religion-based aspects. That provides structural unity to the plot. It is unmistakably, be hailed as one of the most compact and coherent plots in Indian English fiction that finds confirmation in the fact that getting convinced of the advice of Mahatma Gandhi. In his well- known essay *On the Genesis of Untouchable*, Anand observes:

“In retrospect, I feel that, under the tutelage of the Mahatma, who did not pretend to be an artist was able to exorcise all those self-conscious literary elements which I had woven into the narrative in anticipation of what the critics might approve. He thought that the paragraphs of high-sounding words, in which i had tried to unite the miscellaneous elements in what was essentially a walk through the small town of my hero, must go. Also, the old man suggested the removal of my deliberate attempts, at melodramatic contrasts of the comic and tragic motifs, through which the spontaneous feeling moods and lurking chaos of Bakha had been somewhat suppressed”.

Anand was asked for the deflation of those clever tricks, which had made the expression of concrete detail into a deliberate effort as style. Observing the three Aristotelian unities, though unconsciously, the novel records a day's events in Bakha's life which serve as a mirror to the pathetic condition of the untouchables who form the lower stratum of society in the caste-ridden orthodox Hindu society, especially in the pre-Partition times.

The novel begins with an autumn morning in Bakha's life, the central character in the novel, is the son of Lakha, the 'Jemandar' of all the sweepers in the town and the cantonment. His chief duty is to keep the three rows of public latrines clean. These latrines are used by men from both the town and cantonment. He has for sometime worked in the barracks of a British regiment. He had looked at the Tommies, with wonder and amazement when he first went to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncle. Though his job is dirty, Bakaha remains comparatively clean, looks intelligent even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger who as a rule is uncouth and unclean. Due to the series of incidents troubled, reminded as bitter experiences, made him recognize himself as an 'Untouchable'. When he was not only scolded but also slapped by a Hindu merchant who alleges that Bakha touched him and thus polluted him while he goes into the town to sweep the streets as substitute for his father. He feels much troubled at heart by the incident of his beautiful sister Sohini, was disparaged by the temple priest who impudently tried to molest her while she was cleaning the lavatory of his house. He not only disgraced her but also attracted sympathy of the crowd by accusing him of having polluted the premises. Bakha realises his helplessness can do nothing to expose the hypocrisy of the priest.

Bakha feels disgusted when a housewife becomes furious to find Bakaha on the threshold of the house and scolds him "Perish and die" as she thinks that he has defiled her house. He asks for forgiveness and appeals for food. He feels disheartened of flinging a defiled chapatti by her as if she were giving it to a dog. Bakha is quite distressed of considering him as an outcaste boy Ram Charan's mother Gulabo, as he loves Charan's sister, she denies him and declares that it lowers their dignity to get her daughter marry him. Being washer men, they considered themselves superior to him in the hierarchy even among the outcastes. Bakha is extremely humiliated by the military babu's wife for carrying her injured son home, in return he is accused of defiling her house by coming there. It confuses his mind and infuriates his heart. The rude behaviour and insulting remarks a but the sweepers made by Colonel Hutchinson's wife fill Bakha's mind with pain and puzzled of his existence. At this moment, Anand introduces the arrival of Gandhiji to Golbagh to address a meeting. Bakha finds the Hindu, Lallas, the Kashmiri Muslims, the Sikh rustics, red- cheeked Afghans, Indian Christians and many people from the outcastes colony together in the crowd. He realises that it was only Mahatma Gandhi who could bring unity among all the castes. It reflects Anand's

consciousness towards Gandhiji's principles of equality, love for helpless, eradication of caste system.

Bakha also learns several facts about Gandhin besides he had been released from the jail on the condition that he would not make any political speech. He heard the shout from the crowd "Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai! Hindu, Mussulman, Sikh ki Jai! Harijan ki Jai!". Bakha recalls having heard that "Gandhi was very keen on uplifting the untouchables (U,p155). Then Bakha hears a congress worker telling the crowd that the government has allowed Gandhi to come out of jail on condition that he can speak to the people only on behalf of the harijans and for the removal of untouchability. Bakha wonders what the word "Harijan" means. Bakha would like to tell Gandhi about his experiences of him that day and inform him how he had been ill-treated.

About Gandhi's appearance in the novel Saros Cowsjee writes : "*Perched on a tree not quite unlike an ape, Bakha gets his first view of Gandhi. With superb skill, Anand fashions the image of Gandhi as all knew him: the little man swathed in a white shawl, with his protruding ears, expansive forehead, quixotic smile and determined chin. But more than the physical details is the magic of Gandhi that Anand has been able to capture*"

Gandhi's speech is carefully drawn from his autobiography, Young India and other writings. Gandhi begins by saying that he would speak only about the so- called untouchables whom the government has tried to alienate from Hinduism by given them a separate legal and political status. Gandhiji then tells his listeners that the Indian themselves have for centuries, trampled upon millions of human beings without feeling the slightest regret. He says that he has undertaken a fast to death for the sake of those downtrodden millions in obedience to the call of his conscience.

The opening words of Gandhi's speech are unintelligible to Bakha, when Mahatma says about a story related to the scavenger name Uka who used to clean the latrine in his house, he says that often he had asked his mother why it was wrong to touch him and why he was forbidden to do so. He tells that if he accidentally touched Uka, he was asked to perform ablutions; and though he obeyed it was not without protesting that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion. He often had arguments with his parents on this matter. He told his mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful.

Gandhiji also expresses his genuine love for the outcastes. He tells people that he was at Nellore on the National Day. He met the untouchables there, and prayed as he had done that day. He says that he did not want to attain spiritual deliverance; he did not want to be reborn, he would wish to be reborn as an untouchable so that he may share their sorrows sufferings and the affronts levelled at them, in order that he may endeavour to free himself and them from their miserable condition. Therefore he prayed that if he were to be born again, he should be so, not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Shudra, but as an untouchable an outcaste. Bakha is struck by this love of Gandhiji for his class.

Gandhiji further says that he loves scavenging and that, in his ashram, an eighteen year old Brahmin is doing a scavenger's work in order to teach the lesson cleanliness to ashram sweepers. this Brahmin lad, says Gandhiji, is a regular reader of the Gita, and he regularly says his prayers; but this lad feels that his achievement would be incomplete until he has become a perfect scavenger, bakha is delighted hear Gandhi's words about the boy adore Gandhiji in his mind. Bakha would like to do anything for Gandhiji.

Gandhiji, continuing his speech, says that the untouchables should realize that by working as sweepers and scavengers they are cleaning Hindu society but that, in order to succeed in their work, they must purify their own lives first and must cultivate habits of cleanliness. Those among them who are addicted to the habits of drinking alcohol, gambling and eating meat, must get rid of such habits. If the untouchables are oppressed by the Hindus, the fault does not lie with the Hindu religion but with the people who profess this religion. He further urges the sweepers to stop accepting the left overs of the meals of high- caste Hindus. The sweepers should accept only sound and wholesome grains and not the rotten grains. These words of the mahatma are liked by Bakha who wants to tell the Mahatma that on that very day he had felt compelled to pick up a loaf of bread from near the gutter and that his brother had found it necessary to accept leavings of food from the plates of the sepoys. The great man's words have the effect of a balm to treat Bakha 's troubled mind. He wishes that Gandhiji should tell his father not to treat him so harshly because Bakha is already a victim of callousness of the caste Hindus.

Gandhiji then goes on to say that he is an orthodox Hindu and that he knows that the Hindus are not sinful by nature. The Hindus are only sunk in ignorance. Gandhiji further says that all public wells, temples, roads schools and hospitals should be declared open to the

untouchables. This is how the evil of untouchability is to be untouchability and also to take care that they do not use compulsion or brute force in securing this end. *Gandhiji says that peaceful persuasion is the only means to this end.*

Gandhiji's lecture contains the second possible solution to Bakha's problem and to the problem of the entire class of sweepers and scavengers. The other two solutions are proposed by Colonel Hutchinson and the poet Iqbal Nath: the former proposes conversion to Christianity, the latter the introduction of the flush- system, that cannot by itself remove untouchability though it would enable the sweepers to get rid of an unpleasant duty.

Bakha notifies that through Gandhiji's presence he is given a real possibility of recognizing himself a human being in his own society. In a letter to Baba Saheb Ambedkar, Gandhiji argues, "Caste is nothing to do with religion... it is harmful to both spiritual and natural growth. Varna and Ashrama are institutions which have nothing to do with castes." By calling the outcastes "Harijan" – the children of God – Gandhiji was striving to unite a sundered limb of Indian society to its body for achieving more effective social and political ends.

Mulk Raj Anand uses this novel to express immense influence of Gandhiji on him, and his thought provocation to pen his views of equality. In this view, his narration of voicing Gandhiji's impact on shaping his novel 'Untouchable' showcases his Aliveness and Intensity in his writings. His "Untouchable" influences a struggle to be self – conscious and struggle to be human.

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