

THE SUFFERINGS OF DALITS IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF MULK RAJ ANAND**S. Nagarajan***Assistant Professor of English, Adhiparasakthi College of Engineering, Kalavai- 632 506***Dr. K.R. Venkatesan***Principal, Sri Sankara Arts & Science College, Enathur, Kanchipuram- 631561*

Mulk Raj Anand is verily called the Charles Dickens of India. As Dickens portrays the sordid state of slum dwellers and chimney sweepers of London in his novels, Dr. Anand depicts the squalor, filth and the unbearable stink that emanates around the hamlets of those from the lowest rungs of life. Bakha, Munoo and Gangu in his novels *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* respectively are victims of the haves. In these novels Anand paints the downtrodden with the like of whom he has moved closely in his childhood.

The canker of casteism results in the segregation of thousands of people into perpetual humility and eventual extinction. Our society is sharply divided into two classes: i.e. the rich and the poor. The horrendous sufferings of these dalits are ineffable. Anand was once segregated on board a ship by some Westerners and with a shock he felt what it meant to be an untouchable. All the humiliations that the dalits face Anand pens. When we start reading the first page of *Untouchable* we feel sympathetic towards the depressed and the prevailing conditions of their unheard of ethos and we shed tears of blood.

Dalitism is strongly rooted to the soil. Eventhough Sri Narayana Guru, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and E.V.R. Periyar advocated the abolition of untouchability, it still exists even after sixty eight years of independence in the nooks and corners of India. Besides, all the school text books carry the message, "Untouchability is a sin; Untouchability is a crime and Untouchability is punishable" only in words and not in deeds. Recently, it was flashed in the newspapers that separate tea cups of inferior quality were being used for dalits in Coimbatore suburban villages. We also witness the elements of dalitism in the minds of everybody when we are unable to materialize our basic amenities of life. A large number people are exploited by the rich employers around the globe. In fact, we become flies in the hands of rich who kill us for their sport.

Three famous novels viz *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* have been taken for this article. The original edition of *Untouchable* (1935) was dedicated to Edith Young, who sustained Anand's faith in the book when nineteen publishers turned down. Subsequently, Mahatma Gandhi allowed Anand to read the novel to him at the Sabarmathi Ashram, Ahmedabad and converted him to sincerity, simplicity and truth by asking him to cut meretricious literariness. E.M. Forster saved Anand from suicide, when he was on the edge of the abyss with a preface.

Untouchable is the first novel of Mulk Raj Anand. The novel takes the form of crusade against the evils of society. He has sympathies with the downtrodden and the depressed. *Untouchable* portrays a day in the life of Bakha, an eighteen year old Bangi boy

living in the outcastes' colony which is a group of mud-walled houses that clustered in two rows. The scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, water-carriers, grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society lived there. A crystal-clear brook of past ran near the lane, soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it and the unbearable stink emanated from the ramparts of animal and human wastes, the ugliness, squalor and the misery made the place unbearable to live in. In his preface to the book, E.M. Forster quoted, "...the book seems to me indescribably clean... it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it"¹. Bakha is an exceptional and unique dalit living in such an abject condition. Even before the day dawns Bakha sets out for his work at the behest of his father. When cleaning the latrines Bakha suffers a series of insults at the hands of the caste Hindus. Cigarettes are flung at him as bones are flung at an insistent sniffing dog. Wherever Bakha goes, he is greeted with the words as 'defiled' and 'polluted'. The caste Hindus declared callously: "They ought to be wiped off the surface of the earth!"². We see Bakha living in a world of illusions - a make belief world where he could rub shoulders with the sahibs. "I am an untouchable! ...an untouchable! Posh, posh sweeper coming"³. When the day dawns, his work of cleaning the commodes starts. He is a steady and adept worker. each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came to play, seemed to shine forth like a glass. "What a dexterous workman", the onlookers would have said. Though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean. Anand describes Bakha's daily chores with a painful sympathy depicting both the efficiency with which he executes this essential service with his deft hands and the callousness with which the beneficiaries receive him. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes: "There are degrees of caste among the 'low-caste' people, there being none low without one being lower still"⁴. The custom of touching a Muslim for redressing an unholy touch sounds comic and reveals the absurdity of the caste system.

When his sister Sohini approaches the well, she has to face inter-caste abuses and recriminations for there are degrees of caste among the low-class people. Attracted by her angelic beauty Pandit Kalinath invites Sohini into his house and embraces her. When she resists, he cries 'polluted'. Anand has created Sohini to indicate that in the matters of sex untouchability would fly. Cowasjee says, "The Hindu religion is responsible for the fiendish segregation of humanity"⁵. The adage that man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains is hundred percent true with such Bakhas, who clean the commodes, in our society. Untouchable is regarded as a classic since it brings into sharp focus what has proved debilitating to Indian society in general and Hindu society in particular.

Anand suggests three solutions to Bakha's agony of self-abasement and total frustration. Firstly, Colonel Hutchinson, the Salvationist, asks Bakha to turn Christian to end his caste discrimination. Secondly, he listens to the inspiring speech of Gandhiji who states: "I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism". If he were to be born again, he would prefer to be born an outcaste, rather than as a member of a high-caste. Thirdly, the introduction of flush system will put an end to caste system. Gandhi calls the harijan, 'man

of God'. As C.D. Narasimhaiya remarks, "the title gives 'published information' as the title does not have an article, Bakha seems to be a representative of the untouchables and the dispossessed everywhere"⁶.

'Coolie' is the story of a hill boy who is made to leave his idyllic village in the Kangra valley. With the intention of seeing a better world, he contacts a minor bank clerk, a powerful caricature of an Indian subordinate driven the 'Coolie' (1936) is an important chronicle, especially for it portrays the tribulations of an individual in a class-ridden society" Premila Paul⁷. "Coolie is verily a cross-section of India,...the horrible and the holy, the humane and inhumane, the sordid and the beautiful"⁸ Iyengar (340). M.K. Naik calls 'Coolie' the pathetic Odyssey of Munoo⁷, an orphaned village boy from the Kangra hills; he sets out in search of livelihood. His different roles such as a domestic servant, a coolie, a factory worker and a rikshaw-puller, take him to various places from Bombay to Simla, until he dies of consumption. Premila Paul calls Coolie, "a veritable saga of unending pain, suffering and prolonged struggle punctuated only occasionally by brief moments of relief and hope"⁹. It presents the sufferings of Munoo at the hands of different exploiters in four different places. From this novel we understand that the exploiters change and the exploited remains the same.

The four tragic episodes which make up the tragic life - as servant in a Bank clerk's house, as a worker in a pickle factory in a feudal city, as a factory worker in an industry in Bombay and at last as a servant of high-caste woman at Simla- present a sequence of events that portray the abject condition of humble, illiterate Indians. Coolie covers all the classes of people from the landless peasant to the aristocratic Anglo-Indian and British.

Munoo and his fellow coolies are exploited by the forces of industrialism, capitalism, communalism and colonialism. With its constant shifting of scenes, its variety of characters from all sections of society and its wealth of eventful incident, Coolie has an epic quality. When the Coolies toil with their perspiration and blood the exploiters discuss the weather over a cup of tea. The canker of cast system often results in the segregation of people into perpetual misery and eventual extinction. Edward Burra says that with Munoo's tragic end, "all that is good in life seems to be irreparably lost". Yet Coolie is not a pessimistic novel. The hope of humanity lies in people like Ratan and Mohan. Coolie sums up that there are only two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor, and between the two there is no connection. C.D. Narasimhaiah's comment on Coolie is relevant in this context: "Death has ceased to frighten these poor people - they are past all fright; it is life that is a threat, and death is a release"⁹.

Two Leaves and a Bud (1937) is a dramatic novel. It results in a tragic clash of interests and destinies and what is fine is put out and what is dark is triumphant. It recounts the clashes of hopes of a Punjabi peasant who has been lured under the false pretext of working in a tea estate in Assam. He is forced to work in unhygienic conditions and starved and is shot dead by a British officer, who tries to rape his daughter. We see the British imperialistic dominance as in the case of Reggie Hunt or liberalism as in that of Dr.

de la Harve. On the whole Gangu is presented as an Indian worker. Money has become an indispensable thing in the life of one to be happy and the measure of status in one's life.

Buta is a barber by birth. But we don't see the plebian abjectness traditionally attached to his caste in the novel, as he is a sardar by position. Because of that he ranks higher in the labour force than is warranted for the proletarian sects. The novels *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* centre round the tribulations of the labour class and the underprivileged. Whereas the *Coolie* describes the predicaments of an individual coolie in a class-ridden society, *Two Leaves and a Bud* paints the same problem in a group experience in the framework of a vast capitalistic organisation. Whereas *Coolie* is about an individual coolie, *Two Leaves* is about coolies in general. *Two Leaves* could have been entitled as *Coolies*. However, the title is so apt: "The little hands clipped the leaves more eagerly [because they earn their livelihood], and more nervously [because they work under horror], two leaves and a bud, two leaves and a bud" *Two Leaves and a Bud* (Orient Paperback, n.d, 240)¹⁰. The refrain suggests the monotonous routine of the work and paradoxically enough, relieves the workers temporarily of its drabness. *Two Leaves* is somewhat a grimmer tragedy. The forests of Assam Plantation are so dense a jungle that the ray of love cannot penetrate.

The novel opens with the cliché, "Life is like a journey...A journey to the unknown". Indeed, it is an unconscious journey to the eternal doom; a journey from ignorance to awareness. The children are spontaneous, natural, happy and trusting. With the earthly freight, the bliss of childhood wanes. When Gangu plays with the children in baby language, it grins with its toothless gums as to mock the cares of grown-ups. Narain describes the life in Assam as, "The Prison has no bars, but it is nevertheless an unbreakable jail"¹¹. (*Two Leaves and a Bud*, p. 32). Buddhu brings 'a live, fluttering, frightening pigeon' which is destined to sit for many days at the ledge. The ledge is not a jail for it indeed. It symbolizes Gangu's incarceration in Assam till he finds the release only in death.

Like Bakha and Munoo, the coolies in *The Two Leaves and a Bud*, too, face terrible humiliations. They are accused of thieving habits. The dealer tells Gangu that the necklace is as white as his face is black. When Munoo is abused by the shop-keeper, his feelings are hurt, but he is excited over the wonders of the city. But Gangu is more mature. When the coolies are beaten, Gangu feels that their self-respect is at stake. In spite of all these hardships, the coolies seldom rebel. De la Harve describes them as non-entities running about locusts- "docile, gutless, spineless coolies, who never raised their voices except on the day of the Holi" (*Two Leaves and a Bud*, p. 148). Their crass stupidity is so firm and deep-rooted that neither hunger nor pestilence nor disease can provoke them to rebellion. Abject submission is their order of the day.

The insecurity of women in the plantations is well-portrayed. We also foresee the future disaster. Leela's struggle with the python's grip symbolizes her struggle at the hands of Reggie the human python. It is a pity that such a gentle character pleads with her brother to set free the fluttering pigeon is doomed to struggle in the same manner. This

incident symbolizes innocence getting throttled at the hands of callous brutality which results in the death of the innocent soul, Gangu. What is more striking is not the isolated actions of the grim aspects of the plantation life involving the British masters and Indian labourers- the aspects involving the darkness in the heart of man.

To sum up, Mulk Raj Anand's novels depict the pathos in the life of the dalits in a picturesque manner. The exploitation of dalits is a serious issue that needs our immediate concern. To quote Maya Anjelou, " The cage bird sings of freedom". It is time we did something for the emancipation of dalits from the shackles of the rich and the powerful. Let us take a pledge to fight for justice, equality and unity in life with which the globe can progress.

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