
Dalit Consciousness in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

Dr.Ohm Shrivastava, Assistant Professor, Department of English, K.S Saket P.G College, Ayodhya, U.P

**Paper Received on 18-07-2023, Accepted on 16-08-2023,
Published on 17-08-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.3.139**

Abstract

Dalit literature narrates the experiences of the downtrodden people that have been boycotted from the main stream society. The expressions and feelings of the Dalit community have not been heard or seen till now. One who read Dalit experiences are shaken by it. The Dalit community has suffered generational social discrimination inflicted by the Hindu caste system. The caste system has not only colonized them but also it made their lives worse than animals. Dalit literature has raised many questions against the hegemony of upper caste Hindu society. It's social, cultural and literary ambience is different from the main stream literature and this is the reason many obstacles arise during its critical evolution. "Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality" (Mukherjee 1).

Keywords: Dalit Consciousness, Dalit literature, Hindu society, inequality.

It is said that writing about Dalits by the Dalit writers with Dalit consciousness is called real Dalit writing and the purpose of Dalit writing is to inform people of Dalit community about their slavery and narrate their pain and suffering to upper caste Hindu society. Dalit literature does not expect description of beauty and pleasure from writing but it demands social transformation in society by realistic description by the writers. It focuses more on social values than beauty. They rejected the traditional aesthetics and demanded for the new and distinct aesthetics for the literature and that aesthetics is life affirming and realistic. Dalit writers demanded different yardsticks for literary analysis of their works and they firmly believe that if the yardsticks change, the concept of literary aesthetics will also be changed. This is one aspect of dalit consciousness narrated by the dalit writers. It is also of the view that dalit and non dalit writers, both have depicted the suffering of the dalits and dalit writers have the view that only a dalit writer can express the real stigma of a dalit but perhaps, it cannot be

true after reading the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand. The description and narration given by Mulk Raj Anand have depicted the real suffering of the dalit community.

Dalit literature has its own significance. Dalits were always considered as marginalised people, oppressed and others by the Indian society. Inequality is the root cause for this marginalization of the dalit community. The word Dalit is not new to us; it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of “depressed classes”, a term the British used for what are now called the Scheduled castes. The word “Dalit” has originated from Sanskrit ‘Dalita’ which means ‘oppressed’. Dalits have various names in different parts of India, such as ‘dasa’, ‘dasya’, ‘raksasa’, ‘asura’, ‘avarna’, ‘nisoda’, ‘panchama’, ‘chandala’ etc., There are also known by such names i.e ‘untouchables’, ‘harijans’, ‘weaker sections’, ‘atishudras’, ‘dalits’, ‘depressed classes’, ‘others’, ‘servile classes’, ‘avamas’, ‘antyajas’, ‘scheduled castes’. Mulk Raj Anand wrote novels for the poor and the depressed classes. The novels of Mulk Raj Anand deal with the caste and class issues. The novel, Untouchable (1935) is the best example of Dalit consciousness. Through, this paper, I have tried to study the elements of Dalit consciousness in the novel, Untouchable.

Key Words: Untouchability, Marginality, Slavery, Exploitation, Suffering, Dalit Consciousness, Dalit Aesthetics.

Dalit Consciousness means writing about the Dalit community with the Dalit consciousness by the Dalit writers, The purpose of Dalit writing is to inform about their suffering, slavery and pain given to them by their upper caste Hindu society. It is said by the Dalit writers that real pain and suffering of the Dalit community can be expressed by the Dalit writers, not by the writers of upper caste society, but it is proved wrong by Mulk Raj Anand. After reading the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, we can't say that this is not written by a Dalit's writer, but it seems that this is manifestation of a true Dalit writer. Dalit consciousness is the mentality which revolts against the caste system, injustice or any kinds of exploitation in the society. It always related with the struggle. It is a belief to revolt against the beliefs which are made by the caste system. It follows thoughts of Baba Sahab Ambedkar. His thoughts and beliefs are inspiration for the Dalit writing. Dalit consciousness realizes slaves for their slavery.

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable is a thought provoking and realistic work. It talks about various evils which are prevalent in society. The most vital concern of the novel is untouchability, caste system, illiteracy, religious bigotry and so many other things. Untouchability and caste system are curse for Indian society. The feeling of untouchability is not given by God. He does not say to anybody to have feeling of untouchability and promote caste system. Caste system has been given and promoted by certain class of people for their personal benefits. They used the weapon of social untouchability to colonize the poor people who were innocent. Dr Anand depicted the long-lasting durability of untouchables in this novel. He was a social critic. He was committed to change the life of untouchables. He brought social revolution in the Indian fiction writing. He has presented the characters from real life who were very dear to him. He has raised the issue of untouchability which was the burning

problem of society. He talks about his subject as well as about his characters. He himself writes that "All these heroes as the other men and women, who had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me because they were the reflection of real people. I had known during my childhood and youth" (Preface to Two Leaves and a Bud, 3). He has depicted the real disparity between the rich and the poor. The disparity compelled him to think about the upliftment of untouchables.

This is one of realistic pictures of the downtrodden ever presented by the novelists. It was Dr. Anand who gave such a realistic picture of Indian society where untouchable used to live. He has presented before us such realistic picture which he experienced and come to know during his childhood days. This is not enough, various other realistic descriptions and situation have been given throughout the novel. Every page of the novel is full of social protest. Humiliation of the downtrodden was common in that time and it seems that lower castes used to wait to be humiliated by the upper caste. Dr. Anand has given such naturalistic description that he has passed the life with Bakha. He has minutely observed the life of Bakha and has shown us the miserable life of Bakha as well as his family members. Anand has shown us how Bakha's day begins:

Bakha thought of the uncongeniality of his home as he lay half-awake in the morning of an autumn day, covered by a worn out, greasy blanket, on a faded blue carpet which was spread on the floor in a corner of the twelve feet by five, dank, dingy, one roomed mud- house. His sister slept on a cot next to him and his father and brother snored from under a patched, ochre-coloured quilt, on a broken string bed. (Untouchable, 2)

Bakha's day begins with scolding from his father. Every father loves his sons more than anything. Their day begins with love and blessings but the day of untouchables begin like Bakha. Lakha who is father of Bakha, Jamadar of all the sweepers mostly scolds Bakha. Bakha has a desire to look like Britishers and free from the curse of untouchability. Every downtrodden has a strong desire to free from the curse of untouchability and wants to live a castless life. Dr Anand writes:

Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement when he first went to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncle. He had had glimpses, during his sojourn there; of the life the Tommies lived: sleeping on strange, low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets; eating eggs, drinking tea and wine in tin mugs; going to parade and then walking down the bazaar with cigarettes in their mouths and small silver- mounted canes in their hands. 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 begged one Tommy for the gift of a pair of trousers. (Untouchable, 3)

He can desire only. He cannot convert it into reality. He saw so many things in the market and has inner desire to buy them. He was hungry for the things. He has desire to touch them but he was not allowed to do so because of his caste and profession. He cannot go into the shops because of his caste. Dr Anand writes:

He had looked longingly at that shop. Ever since he was a child he had walked past the wooden stall on which lay heaped the scarlet and khaki uniforms discarded or pawned by the Tommies, pith solar topees, peak caps, knives, forks, buttons, old books and other ornaments of Anglo-Indian life. And he had hungered for the touch of them. But he had never mustered up courage enough to go up to the keeper of the shop and ask him the price of anything. (Untouchable, 3)

The upper caste people have colonized downtrodden ideologically and psychologically. Lakha feels proud when the people call him jamadar. Dalits are happy in their own world. They think that they are born for cleaning society, not for knowledge and respect. The innocent Dalits were cheated by upper castes. They have colonized innocent Dalits by their own constitution of the Manu Smriti. Bakha does not want to live this life. He wants to live the life a normal child live. He wants to play with other children but is not allowed by his father due to work. Although he works hard and does the work whatever he is allotted, yet he is abused by his father continuously. The remarks of Dr Anand are very remarkable in this regard:

Then father won't ask me to put a quilt on. He always keeps abusing me. I do all his work for him. He appropriates the pay all right. He is afraid of the sepoys. He abuses me. He is happy when they call him Jemadar. So proud of his izzat! He just goes about getting Salaams from everybody. I don't take a moment's rest yet he abuses me .And if I go to play with the boys he calls me in the middle of the game to come and attend to the latrines. He is old. He does not know anything of the sahibs. And now he will call me to get up, and it is so cold. He will keep lying in bed, and Rakha and Sohini will still be asleep, when I go to the latrines. (Untouchable, 4-5)

The Novelist has shown the worst impact of the untouchability. During 1930s animals were better than untouchables. People love animals not untouchables. In society, there were several restrictions on the untouchables and women. They were not allowed to go on public places. They were not allowed to fetch up water from public places because the upper castes thought that if they touched anything, they would pollute the things. When they walked on the road, they had to bind the broom behind so that their foot-steps could clean their feet-steps and they could save themselves from the pollution. They would have to call posh! Posh! Bhangi is coming.

The people of lower caste were not allowed to use their ropes and bucket for fetching water from wells. We see in the novel that Bakha's sister Sohini has to wait that someone from upper caste come and fetch water for her. This kind of inhuman treatment was prevalent at that time. Dr Anand describes the situation very well in following words:

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the near-by brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. They had no well of their own because it cost at least a thousand rupees to dig a well in such a hilly town as Bulashah. Before, they had to collect at the foot of

the caste Hindus well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. (Untouchable, 15)

Anand has shown that humiliation and exploitation is common thing for the untouchables. They are very much familiar to such type of behavior. They don't have any izzat (respect) in society. This has been depicted through the character of Sohini. Her character has various elements to provide different kinds of problems which were prevalent at that time against the untouchables. Her character also discloses the inherent problems of the women of untouchable family. She suffers different kinds of physical and mental tortures. Dr Anand portrays her character very exclusively:

She had come as fast as she could to the well, full of fear and anxiety that she would have to wait her turn since she could see from a distance that there was already crowd. She did not feel disappointed so much as depressed to realize that she would be the tenth to receive water. She had sensed with her deep woman's instinct the feeling in her brother's soul. He was tired. He was thirsty. She had felt like a mother as she issued from her home to fetch water, a mother going out to fetch food or drink for her loved ones at home. Now she sat in a row with her fellow sufferers, her heart sank. There was no sign of any-one passing that way who could be a possible benefactor. But she was patient. She had in her an instinctive fortitude, obvious in her curious reserve, in her composed and peaceful bearings. (Untouchable, 15)

We feel pitiful on witnessing the condition of untouchables. On the one hand, Bakha is tired and so much thirsty on the other hand Gulabo the washer woman misbehaves badly with Sohini. Dr. Anand writes "Go back home", said Gulabo mockingly, "There is no one to give you water here! And, at any rate, there are so many of us ahead of you!" (Untouchable, 16). Even women do not have respect for women. Gulabo speaks very harshly to Sohani:

Think of it! Think of it! You bitch! You prostitute; wonton! and your mother hardly dead. Think of laughing in my face, laughing at me who am old enough to be your mother. Bitch!' the washerwoman exploded 'Ari, you bitch! Do you take me for a buffoon? What are you laughing at, slut? Aren't you ashamed of showing your teeth to me in the presence of men, prostitute? (Untouchable, 17)

Dr Anand has also shown the hypocrisy of a Brahmin. There is one upper castes man known as Pundit Kalinath who comes to fetch up water for Sohini attracted by her beauty. He invites her at her home for cleaning the house as well as temple. His intention was bad. When Sohini goes there for cleaning, Pt. Kalinath tries to molest her. When she opposes the act, she was blamed for the act in reverse. He cries and goes out of the temple and blames Sohini that she has polluted him as well as the temple. People believe the words of Pt. Kalinath. They do not believe the words of Sohini. This is the reality of Indian society. They believe the words of upper castes people and those who are powerful and there is no value of the words of the downtrodden. This is the biggest question mark on the Hindu religion. Dr Anand wants to show us that if the head of the Hindu religion is like Pt. Kalinath then what will happen with Hindu religion? In present period, there are many saints like Pundit Kalinath who molest the innocent girls on the name of God. There are many cases of rape, we come across in our daily life. Many

heads of the religious institutions have raped so many girls. These heads have also polluted Hindu religion by making caste system in it. If we want to make it one of the best religions of the world, we will have to reform the shortcomings of the religion by removing caste system from Hindu religion and people like Pt. Kalinath from the religious activity. Sohini was cursed too much and there is no one to listen to the words of Sohini. This happened not only with Sohini but also usually happens with many girls like Sohini. They told her that she had defiled their temple as well as our religion. Now we will have to conduct the purification ceremony. The people like Pundit Kalinath who are Brahmin only by outside but from the inside they are more corrupt than animals. They are leading the Indian society and what will be the future of society, nobody knows. Religious hypocrisy and diplomacy are the real weapons to colonize the untouchables. Kapur Hargunjot writes in this regard, "He focuses his lenses on the hypocrisy, the dual standards and the perfidy underlying the facade of purity and spirituality" (152).

Thus, Mulk Raj Anand is the novelist who is known in the Indian English writing to raise the Dalit consciousness. Although, he is an upper caste Kshatriya but he had a big heart for the lower caste people. He made the lower caste people realize their slavery, exploitation and the ill behavior which was continue with them at that time. Perhaps, he was the first novelist who made them realize their rights. It is true that Dalit writers says that real suffering, and real feelings of Dalit society can be truly depicted only by Dalit writers but it is also true that the description given by Mulk Raj Anand, is not less than. Symptoms of Dalit Consciousness can be seen easily in the writing of the novelist. In the real sense, first time Dalit sensibility can be seen in the novel Untouchable, He was the first novelist who put the suffering of untouchables before the world. In the polite literature, nothing had been written about outcaste people. It was Anand who gave them place in his writing. He presented the problem of real India, and man's inhumanity to his fellow man. Casteism is a kind of crime for him and he appeals to people to eliminate it from their behavior if they believe in human dignity. Inequality and ill treatment of upper castes to lower castes are the national tragedy and this can only be removed through the democratic socialism. Religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, superstitious activities and have faith in Fate or Karma are the enemy of healthy social life, individual and national prosperity. These practices are also a big hindrance in progressive thinking of the people and this has rotten progress of the individual as well as the country. Religious fundamentalism, fanaticism and superstition have given birth to caste system and it is responsible for the Dalits' exploitation in the country. Now, Dalits have known a lot for years. The awareness of Dalits will liberate them from the above Pandora boxes very soon.

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How to cite this article?

Dr. Ohm Shrivastava " Dalit Consciousness in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*" Research Journal Of English (RJOE)8(3), PP:133-139,2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.3.139