

The Power of Discourse in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract: This paper studies the discourse embodied in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* (1935) which presents a scathing criticism of the caste system as prevalent in the upper caste Hindu society through the events of a particular day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy and an untouchable. This will attempt to study the power of the discourse in the context of this novel that reduces the political forces, economic forces, ideological control and social control to aspects of signifying processes. The paper explores the power of the discourse embodied in the literary text through its didactic message to bring about changes in the status of the untouchables in the Hindu society by offering a logical solution of introducing new technologies like flush toilets which would lead to the eradication of social stigma related to their profession of cleaning toilets. The research paper will show that all knowledge is an expression of the 'Will to Power' and there is no absolute truth or objective knowledge in the light of this text. It will exhibit that a particular piece of philosophy or scientific theory is 'true' if it fits the description of truth as laid down by the intellectual or the political authorities of the day, by the members of the ruling elite or by the prevailing ideologues of knowledge. The paper will also attempt to elucidate the historical dimension of discursive change in the light of the above-mentioned text.

Keywords: Discourse, power, political forces, economic forces, ideological control and social control, Mulk Raj Anand.

In the field of Humanities, "discourse describes a formal way of thinking that can be expressed through language and is also a social boundary that defines the statements that can be said about a topic" (Discourse). The novel *Untouchable* (1935) by Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) espouses the social issue of untouchability, presents a scathing criticism associated with the scourge of caste system in the Hindu society, calls for its eradication from it through technology and offers a panacea in the form of flush toilets to liberate the untouchables not only from the social stigma related to their profession but also from the shackles of the caste-system. The novel is a petrifying exposé of the day-to-day life of Bakha who is an untouchable, a toilet-cleaner by profession and a representative of the lowest caste. This one day in the life of Bakha is replete with tragedies which are a result of the social discrimination practised in the upper caste Hindu society towards the untouchables. If we examine the living condition of Bakha and the various oppressive and tragic incidents encountered by Bakha in one day of his life we get a dehumanized and thwarted picture of the untouchables. Bakha lives in the dirty, filthy outcastes' colony at the outskirts of the city Bulashah. He begins his day with abuses from his father Lakha. He has to clean the toilets for the high caste Hindus. Bakha's sister Sohini has to wait longer to

draw water from the well of the upper caste Hindus. Pundit Kali Nath gives Sohini water from the well out of turn but asks her to come and clean the courtyard of his house in the precincts of the temple on a daily basis with the dishonourable intention of violating her modesty. Bakha aspired for school education but sooner or later he becomes aware that he is not entitled to be educated as he is the son of a sweeper and his entry in a school may pollute the children of the caste Hindus who study there. The betel-leaf-seller throws the 'Red-Lamp' cigarettes that Bakha buys rather than handing it over to him. The jalebis that Bakha buys paying four annas are thrown to him by the confectioner at the Bengali sweetmeat-seller's shop rather than handed over to him in order to avoid defilement by touch. His accidental collision with a Hindu merchant, his caste superior, ensues humiliation in the form of a slap from the caste Hindu. Bakha is expected to clean the temple courtyard but is not allowed to enter the temple for the risk of polluting the holy place beyond purification and when he dares to do so he is chased out of the temple. Bakha feels oppressed by all these humiliating experiences and wants to rebel against tradition and the shackles of the caste-ridden society. He searches for salvation that will help him overcome the disastrous effect of the caste-system. In despair, he meets Colonel Hutchinson who is a priest from the church and wants him to convert to Christianity after confessing his sins. But his wife shouts at him for bringing an untouchable to her house and as a result Bakha runs away from the church. He then goes to Golbagh to listen to Gandhi's speech and feels better when Gandhi expresses his wish of being reborn as an untouchable, calls the untouchables 'Harijans' as well as cleaners of the Hindu religion and asks them to stop accepting food for the work that they do.

Gandhi's speech does not offer a solution to Bakha's problem; he cannot escape from the profession of cleaning toilets, sweeping streets or carrying dung which is the main source of the social stigma to which people of his caste are subjected. Finally, he finds a solution to his problem through the conversation between Iqbal Nath Sarshar, a modernist poet, and B.N. Bashir, a lawyer, in the idea of introducing flush toilets, water closets and main-drainage throughout India which will emancipate the untouchables from the social stigma of their profession, thereby liberating them from untouchability. This novel is a discourse that conveys a strong, social message and embodies the idea of ending the excesses of the caste-system, spreading awareness about dignity of labour and restoring respectability to the scavengers. The novel advocates the use of technology, that is, introduction of flush toilets to liberate the untouchables and to create an egalitarian society with social mobility even for the lowest of the low. This abstract construct assigns meaning to the various incidents happening in the life of Bakha and other characters in the novel which are all semiotic signs that combine to form sequences in order to communicate a specific and repeatable message, that is, caste-system is a malaise of the Hindu society and it should be eradicated to establish an egalitarian society with equal opportunities for one and all (*Untouchable* 1-148).

The Constructionist Theory of Meaning and Representation proposes an idea that physical things and actions exist but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within a discourse. On the other hand, Michel Foucault argues that since we can only have knowledge of

things if they have a meaning it is through the discourse not through the things which produces meaning (Hall 73). The power of the discourse in the context of this text, *Untouchable*, reduces the political forces, economic forces, ideological control and social control to aspects of signifying processes. The writing of the novel by Mulk Raj Anand took place in the pre-independence India and was a result of a family tragedy that had been triggered by the excesses of the caste system. The author's aunt had committed suicide after being ostracized by her family for having shared a meal with a Muslim woman. The text was written with the purpose of generating awareness among the readers of the text, rendering a stark portrayal regarding the stringent caste-system and class-system existing in the Indian society of the times. The politics of the text is aimed towards bringing about a change in the Indian society by eradicating the social stigma associated with the untouchables as a result of their profession. Thus, the text projects a technological solution in the form of flush toilets as a means of liberating the untouchables from their misery. Moreover, this solution is supposed to have ramifications in the real world in terms of draconian laws and policies that would help in restoring the rights of the untouchables to them.

The discourse that is embodied in this text is not only against the caste-system with its excesses or about the rigid class system prevalent in the Indian or more specifically Hindu society but also about their economic ramifications and restricted social mobility for the downtrodden and the oppressed. Bakha is never allowed to educate himself on the pretext that if he goes to a school the caste Hindus will never send their children to the same school for fear of defilement. Since education is the basis of economic advancement and social mobility, Bakha is deprived of an education.

The text through the power of its discourse brings about ideological control and social control in the context of Indian culture and society. The discourse that opposes oppression resulting from caste-system and class-system brings about ideological control by introducing the idea of dignity of labour, by foregrounding the identity of the marginalised and the dispossessed male subaltern subject as a subject with agency and voicing the concern regarding the manifold oppression of a marginalised female subject in terms of caste, class and gender in the Indian cultural set-up. It brings about social control by portraying caste-system and class-system as an evil prevalent in the society that should be eradicated thereby establishing an egalitarian society. The injustices that are done on Bakha as a result of the lopsided caste-system and class-system such as the living condition of Bakha on the outskirts of Bulashah, the back breaking poverty of Bakha despite the essential service that he renders to the society by cleaning toilets and latrines, Bakha's aspiration to lead the comfortable life of an Englishman that can go as far as keeping an article of furniture of European design, that is, a broken cane chair, the caste Hindus avoiding being touched by him, he being deprived from getting himself educated and he not being allowed to enter the temple for praying are grave offences which help in exposing the plight of the untouchables. This in turn helps to turn the tide against the excesses of the caste-system and the class-system thereby making the need for eradication of the existing caste-system and class-

system imperative. Lakha, Bakha's father, serves as a foil to Bakha because despite bearing the brunt of social discrimination in the society on account of untouchability he has accepted it and unlike Bakha has never searched for a solution to it. Thus, the ideology proposes freedom from such shackles of the caste and the class by introduction of flush toilets thereby proposing a change in the traditional ideology and the traditional society leading to its makeover.

The novel proposes that all knowledge is an expression of the 'Will to Power' as Bakha's knowledge regarding the possibility of introducing flush toilets gives him a new lease of life and it brings to him a promise of freedom from a shackled and dark existence as an untouchable. This new technology can release him from the abominable profession that has a social stigma associated with it. The inception of flush toilets makes him feel powerful as it gives him the hope of a better life with a respectable identity.

Foucault states that there is no absolute truth or objective knowledge (Seldan 71). The novel projects that there is no absolute truth or objective knowledge as Lakha has borne the brunt of the same oppression of the caste-system and the class-system as Bakha, which becomes evident in his narration of an episode from his life through a flashback technique. It tells us about Lakha's predicament to get medicines from Hakim Bhagwan Das for his child Bakha when he was very ill and had high temperature. He initially tries to reach Hakim Bhagwan Das through a babu but he refuses Lakha and insults him by saying that he does not want to take a bath again for having been defiled by an untouchable. He tries reaching the Hakim through other people who were visiting the Hakim's dispensary but no one pays heed to him. He keeps waiting near the heap of rubbish that he had collected and feels bitter about the fact that he cannot purchase medicines for his son although he is ready to spend his hard earned money. He is concerned about his son's plight and starts praying to God. He goes back home where his wife who is tending to his sick son who is on his death bed. He rushes back to the Hakim's house, falls on the Hakim's feet and begs him to attend to his son. The Hakim insults him by calling him a 'Bhangi' and a 'Chandal' (Anand 73) as he has been defiled by Lakha's touch. Lakha servilely apologizes to the Hakim and requests him again to attend to his son. The Hakim relents and starts writing a prescription. At that point of time Bakha's uncle comes shouting that Bakha is passing out. Lakha rushes home to his son and is soon followed by Hakimji who attends to Bakha and saves his life (Anand 71-74). Lakha narrates the incident and mentions that actually the caste Hindus are kind people but religion prevents them from touching the untouchables, thereby exhibiting his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of the laws of fate. Thus, Lakha unlike Bakha seems to have accepted the oppression and discrimination practised in the Indian society as a result of the flawed caste-system and the rigid class-system. It proves that the truth of Bakha is to rebel against the excesses of the caste-system and the class-system and to search for a solution to encounter those excesses whereas the truth of Lakha is a docile acceptance of the very same excesses.

For Bakha, who belongs to the next generation, this is not acceptable. He rebels against the excesses of the caste-system and the class-system and looks for a solution to encounter those

excesses which Lakha had accepted. So the system and dogma of untouchability is not a fixed structure. Lakha could not challenge it but Bakha could.

As per Foucault a new discourse or episteme will arise at a later historical moment substituting the existing one and opening up a new discursive formation and producing new discourses with the power and authority as well as truth to regulate social practices in new ways (Hall 74). The novel exhibits that a particular piece of philosophy or scientific theory is 'true' if it fits the description of truth laid down by the intellectual or the political authorities of the day, by the members of the ruling elite or by the prevailing ideologues of knowledge. Lakha's docile acceptance of the diktats of the caste-system is a result of the socio-religious conditioning that he has undergone as religion too at that time advocated strict adherence to the diktats of the caste-system whereas Bakha's search for a solution regarding the excesses of the caste-system is a result of the progressive and the modernist wave related to technological advancement that sweeps through the land. Moreover, Lakha's belief in his inferiority is based on the description of truth as laid down by religion and endorsed by it whereas Bakha's belief in the technological solution and the superiority of his identity is based on the description of truth as laid down by the intellectual or the political authorities of the day and endorsed by them, such as the poet-cum-journalist Iqbal Nath Sarashar and Mahatma Gandhi. This example also elucidates the historical dimension of discursive change that is manifested through Bakha's social and technological conditioning which is in stark opposition to Lakha's socio-religious conditioning.

The novel through its discourse has played an iconic role in consciousness-raising regarding the miserable plight of the untouchables in pre-independence India which was the result of the injustices that were inflicted on them. It highlights the need to redress their grievances and to end their oppression. With time there were many policy changes in post independence India. Many draconian laws were revised and a provision in Indian Constitution was made to end discrimination against the untouchables, to restore their rights, give them a new identity, and proper representation in the mainstream Indian society by providing them adequate opportunities related to education and employment so that social mobility is possible for them. But still many more measures are to be adopted to ameliorate their condition. The text's production is thus symptomatic of the time when India was nearing her independence with the aspiration of becoming a Nation State that would believe in Equality and access and development for all.

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