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Nihilism in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*

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Abstract

Untouchable (1935) depicts the pain of its protagonist, Bakha in a single day incident. Bakha is born to an untouchable, who are known for their manual scavenging work. Set in Aristotelian model of ideal drama, the plot follows unities. Bakha is son Lakha who is happy to be called as *jemadar* or manual scavenger (Anand 4). Most of the story revolves around the problems Bakha faces. Bakha is not the product of old generation but is rather rational and does not accept his present situation. The story unfolds and we see numerous incidents in which Bakha is maltreated. Many a times despair and depression grips his mind, but his resilient spirit results in the change of attitude and eventually he tries to explore the new arena, ironically again to get disheartened. The depiction of Bakha, elaborates the exploitative practices that caste Hindu poses, in which the untouchable acquire lowest position in the society. Bakha tries to find solution of his problems in religion but all in vain. The only reason he works for "to him work was a sort of intoxication which gave him a glowing health and plenty of easy sleep" (10).

Keywords- *Nihilism, Existentialism, Humanity, Modernity*

Nihilism is a belief that all political and religious organizations are bad and unwanted or a system of thought that says that there are no principles or beliefs that have any meaning or

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can be true” (“nihilism”) Anand and Ananthamurthy are unable to find harmony in the existence of religion and different sects and their works depict the rejection of the established convention that has been directing the human actions from time immemorial. Religious institutions according to them are the cause of social disintegration that leads to emergence of meaningless society around us. The advocates of nihilist philosophy reject the established institutions and other such aspects that are meaningful in life.

The term is also associated with word, “Anomie” is a "condition in which society provides little moral guidance to individuals" (MacIonis). It is the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and the community (“Nihilism”). The institutions whether it is religious or political institutions, are basically formed and are guided by certain principles and if disbelief sets in the mind of then it tries to break the norms of the religion, morality and other established conventions.

The upbringing of these thoughts can be traced to the similar influence these writers experiences. Educated in western countries, influence of the English political and religious movements influenced their minds and we see that, Anand in London “the Hindu myth of evolution from fish to tortoise, boar, lion peasant and God king seemed to him absurd” (Gautam 21). In a similar situation we find Ananthamurthy underwent changes and transformation that was set in his family, flourished in University of Birmingham, where he received his doctorate in English. Nihilism is not the single word concept but there are incorporates in it the concept of modernity and rejection of theism and it combines both of the essentially nihilistic attitude.

We find similar ideas are reflected in the works of Mulk Raj Anand and U. R. Ananthamurthy. *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*¹ was originally published in Kannada in 1965. *Samskara* was responsible for creating much problem when it was published. Ananthamurthy was himself a Brahmin yet he focused his writing on exposing the dogmas of Hindu religion. He goes further and eventually, we see that his characters are not only iconoclasts but also in the state of perpetual conflict. Caste again remains at the centre of his attack yet in so he also attacks the other institutions of religion.

The character in the novels like that of Bakha in *Untouchable* and Naranappa in *Samskara* are in the revolt to their society. While Bakha’s attitude is confined to questioning of the established institutions, Naranappa outrightly rejects the Hindu institution and openly defies the Brahmanical conventions. Bakha’s iconoclastic attitude can be felt in the way he questions the conventions of all the religion and acts as a mouth piece for the social critique of all the religions, whether it is Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism. The onset of Victorian disillusionment and questioning attitude finds an expression in the utterance of Bakha where he speculates in the manner Muslims offers their prayers to a sort of exercise as, “I wonder what they say in their prayers? Why do they sit, stand, bend and kneel as if they

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were doing exercises?” (Anand11). In another criticism he expresses his view regarding the pathetic conditions of cows, which is religiously important for the religious for Hindus questioningly he puts, “How queer, the Hindus don’t feed their cows² although they call the cow ‘mother!’” (45).

The nihilistic attitude is not the outcome of rejection of dogmatism in a particular religion. But religion itself is at the target of nihilist philosophers. The curiosity of Bakha attracts him to the temple, the chants, prayers and songs fill him with deep interest. Though he is sent to clean the courtyard of temple “pertinacity of his sweeper’s instinct, surveyed the dropping and the flowers, the heap of leaves and dust which he had come to clear” (48). In the end temple becomes the instrument of oppression as the priest, Pandit Kali Nath who tries to molest Sohini, Bakha’s sister finds rescue on the pretext on this institution. The primary purpose of the religious institution to comfort people gets suddenly lost, nothing remains the “twelve-headed and ten-armed gods”³ (48) which were the cause of Bakha’s fear since his childhood seemed “vast and fearful and oppressive” (55). The individual in a sense is trapped between himself and the conventions of society and though strong desire erupts in the mind of Bakha to avenge the wrong done to his sister yet he is unable to reach.

The reaction of Naranappa, a prominent character in the work if U. R. Ananthamurthy, *Samskara* also poses a similar question and he deliberately goes on to dismantle the established convention by the Hindu religion. Naranappa is threat to Brahmins of Durvasapura, he openly challenges the agrahara⁴ Brahmins pain of which can be expressed by them as “he comes to the river in full view of all the Brahmins and takes the holy stone that we’ve worshipped for generations and throws it in the water and spits after it!” (Ananthamurthy 8). He does not stop here but rather to defy the rules of Brahmins and Muslims over and eat and drink forbidden things in the wide open front yard.” Naranappa is not cowed by the threats and he eventually pays no heed to the conventions established by the Hindu tenets in authors own words, Naranappa “threw away the worship-stone for her, ate taboo meat and drank taboo liquor” (9).

Another important character is Praneshacharya who is protagonist of the novel and remains at the central point of all the issues. Praneshacharya “the great ascetic, ‘Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning’” is known for his pious life and is important to people of Durvasapura. Not only to this on religious occasions like that of birth-anniversary of Lord Rama, people from the neighbouring agraharas come to hear the holy tales by Praneshacharya, the Acharya. The Acharya is known to nurture his invalid wife. His religious position gives him indomitable position in the sphere of religion. In the matter of religion his words are final and to common folks no authority is above him. The calm and quiet life undergoes a when Praneshacharya is faced with tumultuous condition is which after the death of Naranappa, he is left in the state of confusion.

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Regarding the course of action that needs to be taken in terms of his funeral he remains in perplexed state and is eventually turns towards religious books and various discussion are then followed regarding the funeral rites of heretic person, Naranappa who openly defies all the convention of religion and gets engaged in unholy activities, Naranappa defied everything, “even God” (06).

In the entire course of action Praneshacharya remains in the state of dilemma regarding the ordeals that are given in the religious text and solution that he needed to find for the funeral of Naranappa. Eventually he leaves “desperately for the god’s favour” (53). He pleads to god for some action that he needs to take against his dilemma regarding Naranappa, ‘If it shouldn’t be done, give me a sign, at least the flower on the left please” (54).

Modernist images of decay have been used in the representation of the surrounding in which Bakha lives. The entire scenario is filled with dirt and degenerative condition is evident in the novel. The images continue the order and the depiction of modern man trapped in awful situation are depicted. “A stray dog, thin, flea-bitten and diseased, was relieving itself. Another which was all bones, was licking at some decaying food on a refuse-heap that lay blocking the drain” (Anand 59). In the end of the novel, where Colonel tries to convince Bakha regarding Christianity, we see that ironically Colonel’s wife who is herself a Christian fails to identify Bakha as human being and rather she also acquires a detestable and loathsome attitude towards Bakha, an untouchable.

The onset of doubt that we find in the Victorian Literature in the Western countries, changed into completely shattering of faith in the Modernist Era and we find that, religion as an institution hardly finds a valid representation in the work of Modernist literature. In the Victorian literature we find a Victorian compromise but that element of faith and strand of hope becomes blurred in the Modernist literature. It is in the same context we see that Bakha is unable to find rescue in the religion and rather remains disillusioned with the different religion. The intention of Anand is to see the complications and challenges religion creates and that is responsible for the degradation in the situation of human being. The only difference that can be found in Age of Modernist is that it was an onset owing to the World Wars, while the situation of Bakha and people like him remains unchanged because of the caste system that prevailed in the Indian society for centuries.

Bakha in the similar sense tries to bring reconciliation between the divergent forces he sees in his life, reconciliation between his English clothes and his situation as a sweeper. The absurd situation he is forced to can be best put in author’s own word:

That trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers, the weakness, of the down-trodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indigent, suddenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog, suddenly

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illuminated by the prospect of fulfilment of a secret and long cherished desire. He saluted his benefactor and bent down to his work again. (9)

Bakha tries to find a meaning in his life and tries to make something reasonable out of his situation; Bakha is “baffled” by the different conventions different religions offers and tries to see through things as if he searches for some meaning. In the temple, his entry is juxtaposed to that of “murderer”, who furtively seeks meaning of all the things that are going on inside. “And he was more completely baffled when a man passed by repeating: ‘Om, Om, Shanti Deva.’ Who was Shanti Deva? Was he in the temple?” authors own words give the state of perplexing thoughts Bakha undergoes.

Even when Bhaka confronts Colonel Hutchinson, he is again “baffled” and “bored”; the Colonel tries hard to explain the role of Christ or Yessuh Messih, his suffering, his sacrifice and his pain yet Bakha’s mind is unable to see any clarity in these explanations and wonders on the Christian idea of sin and expiation. He mulls on the thought and idea of sin but “he didn’t like the idea of being called a sinner. He had committed no sin that he could remember” (121)

Bakha’s fruitless search goes from one religion to another, all in vain. Ironically when Bakha speculates about the teachings and character of “Yessuh Messih” and concludes him to be ‘a good man’, ‘if he regards a Brahmin and a Bhangi the same.’” Wife of Colonel Hutchinson appears infuriated and rather less pleased by the association of her husband to the lower strata of society “for she was a mem-sahib, and the frown of a mem-sahib had the strange quality of unknown, uncharted seas of anger behind her” (124). Bakha remains in flabbergasted state and is unable to come to terms of such behaviour, the anguish to Bakha “therefore, the few words which she had uttered carried a dread a hundred times more terrible than the fear inspired by the whole tirade of abuse by the touched man” (124).

Bakha is unable to understand the concept of Original Sin and is unable understand its implication in the contemporary life. The emphasis of Colonel that ‘We were all born sinners’” (120), to this Bakha gets irked for he is unable to understand the implication of the same and he is unable to digest the idea of being called as sinner. The entire concept of Sin and Expiation is rejected by Bakha for he broods “He had committed no sin that he could remember” (121). In the words of author, “As a Hindu he didn’t believe in the Judgement Day.” Ironically, Bakha being an outcaste is not accepted in the folds of Hinduism and even the entry in the temples are denied to him.

Bakha and Praneshacharya are left flabbergasted in the end with no solution at hand. The idea to find answer to the questions posed by life within the conformity of God fails to meet the desire end. Eventually both are left in the state of disgust. The confrontation with worldly institution hardly ends in any meaningful existence. The outcome is disgust.

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1. *Samskara*, is derive out of Sanskrit word which has multilayered meaning; that can range from any rite of ceremony, funeral obsequies, making pure, making sacred. But here it deals with the death rite of reprobate Brahmin Naranappa.
2. Cow, is important to caste Hindu, the animal rich for its utility is revered.
3. “twelve-headed and ten-armed gods”, pointing out the Hindu God, Lord Vishnu who is known for various incarnation.
4. Agrahara, represents a small village in which people of particular caste reside so that purity of caste could be maintained and intermingling be avoided.

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