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GANDHI AND UNTOUCHABLES IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S "UNTOUCHABLE"



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Abs tract:-This paper aims at exploring Gandhi's attitude to untouchables through the narrative of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. As literary work and historical document interrogate and correlate each other in order to decipher History, I juxtapose B. R. Ambedkar's "what congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables" as a historical document and Anand's *Untouchable* as a literary work in order to interrogate and correlate each other.

Keyw ords:Untouchables & Gandhian Philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand (1895-2004) in his novels gives us a realistic picture of contemporary society. In most of his novels, he deals with inhuman exploitation of downtrodden. The novel *Untouchable* (1935) covers the span from 1930 to 1940 when poverty, caste prejudices and inhuman exploitation of the masses were predominant in society. It was Gandhi who declared a direct war against the untouchability but his attitude to untouchables was not beyond question. B. R. Ambedkar's "what Congress & Gandhi have done to Untouchables" is a severe critique of Gandhi's attitude to untouchables and his philosophical doctrine based on Hinduism. Now, in my paper I correlate the literary text (*Untouchable*) and historical text ("what Congress & Gandhi have done to Untouchables") in order to decipher historical truth.

DISCUSSION

Inhuman exploitation of the untouchables by the higher section of the society was the main theme of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. This novel describes a single day in the life of the protagonist, Bakha who is a scavenger boy. Being a son of a scavenger he is exploited by every section of society. He does not enjoy the freedom of roaming freely. Even he has no right to go to a god or goddess in a temple to express his grief.

While walking through a street he touches unwillingly a high caste Hindu who slaps him in spite of his apology to him. After that when he is roaming near a temple, a Brahmin shouts at him for polluting the temple. While climbing down the steps he finds his sister standing terrified. His sister Sohini tells him that the priest of the temple tries to molest her. When he enrages and tries to protest against it, his sister pacifies him because she knows very well that nobody listens to them. So, there is an organized evil in the form of untouchability engulfs the downtrodden entirely.

Mentally tormented and disgusted with Hutchinson's efforts to convert him into a Christian, Bakha sought mental peace in the ideology and philosophy of

Gandhi who came to meeting in the golbagh where Mahatma said:

"As you all know, while we are asking for freedom from the grip of a foreign nation, we have ourselves, for centuries, trampled underfoot millions of human beings without feeling the slightest remorse of our iniquity. For me the question of these people is moral and religious..." (*Untouchable*: Penguin India, p.136)

But Bakha did not understand all those words uttered by Gandhi. He was confused and restless but soon he was assured when Gandhi said: "I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism." (p.137)

However, the end of Gandhi's speech seemed to have touched the core of Bakha's heart when Gandhi said:

"...Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the untouchables and the protection of the cow..." (p.140)

But Bakha's faith in Gandhian philosophy was soon disturbed by a bookish Marxist Mr. R.N. Bashir, B.A. (Oxon), Barrister-in-Law. He called Gandhi a 'humbug'. As Gandhi once said in his speech "I am an orthodox Hindu and I know the Hindus are not sinful by nature." (p.139), Bashir said, "He is a fool. He is a hypocrite. In one breath he says he wants to abolish untouchability, in the other he asserts that he is an orthodox Hindu..." (p.141)

B. R. Ambedkar in his essay "what Congress & Gandhi have done to Untouchables" also criticizes Gandhism on that point. He writes:

"Gandhism is a paradox. It stands for freedom from foreign domination which means the destruction of the existing political structure of the country. At the same time it seeks to maintain intact a social structure which permits the domination of one class by another on the heredity basis which means a perpetual domination of one class by another. What is the explanation of this paradox? It is a part of strategy by Mr. Gandhi to win the whole hearted support of the Hindus, Orthodox, Unorthodox, to the campaign of Swaraj?..."

Ambedkar in this essay also said:

"The special feature of Gandhism is that its philosophy helps those who have to keep what they have and to prevent those who have not from getting what they have a right to get..."

"The second special feature of Gandhism is to delude people into accepting their misfortunes by presenting them as best of good fortunes." He also gave example to bring out the truth of the statement. In this essay Ambedkar quotes Gandhi who as a president of the untouchables said:

"I do not want to attain Moskha. I do want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings..." Gandhi also said in the same speech: "I love scavenging. In my ashram, an eighteen years old Brahmin lad is doing the scavenger's work in order to teach the Ashram scavenger cleanliness. The lad is no reformer. He was born and bred in orthodoxy. But he felt that his accomplishments were incomplete until he had become a perfect sweeper..."

In Anand's *Untouchable* we get almost same words uttered by Gandhi:

"I was at Nellore on the National Day. I met the Untouchables there, and I prayed as I have done to-day. I do want to attain spiritual deliverance. I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them..." (*Untouchable*: Penguin India, p.138)

In the next paragraph of the novel we also get the same story of an eighteen-year-old Brahmin lad doing a scavenger's work in Gandhi's ashram.

Ambedkar claimed that this was the technique of Gandhism which makes "wrong done appear to the very victims as though they were his privileges."

However, Asifa Zunaidha in her paper "Gramsci & Gandhi : Discovering the Logic of Mass Movement" points out the reason behind the success of Gandhian philosophy. She writes in the paper, "Gandhi was able to connect between his philosophy and intuitive mass collective consciousness or 'common sense' which was the key to success of his philosophy in the Indian Freedom Movement." Asifa describes "Common sense" as "incoherent sense of generally held assumptions and beliefs to any given society..."

However, Bashir was counterattacked by the believer in Gandhian ideology, Iqbal Nath Sarshar, the young poet who edits *Nawan jung* (New Era). The poet said:

"He has his limitations but he is fundamentally sound. He may be wrong in wanting to shut India off from the rest of the world by preaching the revival of the spinning-wheel, because, as things are, that can't be done. But even in that regard he is right. For it is not India's fault that it is poor; it is the world's fault that the world is rich!..." (*Untouchable*: Penguin India, p.142)

Although the young poet did not give any strong and clear reasons for his supporting Gandhian Ideology and explained Gandhian ideology with the help of complex philosophical doctrines, his mention of 'flush system' gave a new ray of hope to the downtrodden, Bakha. The young poet said that with the help of the 'flush system' "sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the

dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and careless society." (p.146) And the novel ends with this new hope for the untouchables. In *The Indian novel With a Social Purpose* edited by K.V. Reddy and P.P.Reddy, I get an important comment in this respect:

"Anand, in *Untouchable* criticizes Gandhi's approach and suggests the introduction of flush system as the only solution to the problem of untouchability. Though Anand advocates Gandhian approach to untouchability as one of the possible ways of eradicating the practice of untouchability, he does not endorse it."

CONCLUSION

Andrew M. Stracuzzi in his paper "The Inedible problem: Mulk Raj Anand & the plight of Untouchability" claims that "the representation of both Gandhi and the poet proves confusing alternatives for Bakha" because on the one hand Gandhi said that "the plight of untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism" and on the other he articulates it is 'satanic' to assume everyone in Hinduism is polluted. Then he narrated the story of the Brahmin lad in his ashram. Through this story he wanted to give untouchables a message because it is assumed that the untouchables are incapable of doing his work (i.e. menial work) well. Andrew also writes in this paper, "...Further it implies and confirms an hierarchy of power between the untouchable and other high caste Hindus because it suggests that they must be taught to be untouchables, which only perpetuates the cycle of oppression..."

In fact, both Ambedkar and Gandhi concerned about the problem of Untouchability but their approach was different. Sarat Chandra Bibhar in his paper "Approach to Human Dignity: Ambedkar vs. Gandhi" points out three different approaches of Gandhi and Ambedkar to the untouchables.

First, Ambedkar as a constitutional expert aims at establishing human dignity for the untouchables through political process by giving them political rights, whereas Gandhi's social reforms for Harijan were based on duties rather than on rights.

Secondly, whereas Ambedkar propounded economic well being for the benefit of the untouchables, Gandhi propounded spiritual well being for their dignified life.

Thirdly, while Gandhi valued Hinduism a lot which believed Varnasramadharm, Ambedkar gave emphasis on the humanity and human dignity instead of religion.

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