

Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Thematic Study

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Abstract

An author cannot remain aloof and segregated from the contemporary atmosphere and surroundings. He shares everything that happens around. A writer's views and attitudes are determined by a number of influences which work upon him since childhood till the funeral and Mulk Raj Anand is no exception to it at all. His cultural, social, academic heritage altogether shapes his art and personality as well. Anand's novels better reveal this fact. We see a deep awareness of both the strength and the limitations of the traditional Indian way of life and a rich understanding of the impact of modernity on it. The locale for most of his stories is India. In exposing the limitations of tradition, Anand's mood is in turn ruthless, resentful, ironical and satirical, as the subject and the condition demand. Religious bigotry, hypocrisy and formalism and the deterioration of institutionalized religion into an instrument of exploitation is the chief theme in his works. The novelist, short story writer, essayist, art critic is the most prolific of all the Indian writers in English. He has to his credit sixteen novels, at least five volumes of short stories and numerous non-fictional works. His life and writings testify to his participation and achievement in a variety of fields- fiction, journalism, editorship etc. Nevertheless his most ambitious mode of expression has been fiction. We associate him with the early struggle of the Indian untouchables to win recognition for themselves, with the move towards independence and opposition to the British government in India, with the Bloomsbury generation who first sponsored him and with the early books of literary criticism, which recognized him as the father of modern Indian fiction in English.

Keywords: Contemporary, Social, Academic heritage, Prolific, Journalism, Editorship, Literary criticism, Bloomsbury generation.

Mulk Raj Anand was a distinguished writer, editor, critic, journalist and political activist, famous for his portrayal of the lives of the poorer castes in traditional Indian society. Born in Peshawar, now in Pakistan on 12th December 1905 and died on 28th September 2004 in Pune, India at the age of 98. He has to his credit sixteen novels, at least five volumes of short stories, and many non-fictional works. His life and writings testify to his participation and achievement in a variety of fields- fiction, journalism, editorship etc. Nevertheless his most ambitious mode of expression has been fiction. We associate him with the early struggle of the Indian untouchables to win recognition for themselves, with the move towards independence and resistance to the British government in India, with the Bloomsbury generation who first sponsored him, and with the early books of literacy criticism, which recognized him as the father of modern Indian fiction in English. He was awarded International Peace Prize for promoting peace among the nations through his literary work in 1952. In the same year, he visited China as a member of an Indian delegation. He visited Australia in 1961 and attended Australian Peace Conference in Melbourne. He was also awarded 'Sahitya Academy Award' for his novel *Morning Face* in 1972.

Mulk Raj Anand's life may easily be divided into three periods: the early years in India, 1905-1925, the years abroad, 1925-1945 and the later years in India 1945 to the present day. According to Saros Cowasjee this division is not arbitrarily based on his principal periods of residence, but has the merit of corresponding with his literary career. He maintains that the first period reveals the various strands that go into shaping his mind and the influences that later bear upon his writing. The second period is concerned with Anand's great effort to become a novelist and the success that led him to be rated as the leading Indian novelist. It includes his association with the writers of the thirties and his work with the B.B.C. and also his fight for India's freedom on the one hand and against Fascism, on the other. The third period, which includes his finest literary achievement i.e. *Private Life of an Indian Prince* – is disappointing. In this time his fiction falls short of his earlier achievements. This time is, however, notable for Anand's headlong plunge into the social and cultural life of India and especially his founding and editing of the art magazine, *Marg*. Anand, like Lawrence, Gorky, and Eric Gill, believes that the work of a creative writer is always inspired by a mission: a powerful attack on the evils of life like hypocrisy, cruelty, insensitivity etc. and an advocacy of love and compassion which make human life nobler and more contented. The novel, Anand affirms, neither states a case, nor suggests practical solutions of certain problems, nor offers a direct exhortation. It mainly

interprets the problems related to man's destiny. It must be concerned with the core of the problems of its time, with the tragedy of man. The purpose of this paper is to focus on and to explore with new approach the various themes of the works of Mulk Raj Anand which were the results of the suffering, misery and wretchedness of the poor. The feudal lords, capitalists and industrialists were the main factors behind the sufferings of the downtrodden during that time. Mulk Raj Anand had an insightful mind to turn towards the suffering humanity and he advocated for their welfare in most of his works. Individual's search for freedom is one of the main themes of Anand's fictional works. Munoo in *Coolie*, Bakha in *Untouchable* and Gangu in *Two Leaves and a Bud* suffer at the hands of the Britishers as well as the powerful Indians.

The theme of exploitation is evident in Anand's famous novel *Two Leaves and a Bud*. The novel is the tragic story of Gangu, a Punjabi peasant. He loses his inherited property owing to debt and is forced in old age to indenture himself, his wife and his two children as laborers in a British owned tea plantation in Assam. Little does he know that he is only jumping from the frying pan into the fire. After being fleeced by the Indian money lender Seth Badri Dass, he is now going to be thoroughly exploited by the whole capitalistic machinery geared up in the Macpherson tea estate in the Assam.

Gangu is allured to the plantation by the wonderful promises made by Sardar Buta who recruits laborers, the greatest temptation dangled before the victim being the possibility of receiving a plot of land free of charge - a temptation which the peasant with his roots firmly embedded in the soil can never resist. Once he reaches the Estate, the promised land too turns out to be a prison with no bars but 'nevertheless an unbreakable jail'. The tea plantation is a world within a world that is more a prison as Narain, a coolie tells Gangu:

I suppose it was in our kismet. But at home it was like a prison and here it is slightly worse. First water, afterwards mire! This prison has no bars, but it is nevertheless an unbreakable jail (Anand 1998: 38-39).

Being paid very insufficient wages, and compelled to live in unhealthy conditions, Gangu and his wife fall a prey to disease. Eventually Gangu's wife dies unable to bear the pain of the disease, malaria. As if the cup of misery of Gangu is not enough, Leila, daughter of Gangu found picking the tea leaves along in a bush falls in the lewd eyes of Reggie Hunt, a womanizer working as Assistant Manager in the estate. He chases her and tries to rape Leila and when Gangu intervenes Reggie shoots

him down and flees the place. Gangu comes to the plantation to start a new life, but he ends up by losing his life. Pilgrimage of suffering on the earth being over he leaves the world.

Two Leaves and a Bud was followed by a group of three novels - *The village*, *Across the Black Waters*, and *The Sword and the Sickle* - dealing with the boyhood, youth and early manhood of Lal Singh. The trilogy is perhaps the most realistic study of the individual in terms of the traditional social values and the new socialist forces. In these three novels, Anand has dealt with, the theme of tradition versus modernity on a much more extensive scale. The thematic significance of the trilogy mainly lies in the protagonist's rebellion against the conventional social values. In *The village*, we get first of all a different stage on which the action takes place. We are no more confronted with the lowest strata of society but with the small community of a Punjab village. The protagonist of the trilogy is a Punjabi young man Lal Singh who, unlike passive Munoo and ineffectual Gangu, is a fiery rebel against old values. The village is a vivid representation of life in a typical Punjab village, Nadpur during the early decades of the twentieth century, seen through the eyes of young Lal Singh. The village presented here is still in the grip of poverty and hunger, ignorance and superstition. But there is also a hint at Anand's faith in the eventual awakening and emancipation of peasantry, easily discoverable in the dashing rebellious character of the hero who fights against all hypocrisy and tries to emerge into a richer and more honest world.

Therefore we clearly notice that Anand in *The Village* trilogy, shows the evils of superstition, orthodoxy and war. In these works he displays that superstition, belief in Karma, religious fundamentalism and fanaticism are enemies of good social life. They should be totally removed from the mind of the people by rational thinking. In his opinion, war is the greatest plague that can affect humanity. It destroys not only states and families but also international harmony and world peace. In short we can say *The Village* is perhaps the most rounded portrait of village and rural life that the Indian novel in English offers us. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Lal Singh remains an entirely dissatisfied person, making several abortive attempts to bring about social revolution against age-long traditional mores.

In the novel, *Untouchable* Mulk Raj Anand has introduced one of his major themes, the theme of tradition versus modernity. The novel is story of a caste sweeper boy who leaves his home early in the morning with the alarming words of his old father Lakha, the Zamadar or the head of the sweepers in the cantonment of Bulashah. Bakha, the central protagonist of novel lives in the dungeon, no better than the work he performs.

To Bakha, every second seemed an endless age of woe and suffering. His whole demeanour was concentrated in humility, and in his heart there was a queer stirring (Anand 2001: 40-41).

The author employs the stream of consciousness technique to reveal the mental state of Bakha. It is not only the day of the mechanical time from dawn to dusk, but it is the story of the generations together that they have been suffering. The whole life sketch has been drawn sympathetically. Through this novel Mulk Raj Anand draws our mind towards a number of questionable customs and social ways of the Hindu Society of the thirties, mainly the caste system. It makes us aware of the various troubles of the untouchables who are exploited, underfed and oppressed by the upper strata of our society. This orthodox social system made Anand's principles paint the picture of caste ridden society, having been divided since very old times, on the basis of caste, into four sections—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. Through Bakha's character, Anand hits at the evils of the society and at the same moment he reveals his great concern for social justice.

Mulk Raj Anand's writing presents him as a writer of commitment to his subject and philosophy. He is lacking in what John Keats calls 'Negative Capability'. Anand takes sides with the poor folk of India whose poverty, wretchedness and hunger he portrays with social anger. It is impossible not to note this commitment to his philosophy of humanism and socialism in his far-reaching novels like *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. Even after independence, various problems have not been solved. His choice of theme of exploitation, oppression and marginalization of a section of the society by another section of the same society under the pretext of birth, religion, caste and his choice of characters from among the under drop of the society like a coolie, an untouchable, an indentured laborer and his fictional technique of affirming stark realism go but to prove his earnest commitment to the cause of the poor and the oppressed like Bakha, Munoo and Gangu. Anand has presented through his fiction the real India with all her ugliness, squalor, dirt and suffering with artistic success.

Munoo felt that he would die with the misery of not knowing what he wanted. That he wanted something, he knew. But what, he did not know. He rose. Piari patted him on the head. The boy was weeping bitterly as he rushed out. He returned from the street of pleasure, long after midnight, through the sleepless Bombay streets, where the eternally homeless coolies squatted, slept, moaned and gossiped, outside closed shops, pale and ghastly under the glare of gas lights (Anand 1993: 2014).

The novel *Coolie* as we know is one classic example of the story of the deprived class of the society and of the exploited people who cannot even make both ends meet. It reveals the callous and degrading treatment that the poor Munoo gets at the hands of the socially, economically and politically affluent and higher classes of Indian society and how he copes with all circumstances alone.

Indian English novelists have brilliantly depicted contemporary political situation in their works. Anand too deals with the political theme in the *Sword and the Sickle*, *Private Life of an Indian Prince* and *Death of a Hero*. Anand could not distance himself away from the political scene of India. He writes about contemporary politics more or less as Anthony Trollope wrote about the British parliamentary politics of his day making minor adjustments in order to catch the spirit of the movement. As an author of political novels Anand was influenced by European political ideologies, especially those of Vladimir Lenin, Leo Tolstoy and Karl Marx. Though he never actively participated in politics, he was a great supporter of Leftist Peace Movements.

In almost all his novels, from *Untouchable* to *The Bubble*, man is the central figure. All his novels are novels of accountability, of involvement, of creative tension and its resolution, of profound humanism and moral values. Mulk Raj Anand's major aim is to reveal perfect humanistic vision of life. As the pioneer and exponent of nativization technique, Anand enjoys an outstanding position. Anand employs fictional technique as a means of communicating his humanistic vision of life. He adopts the epical or dramatic or episodic or picaresque form as his subject demands. He expresses his view that, every theme requires its own form, technique and skill. One cannot accept the conventional forms of another literature or classics in newer situations. From the above discussed facts, it can be said that Mulk Raj Anand has used his imagination and creative skill to transform facts into fictions to present a realistic vision of life. He has organized his material with great care and skill. His novels definitely evince a thematic unity. Mulk Raj Anand's literary contributions map the pre-independence and modern India. His novels universalize issues which concern every man and every region. He produces a tragic vision of life but also finds resolutions to the problems it presents. In his works he envisions a world permeated with love and good will.

In conclusion we can say that Mulk Raj Anand's main concern is social justice. All his heroes are victims of the age-old customs and traditions in Indian society. Their passive suffering generates sympathy for them in the hearts of the readers. This sympathy compels us to think for a change in society and at the same time guarantee justice to all the sections of people living in this society. Thus

the idea of Anand is fully served when his hero compels readers to think for social justice. The present study of Anand's works with special attention to the various themes on which his novels are based has brought us to certain conclusion. Of all Indian creative writers writing in English, Anand is perhaps the most concerned with the minute observation of society and literature. His views on the subject are spread over many essays and articles. To find out the truth of human relations has become the mission of his life.

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