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Treatment of Subaltern Agony in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Societies always remain categorized and subaltern issues are the consequences of these categorizations. The etymological meaning of subaltern is below the rank. The British Military officer used this term for their junior subordinates. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* explains the term subaltern as, “an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant (p. 1434).” Some thinkers use this term for marginalized groups and the lower classes. They explain subaltern is, “a person rendered without agency by his or her social status (Young, Robert J.C., 2003).” The history of subaltern is not clearly explained but Marxist philosopher and theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) who entered post-colonial studies after the influence of Subaltern Studies Group, a group of South Asian historians who were exploring the role of non-elite actors in South Asian history, was used this term firstly in a non-military sense. But there is a contradiction between scholars regarding to it. Some scholars believe Gramsci, “used the term as a synonym for proletariat, possibly as a codeword in order to get his writings post prison censors, while others believe his usage to be more nuanced and less clear cut (Morton, Stephen).” Moreover, Antonio Gramsci’s subaltern classes present the subordination of class, caste, and gender which are lower rank of human beings in the rigid classification of South Asian sociology. Subaltern classes cover peasants, workers, laborers and other groups who were denied access to “hegemonic power (Ashcroft p. 215).” Subaltern is a term which is used in post-colonial theory and since 1970’s onwards this term is regularly used as a reference to colonized people in the South Asian subcontinent. And now, this term has become an area of study in history, anthropology, sociology, human geology, and literature. Thus, Antonio Gramsci used subaltern for those groups of society who are victims of hegemony of the upper and ruling classes. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains subaltern’s emotion in reality in her most famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak? (1985)” that the subaltern cannot speak until their conditions may not be historically improved. According to her subaltern is not a classy word for the oppressed. She explains:

[.....] everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference. Now who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subalterns. (de Kock, p.23)

In literature, subaltern is a non-western and post-colonial concept which is generally used for downtrodden belonging to the lower caste and class, weak sex and economically poor groups in the rigid social strata of the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, known as Third World Nations. The progressive historians started the Subaltern Studies as a project for revising Indian historiography on the basis of subaltern perspective. The main aim of this project was to collect strong and authentic historical evidences for covering maximum aspect of Indian

history. For this thing, they collected and compiled large number of colonial and post-colonial India's social, economical and religious issues based on peasants and insurgencies. On the support of this project Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak comments, "The most significant outcome of this revision or shift in perspective is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the 'subaltern'" (Spivak, p. 330)

The historical background of Indian society unfolds that subaltern issues are inseparable part of this society since categorization and marginalization is found severely here. The history of subaltern starts in India with the invasion of Aryans. Aryans conquered most of the part of Northern India and enslaved the inhabitants of these parts of India. Aryans used out-caste or the subaltern for these enslaved people and driven out those people to the Southern parts of India. Due to the domination and superiority of Aryans, this subaltern class was compelled to do menial jobs like cleaning human excrements, sweeping roads etc. Aryans, for making their powerful impact, enforced racial, physical and spiritual exclusiveness on their society.

The period of pre-Independence was the period of frustration and social evils. In this period at one hand Britishers enslaved India and exploited the Indians and at the other hand the Hindu caste system and the plight of out-caste people and subalterns were alarming. During this period a few Indian novelists wrote about Indian conditions. Some prominent novelists like Bankim Chandra famous for his romances in the imagination of Scott, Rabindranath Tagore wrote about upper- class gentry of Bengal, Sarat Chandra for middle-class life and Munshi Premchand presented the condition of Indian peasants and humble workers. But Mulk Raj Anand is known as the champion of subalterns or out-castes. He writes against Vedantist kind of caste system that divided the Hindu society into four sub-categories- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. He strongly protests against the Vedantic tradition in which the upper-castes exploit lower-castes and treat them like an animal. In his novels, Anand tries to present the distress and agony of subalterns of India. The pains and miseries of the society affected the sensibility of Anand and he confesses himself:

There has always been an emergent connection between my life and my writings, throughout my creative career. Most of the critics, who have written about my novels, have not motivated that my fiction arouse from the compulsion of life. (Anand, p.2)

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the founding fathers of Indo-Anglian literature. His *Untouchable* (1935) is the result of his keen sympathy with subaltern and downtrodden people. Besides this novel, he wrote *Coolie* (1936) where Munno an orphan, struggles for his livelihood and suffers the communal frame of the Indian society. *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) reflects the evil of poverty and cruelty which 'Gangu' faced in a tea state. The novel is an attack on imperialism, capitalism and the exploitation of human beings. *The Village* (1939) is a pitiful story of a subaltern sepoy Lal Singh who joined the Army and, therefore, the conflict continues between the theory of *Karma* and theory of God. *The Big Heart* (1945) is a story of the struggle between man and machine. It is focused on the evils of industrialization where the people had to suffer. *The Road* (1961) is again based on caste superiority and obstacles faced by the protagonist after the Indian independence. *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) show the lack of unity and leadership. The autobiographical projection of Mulk Raj Anand can be seen in his *Seven Summers* (1951). The monarchy comes under the sharp criticism in *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953). *Morning Face* (1968) is a reflection of Indian beliefs on the traditional practices.

The youthful sentimental feelings of nostalgia are expressed in *Confession of a Lover* (1976), and wrote some other short stories which were the result of Anand's consciousness about subaltern classes. In *Untouchable*, his humanistic vision and reformist zeal presents subaltern sweeper boy, Bakha, higher than the upper-caste people. For this social reformist attitude Anand has been called "the Veritable Dickens of the East." (Iyenger, p. 130) Anand's aim in this novel is to get rid of a low-caste subaltern from the age old rigid Hindu tradition. His humane attitudes towards subaltern classes present the grim and untouchable realities of Indian social life. He presents the theme of social realities and the theme of untouchability of 1930's in *Untouchable*. The painful suffering of low-castes and the inhuman attitudes of high-castes dramatize "a crucial moment of realization when the main character (Bakha) fully understands his place in the social order" (Niven, p. 56). He also projects the psychological and the social condition of subaltern characters like Bakha, Rakha, Sohini, Ram Charan and Chota who were to clean the human excreta for making a healthy environment of society, and high-castes called them 'dirty' as a reward. Through this novel, Anand discloses all the disguising aspect of Hindu hierarchy of social system and gives the message of humanism which is necessary for human development as well as for its betterment.

Bakha is a fictional hero, who is the consequence of Anand's childhood days friendship with an out-caste boy named Bakha. This friendship inspired Anand to create a lively character that has soiled hands, sweating face, wears dirty cloths and belongs to subaltern class. Although Bakha belongs to subaltern class but Anand presented him as the child of modern India. Bakha is a young boy of eighteen years old and has not surrendered to his fate like his father Lakha. He is a child of twentieth century and willing to accept modern way of dressing. "From a Tommy he has secured a pair of old breeches and from a sepoy a pair of old boots; he would, if he could, like to look the white foreigner and so be in the 'fashun'." (Ayengar, p. 336)

Bakha's day begins with the alarming call of his father Lakha for going to work for cleaning latrines for the upper-caste people. After completing five rounds of cleaning the latrines he returns home and thinks in melancholy pensive mood how his work like cleaning the latrines, sweeping the main road and the temple courtyard in the town, makes him inferior to high-caste. He also does not understand how his *Karma* (work) separates him from high-caste and makes him subaltern. He fails to understand how his community people are considered physically impure and untouchable although they clean and purify society as well as social environment. They clean the dirt of others but they are not able to clean the mind and eyes of traditional Hindus as well as high-caste people. They do not like to touch him, however, the Mohammedans do not mind touching him. Anand clearly expressed Bakha's emotions in the novel. Bakha thinks "It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-Untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the world! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (p. 43)

Bakha's miseries and pains are not the consequence of his fault but of his birth in the subaltern class. He faces a lot of humiliation and insult everywhere in his daily life. And whenever he goes he is welcomed with the words, 'defiled' and 'polluted'. He wants to improve his social status but he realises his subalternity when a betel-leaves-seller flung 'Red-Lamp' cigarettes at him "as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop" (p. 34), a confectioner threw a packet of jalebis at him like "a cricket ball" (p. 37) and a high-caste housewife tossed chapattis at him as if thrown at a dog. This subalternity makes

Bakha inferior to everywhere and whenever he goes people make a distance from him with the shouting word 'defiled' and 'polluted'. There was always a struggle within and outside the society, where Bakha had to suffer. Anand's deep sympathy with subaltern class shares the pain and agony of Bakha. He explains Bakha's pain and suffering with these words, "My aim is not negative, merely to shock, but to stimulate consciousness at all levels." (Cawasjee, 1973, p. 115-116) Therefore, Mulk Raj Anand presented the humanistic attitudes in portraying those conditions which Bakha and his subaltern class faced from society.

After getting chapattis Bakha comes back home and his father, Lakha, scolding him because he gets few chapattis. Lakha dreams of the past when he used to bring a lot of food from the marriages. He is also reminded of the past incident how the Hakimji didn't allow him to enter his house, when he went for getting medicine for his child. It happened only because Lakha belonged to the untouchable caste and this caste had no permission to enter any high-caste's house whether he is in pain and misery. It clearly explains Anand's humanistic approach in the novel when Lakha recited the past experiences:

I tried to fall at the feet of every passerby and prayed them to tell the Sarkar, your honour, that my child was suffering. But Sarkar this is the time of kindness, be compassionate at this time, another time you may taken even my life. Only, save my child. (p. 73)

Here Anand presents the condition of untouchability which is continuously running through generation to generation. Being a sweeper, Lakha could not enter inside the shop of medical practitioner and is compelled to see the bottles of medicines from outside.

The novel elaborates the condition of a sweeper's boy Bakha who had suffered not by his mistakes but due to his birth in the sweeper caste. Anand condemns the *Vedic* caste system in which the upper-caste always exploits and humiliates the lower-caste. Upper-caste tortures Bakha and treats him worst than animals. In every episode of the novel Bakha seems to struggle in society for sheer existence. He listens to abuses from society every day. Sometimes abuses help him to regain his strength and self-respect for completing his work more efficiently but at the sometimes it gives emotional imbalance to him and provokes the feeling of protest. He performs his duty honestly and gets only heaps of abuses as the reward. He thinks, "All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused? [.....] Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too." (p. 43) Some characters in the novel like Lakha and Havildar Charat Singh abuse Bakha only to correct his mistakes but other character like Lalla Banarasi Das whom he runs into accidentally in the market not only slaps him but also throws the torrent of abuses, "Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig!" and scolds him, "Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!" (P. 38)

Mulk Raj Anand's first novel *Untouchable* deals with the sad plight of untouchables who have been suppressed by Hindu Vedantic culture. The novel highlights the pathetic condition of untouchables. The scene of this novel is laid in a remote village named Bulashah, in Punjab. This is a small village and located outside of town. Upper-castes compelled untouchables for this separation because they do not want to keep in touch with untouchables. They thought the mere presence of untouchables not only defiled their colonies but polluted their environment also. Such types of attitudes towards untouchables drag them to hell of the subalternity. Bulashah, the

small village of untouchables, separately marked out as ‘the out castes’ colony’. Anand compassionately explains the social condition of subalterns through this filthy, unhygienic and not properly ventilated atmosphere of the colony. He explains:

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 washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane,[.....], now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up[.....]and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides[.....]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. (p. 1)

The well episode in the novel is a vital evidence for understanding the social condition of the subaltern community. In this episode Anand criticizes Hindu caste system and the evil motif of high-castes. Upper-castes think they are superior to all other castes and only they have privilege to the basic necessities of life. In the novel, the people of lower-caste wait at the platform of the well for getting the water with the help of some upper-caste Hindus, who could be generous for pouring some water on their dry pitchers. The out-castes were not supposed to use the natural resources directly, because it would be polluted by their mere touching. This unacceptable force keeps untouchables to remain thirsty, dirty and filthy. The description goes:

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw the water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. (p. 14)

The existing belief of untouchability in Hindu social system has been put untouchables in the margin. And when an untouchable walking on the road, he was compelled to sought, “Posh keep away, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming” (p. 42). It was an alarm to keep away people from touching a low-caste man because high-caste people believed that they could be polluted by mere touch of an out-caste. It is looking like an irony when a upper-caste Hindu Brahmin gargles and spits in the stream, a rich Hindu business man gives excessive food to lazy priest and ignores an untouchable who is working for society, a orthodox Hindu worship a filthy smell bull and do not touch a human being because he is untouchable, an untouchable cleans the temple courtyard but the doors of temple are closed for him, the roads are cleaned by an untouchable and he is not permitted to use the roads. Such types of ignorance fill Bakha’s emotions with rage, agony, frustration, humiliation, pain and revenge.

The subaltern study of *Untouchable* highlights the role of caste in an Indian Hindu society. The dominance of caste divides the society as well as human psyche. Since ancient period a lot of religious-taboos, superstitions and misconception exist in Indian Hindu society and they may be responsible for subalternity in society. At the one hand high-caste Hindus dominate and exploit lower-caste because they think their birth in high-caste is the blessing of

God and they have the right to rule over subaltern class. At the other hand out-caste tolerates high-castes' dominance and exploitation for the sake of their caste promotion in the next birth. Anand believes that such type of psychological attitudes for the life is difficult to eradicate and the condition of subalterns could not be improve.

In the well, the favour done there by an upper caste Hindu Brahmin, Pandit Kali Nath, who pours the water on an empty pitcher of Sohini, sister of Bakha, not for the sake of generosity but because he was attracted towards Sohini's beauty. He calls her in the temple for cleaning and sweeping the courtyard of the temple and tries to molest her. This is again a different satire projected by Anand in the novel on the upper-caste, who regarded the sweepers as an untouchable, but at the same time attracted by the beauty of an untouchable. Brahmins occupy a prominent place in Indian society and are known for their access to religion, rituals, culture and philosophy. This incident unacceptable from Pandit Kali Nath because he always talked about untouchability and preaches about caste pollution that spoils human life. The condition and plight of the untouchables and subalterns can only be understood by those people who really suffer in the so called *Vedic* caste system. Anand's purpose was not only to expose the people, but presented their plight which they face in their day to day lives. "He emphatically states that he creates novels not to expose his philosophy of humanism, but to portray human beings in their wholeness, with their interior as well as exterior life" (Sharma, p. 15). He also did not only create a fiction about one person, but he presented the complete class of those people, who suffered the pain and agony of their caste system. E.M. Forster the friend and a literary companion of Mulk Raj Anand, wrote, in the preface of the novel:

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 and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves and rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disquieting as well as disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it's his duty to call out and warn then that he is coming. (Preface of *Untouchable*, p. VII)

Towards the end of the novel, Bakha goes to listen Mahatma Gandhiji's speech at the 'maidan' near the Bulandshahr railway station. The appearance of Gandhiji in the novel displays Anand's admiration for Gandhiji. He was a great disciple of Gandhiji and his humanism depended on the Gandhian philosophy. As a Gandhian thinker he believed that the problems of untouchability could be solved by Gandhian way of thinking. Therefore, in the novel when Bakha listens to Gandhiji, he was impressed by Gandhiji's lecture on the deliverance from untouchability. He feels blessed after listening to Gandhiji:

He knew it applied to him. It's good that I came! He thought, 'Is he really going to talk about the outcaste, about us, about Chota, Ram Charan, my father and me? What will he say, I wonder? Strange that Sahib of the *Mukti* (Salvation Army) said that the rich and the poor, the Brahmins and *bhangis*, are the same.' (p. 132)

Gandhiji's lecture on untouchables and his will in which he said, "I prayed that, if I should be born again, I should be so, not as a *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, *Shudra*, but as an outcaste, as an untouchable." (p. 138), builds the self confidence and energy in Bakha and for a moment he

forgets the incident which happened in the morning. The soothing impression on the mind of a person whose journey began in the morning stumbling through the stone of caste hierarchy, Bakha relaxed in the evening when he particularly listened to *Bapu*. And the introduction of a flush system machine, by the poet, which would be able to clear the dung without touching it, is another support to Bakha. This machine would be a permanent solution of untouchability because earlier the problem was based on the work which Bakha and his class was doing for centuries. Through this episode Anand imagines a secular, co-operative and egalitarian society which can be helpful to uplift the social condition and position of the subaltern class. Although, it was the evening when Bakha listened to Gandhiji but it seems the dawn of Bakha's life from where he gets a breath of fresh air about his future and after using this machine he and his caste could breathe the fresh air of dignity and freedom.

The subaltern study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* illustrates the unworthiness of caste system in Hindu society because it divides society into numerous sections. For narrating the worst effect of untouchability in Hindu society, Anand chooses his protagonist, Bakha, from the subaltern class background. He discloses all the frustration, agony, aspiration, misery, compassion and depression of his protagonist that were the result of his daily struggle with society.

As a great disciple of Gandhiji and influenced by Marx's ideology, he believes that democratic outlook will be helpful for subaltern classes to uplift their social condition. Better opportunities for subalterns can improve their socio-economic status. He also believes that modernity and scientific approach can eradicate age old traditions, superstitions, religious-taboos, casteism and classism from the society. After using modern and new scientific equipments no untouchable will wait for the mercy of high castes for water, no untouchable will clean human excreta manually and will not carry the human excreta on their heads. Poor socio-economic condition of subaltern class is the main reason for their suffering. Democratic outlook supports them for getting better education as well as job opportunities for improving their socio-economic condition.

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