

A Voice for Social Change and Human Development in Mulk Raj Anand's Major Novels

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Abstract

Untouchable, The Road, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, and *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts* discuss Anand's conception of social system in the unsusceptible society. The most systematic exposition of Mulk Raj Anand's writings is to be viewed from the social angle. Celebrating a long life, he began writing from the very beginning of his career. So an in-depth study of his hazardous profession reveals his concern for various strata of Indian society and several phases of his social conception. The writer was interested not only in one stratum of Indian society but in its diversified strata including scavengers, backward classes, untouchables, upper-middle class, lower classes, peasants, workers and labourers which sharply drew his attention within a time span of more than fifty years. Therefore, his writings depict various phases of social changes and that too amongst many holocausts of social divisions or sub-divisions.

Keywords: Society, Social Change, System, Human Development, Awareness

System is the methodical classification meaning 'order'. There are two types of system: one being the natural system and other the man-made system. The natural system is made of nature and it, too, has two types, organic or inorganic. The organic has affinity with the living like trees, creatures and human beings. The inorganic has relationship with the non-biological things, for example, the sun and the heavenly bodies. Man-made system is created by human beings and has four types - social system, personality system, cultural system and mechanical system. So the meaning of social system can be thus defined:

Social system is an organization as it is an orderly and systematic arrangement of parts. But unlike an organization it lays emphasis on interaction and functional inter-relationship of the parts. Within the social system there are various sub-systems like political, religious, educational, economic system, etc. In all these systems each of the interacting individuals has a function to perform (Horton & Leslie 90)

There were four Varnas in society: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Actually, the work of four Varnas gave the name of their caste. But, more than that, there was the problem of injustice associated with the Shudras because this class was considered lowest in the order. Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were the exploiters of the Shudras. But later, Shudras divided in two groups, it was not that one group was free from austerity of society but both suffered from severity of society. One group came in rigidity of caste system and other group came in tyranny of class system, they suffered from conservative religious beliefs and education. They could not enjoy social facilities like other three classes.

Anand was dissatisfied with the present set up of the system because it was not in the right order. He detested any malfunctioning of the system whether it was British Imperialism or the exploitation of the Indian caste system or the tyranny of the class divide. Anand is dealing with two types of system; one is the caste system, the other the class system. *Untouchable* and *The Road* came in the category of the caste system and the tyranny of class system is discernible in novels like *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud* and *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts*. These systems fail to reserve their order and are incapable to rebel against unsusceptible society.

Through *Untouchable* (1935), Anand tried to portray the evils and maladjustment of society. His intention was not to blame a particular community, but the malaise which had crept into the society. With the publication of *Untouchable* in 1935, Anand started a kind of protest against incapability of Indian social life. The division of society into four castes was to some extent acceptable but the concept of untouchability became a matter of contempt among people because it generated inequality by this division. Anand was greatly influenced by Gandhi's story of Uka in *Young India*, in which Gandhi dealt with the miserable condition of

untouchability. When Gandhi took the great fast in 1932 against the divided and lonely lives of untouchables, he had awakened the entire nation to their troubles. Gandhi firmly believed that India could never attain freedom unless untouchability was eradicated from our country.

Mulk Raj Anand in his first novel, *Untouchable*, shows the injustices of social system which characters, belonging to the lower strata of the novel face on a daily basis. *Untouchable's* hero, Bhakha, the sweeper boy of eighteen years, who is able bodied, cleans the latrines daily. Bhakha is socially, isolated because the society is hostile to him. Though Anand belongs to the Kshatriya caste, he supports the lowest caste. He goes against Hindu orthodoxy. Bhakha gets exploited by the entire higher class and has to tolerate the ugly system of society.

Though circumstances do not favour him yet he has the sensibility to taste every moment of life. So he savours sweets at times. So engrossed does he get in eating the sweets that Bhakha unconsciously touches a high caste Hindu and forgets the mandatory call. The heaven of eating Jalebis turns into hell. In a minute things change for the worse in Bhakha's life

Bhakha stood still, with his hands joined, though he dared to lift his forehead, perspiring and knotted with its hopeless and futile expression of meekness. (Anand 54)

Coming to next novel, *The Road* presents the rigidity of caste system. The concept of adverse untouchability has been repeated in the novel, *The Road*, in which high caste Hindus are seeking the refuse of religion to exploit the untouchables. Bhikhu, one of them, is a conscious minded citizen, who is true towards his duty.

He performs each labour of the village. Untouchables are allowed to do nothing except menial jobs. They have no source of livelihood except milk-selling in towns and petty works in the fields of high caste Hindus. Untouchables construct the village road which will help them in reaching towns but the high caste Hindus decide not to walk on it because it has been built by untouchables. Being an untouchable, Bhikhu receives opposed reception of high caste Hindus.

Bhikhu's identity, which is provided by the social community, has to be readily accepted by him. He feels uncomfortable in this individuality but has no choice but to live with it. Bhikhu answers in a humble and pitiable manner

I am Bhikhu - Harijan! He answered! I would like a drink of water.(109)

Bhikhu is the prey of the evils of caste system. He is more distinct and systematized than Bhakha. *The Road* is an inflexion on the composition of *Untouchable*. Bhikhu comes in the category of leather-worker, a nimble crusader. He is a leather-worker by profession not by birth, he affirms with emphasis. He is an honest labourer engaged with untouchable in an intentional performance of constructing a road, which would fasten together the village with the town. Anand deals with various systems of society to present inhumanity of the upper class on the lower class.

The elements of class differentiation are discernible in the next novel, *Coolie*. Munoo, the hero of *Coolie*, likewise, is the prey of an adverse society. He is ill-treated by his uncle, Daya Ram, and aunt, Gujri, in Bilaspur. They are responsible for his later sufferings. Munoo changes his position from village to town, from town to city and then to Shimla. Munoo's observation in Bombay and Daulatpur brings into prominence his furious strife for survival. He bears the disagreeable smell, chill, glutinous perspiration, manure, dust and heat. Munoo is perishable and brittle lad in an opposed world. The cotton factories in Bombay where the lad has to labour explains to him the abundant vitality of the hardened mandate. He moves easily into a more entangled and circuitous world. He substitutes the workers' community and bears the diabolical calamities of helpless workers who are morbidly believers of destiny. Munoo receives more opposition in Sham Nagar than in Bilaspur. Bibi Uttam Kaur tortures Munoo both physically and mentally. She is adverse towards him

Vay, you eater of your masters! Vay, you, shameless brute!
You pig! You dog! The storm burst on his head as, hearing no response to her call, she appeared at the door, saw him and unable to bear the sight, withdrew. Vey, you shameless,

shameless, vulgar, stupid hill boy! May the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you die! What have you done! Why didn't you ask me where to go? May you fade away! May you burn!(17)

What is the fault of Munoo? Why is she abusing Munoo? It has to be changed. Whenever Munoo gets time from his work, he always, thinks fondly about his fortunate life in Bilaspur. In spite of all abuses, heaped on him, he ponders on the prominent factors of his miserable life and the reasons that have brought him to this hard-hearted dwelling place. Munoo is acutely aware of his present condition. He is able to distinguish between the rich and the poor, caste and class. Munoo says

Caste did not matter, I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, a Varna, a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial because he is poor. No, caste does not matter.(55-56)

These thoughts are Anand's getting expressed through Munoo. Anand as a novelist wants to maintain equilibrium in this rootless social community.

Munoo is representing the pangs and the sufferings of the millions of young coolies of the country. Coolie is the novel of misery of the entire poor Indian community. Munoo, in Daulatpur, discovers that it is a miserable place for the labourers. The exploitation of Indian proletariat by the British Imperialist was perceived by Munoo at Cotton Mill in Bombay. In the novel *Coolie*, Anand highlights the demands of the oppressed workers rather than dealing with literary problems

We are human beings and not soulless machine.

The crowd recited after him;'

We want the right to work without having to pay bribes;

We want clean houses to live in;'

We want schools for our children and crèches for our babies;

We want to be skilled workers;'

We want to be saved from the clutches of the money lenders;'

We want a good wage and no more subsistence allowed if we must go on short work;

We want shorter hours;’

We want security so that the foreman cannot dismiss us suddenly;’

We want our organizations to be recognized by law. (233-234)

These sharp lines are the true picture of class system in unsusceptible society. Even in such a state, he is trying to swim in the sea of existence against all odds. The novel ends with Munoo’s death. The orphan boy suffered from being born in a poor family.

Coming to the next novel, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand makes an attack on the barbaric treatment meted out to its hero. In this connection M.K. Naik in his Mulk Raj Anand defines

In the second chronicle of Coolie - life *Two leaves and a Bud* - the locale shifts to the tea-plantation of Assam, and the adolescent protagonist in *Coolie* is replaced by a landless peasant family from a Punjab village. (Naik 46)

Two Leaves and a Bud is the story of exploitation, Gangu’s exploitation had already started and he was unfamiliar with this. The simpleton was cheated by Buta Sardar and he is unable to comprehend Buta’s cunning thoughts. In a tea-plantation once a coolie comes, he gets trapped because the masters of the tea-plantation and their flatterers always keeps sight on the workers. Life becomes hell and coolies have to live like prisoners in jail like tea-plantations. Craft Cooke and Reggie Hunt are the true representatives of British thoughts. They believe that coolie is only a thing, a machine with no voice, and no rights. It is entrenched in their minds that whites are superior to non-whites and this has been well observed by De la Havre in this novel. Gangu and Sajani both are suffering from fever, first Gangu and then Sajani. Death approaches slowly unknown to Gangu and Sajani. Sajani dies because of poverty. The tea-plantation doctor has been appointed for the coolies because it is the Britishers’ ideology that a doctor must under all circumstances be available

because coolies work hard from morning to late evening in the plantation. After the demise of Sajani, Gangu is alone with his two children. He has to face the exploitation of his British masters. On the one hand, Anand is portraying the splendid dissipation of white manager, leading a licentious life, indulging in merry-making. On the other hand, Anand shows the real miserable, painful and pathetic condition of coolies, who are unable to procure even dry bread to feed their families because all their meager earnings are spent paying debts. The meager remainder is spent in buying essential commodities so they fail to save even a penny for saving day. In the conversation of British women and the rustic women workers there is not much difference except in the status and language. Typical women behaviour is to be seen in both categories. Anyway, the white women are conscious of making the boundary line between the coolies and masters.

Reggie Hunt falls in the category of licentious Britishers. He always is in the lookout for women working in his plantation. He casts his evil eye on Leila from the moment she came in his plantation with her father Gangu, her mother Sajani and her brother Buddhu. When Leila was plucking the leaves in the plantation, she was repeating again and again. 'Two Leaves and a Bud, Two Leaves and a Bud'. At that moment Reggie Hunt, finding her alone, tried to seduce her as it was the perfect time for him to cajole her

Reggie could not control the giddy heat that swirled desperately in the length of his body and hovered like the perfumed spell of drunkenness on the incline of his stare. He stepped up to her and tried to put his arm around her waist once more.(272)

Anand's characters are helpless in front of the faulty system of society and adverse posture of social community. They struggle against the cruel destiny of life that is why they accept all tortures of the people of upper class.

In the next novel, the faulty system dominates the destiny of Nur, the hero of *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts*, who is representing the futile educated group. He turns out to be failure. Anand, himself was the prey of this evil system of

education. Nur is acutely aware of the fact that it is the faulty educational system, which is responsible for his unemployment. Hence he is frustrated and perturbed

He stirred his throat and half-opening his eyes, spat into the spittoon. He closed his eyes, afraid to see the dark-red white flame trailing down from his mouth. He fell back exhausted.(21)

Anand assails the social disapprobation and unreasonable prepossession of social community. He is an unremitting mouthpiece of human excellence. By means of his novels he has investigated to pinpoint those interdependent and frugal grounds that are distinguished enclosures in the footway of sympathy and human grandeur. Anand recognized, perceived, ascertained completely and intimately the prolonged pain of the soul of the rustic folk lamenting beneath degraded indigence, distress, incessant indignation of Britishers and the landlords, the money bestower, the religious ministers. It is no matter of surprise that the protagonists of his novels are underprivileged and untouchable, the scavenger, the plantation coolie and the farmers. Anand specifies the problems of man's invincible necessity he does not dissolve them, as did the ancient epic and poetic recitals.

India is a democratic country but it is a matter of great concern that the Indian society is separated into two classes - the rich and the poor. *Coolie* (1936) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) show the lower and upper class - there is no middle class. If it would be, there might be some connection between the lower and the upper class. These two novels reveal the condition of India before Independence and even today's condition. In both, we find Indian and British characters money plays an important role in demarcating between the upper class and the lower class. Munoo, the protagonist of *Coolie* and Gangu, the hero of *Two Leaves and a Bud*, both are Kshatriya by caste but they belong to the poor strata. Here we can grasp the hypocrisy of untouchability. In the very first novel *Untouchable*, the Pundits, Purohiths and other caste Hindus were claiming the superiority of their high caste but here both Munoo and Gangu fail to protect their respective place in society. The class is dominating the caste system, class system is universal, present everywhere in different forms.

Anand himself accepted this in his autobiographical essay, "Sources of Protest in My Novels"

I noticed that among my playmates were boys and girls who were considered superior if they were the children of parents in big houses, and inferiors if they were the children of parents in small shabby hutments. Our parents asked us to have a bath after playing with untouchable children from the hutments, because we may have touched them. I early realised that since we were of the Kshatriya caste, we were "superior", with Brahmins above us, and Vaishya shopkeepers slightly inferior to us, and all outcastes far, far below us, forever branded from birth by Varna ashram the Hindu caste order! The cruelty of this God-ordained system came home to me when Bhakha, a sweeper boy, brought me home bruised in head by an accidental stone, and my mother scolded him for carrying me and touching me. She bathed me even though I was bleeding. This little accident was to remain in my conscious-unconscious, and became a passion for justice against the age old fixtures of non-human discrimination against untouchables. This passion became the protest implicit in my first published novel, *Untouchable*. It was turned down by nineteen publishers before E.M. Forster wrote a preface. Since then it has been published in many languages of the world, and as a penguin classic it has also been dramatized in London and Delhi and called a 'prototype of the protest novel in the newly freed world, now emergent from the dead habits, supposedly ordained by the supreme God. The opposition between the "superior" and "inferior" had been obsessively in me long before I read Marx. (22)

In *Untouchable*, the early pages reveal the novelist's desire to draw the reader's attention to two things - first the sordid living conditions of the scavengers; and record the second the undying spirit and never say-die attitude of the

untouchables, Bhakha who is bestowed with some uncommon human efficacies namely genuineness, fitness and earnest necessity for life: a provocation to increase above his rank, a desire lurking as a undercurrent in his unconscious mind.

Anand has dealt not only a common plain narrator's voice when he delineates common things, he describes in plain language. But when he uses an emotional sequence, he records in figurative language. He takes assist of some effective symbols and images.

Undoubtedly, Anand's purpose in *Untouchable* is ethical. He himself accepts it in the following words:

The essential function of art is moral. Not aesthetic, not decorative, not pass-time and recreation.(15)

Prompted instinctively by this thought Anand the abnegator projects multifaceted reality which revolves around the society, tensions and animosities of the struggling communities. It is this factor which excites his profound creative incitement and finally leads to the creation of the novelist.

Anand, in his novels, attacking social snobbery and prejudice, urges for a larger outlook, more tolerance more intimate and benevolent understanding and more self-sacrifice. (Ansani 20)

A cursory reading of his fiction will acquaint the reader with what M.K. Naik perceives about Anand

Anand has exposed social evil in its myriad manifestations and has evocatively presented different layer's of human experience in his fiction. (Naik 25)

Likewise, Anand's coolie preposterously extends no specific accusation of individuals: the nefarious accusation is in opposition to society as a whole – a community that generates bias and inhumanity:

Anand decided that he would humanize the coolie - as in Bhakha he humanized the untouchable – and give him feelings,

a mind, a heart, a soul, and raise his dignity as a trembling piece of flesh and blood, worthy of commemoration in serious literature.(Iyengar 340)

Anand's intention was to pinpoint that Murnoo's destiny was not unavoidable and this sensibility is mirrored transparently in the following extract from K. Venkata Reddy's *The Major Indian Novelists*

Anand invests Munoo with sociological significance by making him represent various phases of proletarian existence in specific settings in the course of the narrative thereby organizing the action in a structurally meaningful way. (Reddy 7-8)

Likewise, *Two Leaves and a Bud* successfully revealed Anand's sympathy for the down-trodden. The harassed and disappointed Indian not only became the prey of rapacity and animosity of the Britishers but also the incursion and blatant violation of Capitalism, Industrialism and Racism and it had certainly fanned the fumes in his heart

Two Leaves and a Bud (1937), deals with the same theme of exploitation of the underprivileged with far greater concentration. (Sharma 30)

The Road averred the Gandhian fidelity in the grandeur of work and management of all labours as adoration; consider such a seminal incident as the appearance of Gandhi on the Indian picture when a whole people were in the clutch of fear and when the powerful thing to do was to pass a resolution praying the British rules for the gift of home-rule.

It is Anand's aim to unfold that the down-trodden belonging to the lowest social strata is basically a member of mankind who suffers from having to exhibit alienated work overstrained upon him by caste society and it leads him to a quest for intellectual credentials.

It is only in once of the more recent novels that a more comprehensive treatment of this theme can be noticed, and

though its artistic execution may not be altogether successful, the meaning labour is given in. *The Road* indicated that Anand has achieved an even deeper insight into its complexity. (Nagarajan 27)

Anand emitted venom against the injustices of slavery, poverty, caste, religion and ecclesiastical institutions in India.

Without mincing words, he tellingly substantiates the contemporary position through an evaluation of the plight of women and in this regard, *The Old Woman and the Cow* exhibits a realistic portrait of Gauri's distress. She has been excommunicated and ostracized by the male-oriented society, but fights back

In creating Gauri, Anand goes back to ancient myth of Sita who has served an ideal of Indian woman hood. (Gautam 35)

Likewise, *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts* is an artistic estimation and commentary on the everlasting physical pain and struggle of the present non-availability of employment and unemployed youth of our nation

Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts(1967) is a very short but significant novel. The rare talent of a brilliant story-teller is here combined with that of a writer of deep insight and intense feeling. (Reddy 18-29)

Social injustices are rooted in the Indian soil, only a complete and systematized revolution can reform the prevailing conditions. Anand's novels end with tragedy. Only Bhakha achieves success, though marginally, Bhikhu, Gangu, Munoo and Nur all face death. Though all these novels are full of despondency having tragic endings, they are enveloped by hope not despair. Anand's aim was to infuse an optimistic note. He does not fail in it.

In forming his character, Anand has dealt with sociological and psychological problems. Without beating around the bush, he presents each rotten system of society without the slight hesitation. Presentation alone was not his forte; he offers simple solution, Anand's purpose as a novelist is to transform the wrong

thinking of readers. Each novel has a message for the readers. While some of his novels lay stress on social aspect, others advocate reforms.

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