

A Study of Subalternity in the selected novels of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

In the last few decades of the twentieth century, new theoretical approaches emerged to account for the provenance of the discourses of the minority and the marginalized groups. Of these, one of the most significant developments is the work of the Subaltern Studies Group focusing on the colonized subaltern subject. Fathered by the Italian Marxist leader, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) the word ‘subaltern’ indicates to those categories of people who are subject to the dominance of the elite class. The subalterns include peasants, slaves, women, the proletariat, different races and religious groups. This paper points out the politics of undermining revolutionary subaltern voices, uncovers the un-representations of the Subaltern groups in some select novels of Mulk Raj Anand and applies the subaltern theory to some, select fictions of Mulk Raj Anand to make a design for a better society where subalterns are treated with dignity, and their rights upheld and protected.

Keywords: Subaltern, Marginalized, Revolutionary, Dignity, Dominance

The term ‘subaltern’ has been adapted to postcolonial studies from the work of Subaltern Studies Group. Ranajit Guha defined the term as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha 1982). For Spivak, “When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work cannot say, becomes important” (Spivak, Subaltern 287). Therefore, the readers and interpreters have to unravel what is hidden in the text to construct a portrayal of the subaltern. Spivak defends the opinion that the subaltern never speaks because he /she is never given a chance to speak; and if he is given any voice, there is always an ‘omnipotent’ presence who takes the responsibility of speaking for him assuming that the subaltern is devoid of any power to express himself/herself. Speech is only given to the influential dominator whereas the ‘other’ (whatever or whoever it represents) is always presented as distorted, silent, distressed or sometimes as disturbed. In the elite narratives they are projected never as the subject, but the object of narration, the marginalized do not get any chance to narrate their account or express their true feelings, emotions and reactions; invariably presented as the subordinate ‘other’ whose story should be articulated by more influential parties. Among the invariant features of this study is the notion of resistance to elite domination and the protest of the subaltern voices against established norms and traditions.

There are various facets in Anand's writing. Jack Lindsay in his *The Elephant and the Lotus* (1965) elaborates on the protest mode in Anand's fiction. For Lindsay, Anand has brought powerful new energies into Indian culture, and into our literature an unquenchable faith in the goodness of man and the power of life (165).

Anand's concept of man has been studied in Dieter Riemenschneider's *The Ideal of Man in Mulk Raj Anand's novels* (1967). His (Riemenschneider's) essay "The Function of Labour in Mulk Raj Anand's Novels" (1976) is based on the Marxian concept of labour and man's various though interrelated forms of alienation as historical phenomena caused by the development of factors of production and the ownership of the means of production (1-20).

Margaret Berry's concern is Anand the man, Anand the writer and the relationship of propaganda and art in his *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist* (1971). She reads and evaluates Anand's novels as to their more or less convincingly created centers of consciousness. Her final verdict is that the writer failed to combine his commitment with detachment.

K. D. Verma's "Mulk Raj Anand: An Appraisal" (2000) demonstrates that European thinking since the Romantic period has shaped the writer's humanism that informs his novels and underpins his non-fictional writing from the beginning on a host of topics, including philosophy, art history and aesthetics (83-103).

Susheila Nasta's *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (2000) refers to Anand's works of the 1930s and written in England for methodological reasons since this opens several useful questions regarding the background to a diverse range of diasporic writing in Britain which had its origins prior to contemporary agendas. For her, choosing an untouchable as the novel's protagonist's is a symbolic and political response to the prejudices of the Bloomsbury circle the writer encountered at the time, and in this sense compliments his writing as an attempt to shift the angle of the gaze to present a history that exposes Britain's colonialism and to show his deep commitment to the need to question and to revision the West's image of itself (15-55).

Dorothy Figuiera (2000) feels that the West that Anand depicts in his novels is in a certain sense no different from European representations of India – a phantom arising out of a confrontation with the self. She concludes that the novel offers an interesting challenge to the contention that exoticism is contingent upon the political or economic hegemony of the writer's culture (41-46).

J. M. Waghmare, in the article, "Literature of Marginality", (2001) regards 'marginality' as a term applicable universally to the peoples of the world living in conditions of abject poverty and consequently isolated from the mainstream life. He compares the blacks in other countries and the Dalits of our country who belong to the marginalized group. The writer explores that inequality of all kinds resulting from insecurity, injustice and exploitation consigned them to their deplorable fate (16-24).

Thus, Anand's work can be interpreted in various ways because of its diversity and resilience. This researcher's concern remains to find out, how far is Anand successful in his attempt to help his subalterns to take part in the 'drama of revolt' and give them courage to overthrow the system that has been shackling them. This paper will also try to relate Ranjit Guha and Spivak's idea of subalternity to uncover some questions like: does Anand write the subaltern or write about them? Do his characters resist to elite domination or do they accept their subordination as heavenly ordained? This researcher's theoretical intervention is a modest attempt to find answer to these questions.

This paper tries to define and describe Subalternity from historical elements and contextualizing it in Indian social conditions, it focuses on some of the substantial perspectives on caste system in the Indian subcontinent, the nature of its evolution, and the

modes of its flourishing in contemporary India, it tries to scrutinize gender as a chief unifying determinant of present-day social life and examine the ways that gender overlaps with other significant routes of social differentiation, for instance nationality, caste and social class.

The panoramic view of the cities with its citizens forms part of experience of Munoo of the world. In this novel, Bibiji cannot speak English. So, she stands apart when the Sahib visits Nathu Ram's house. Parvati keeps silent in the regular altercation between Prabha and Ganpat. Laxmi is Ahalya incarnate to endure insurmountable problems of life. Piari Bai thrives on the good hope of graciousness, condensation and charity of her male customer whom she calls 'raja'. Mrs. Mainwaring incessantly searches for her next husband to bestow European comforts on her.

Bakha's erotic thoughts take shape from the shape of his sister's well-formed body that has 'sylph-like form', 'graceful frame', 'an arched narrow waist' [*Untouchable*, 14]. Anand like other writers defined the woman in his novel only on the basis of her appearance.

The identity crisis through which Bakha suffers is restored in Sohini through her sexuality by Anand. Her sexuality is presented as her potential power which helps her overcome the barriers of caste at one level but on the other it again makes her a prey as a female if not as an untouchable. The Pandit is inclined towards her in spite of her being an Untouchable. He fills her pitcher out of this attraction but soon this sexuality becomes her folly when the Pandit tries to ravish her and later defame her in front of the crowd for her low caste. Bakha thinks her to be his own possession. In *Untouchable* the novelist has conjured up Sohini's voluptuous beauty by bits and pieces in a sensuously artistic format. To patriarchy, she is a flesh pot for enjoyment more so because Sohinis of the society have no voice to act against their seducers.

In the novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* the native women are sketched as highly subordinated and doubly colonized subjects side by side with some apparently superior, noisy set of Western female characters who are forever dissatisfied with their position in the native world as also with the dirt and the heat of the tropical country. Leela Gandhi has an interesting say on the white female in colonial India:

"While European civil society remained undecided as to whether women possessed the attributes and capacities of individuals, its colonial counterpart – in places like India – was considerably more amenable to the good offices of the white female subject... And yet she was only anchored as full individual through her racial privileges." [Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial theory: A Critical Introduction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1998, p. 89.]

While Sajani is enmeshed in her daily chore of keeping the family fed and contented. Lady Croft - Cooke is busy in finding fault with her native servants who, according to her, they are badmashes and born liars. But Mrs. Croft Cooke's helplessness at being a handmaid of her husband comes to the fore when we come to know that economically she is subservient to her husband. The ultimate decision lies on the discretion of the Major, she can only depend on her good luck to get relief. The pictures erected by the novelist reflects the sad plight of women irrespective of class and race. Dr. Havre says about Barbara "will she always remain inviolate, virginal and innocent, even after the completeness she has had?" [TLB, 121]. The question relates to the inviolable, unspoken norm of patriarchy that women must be soft, innocent and virgin at heart. Here, the virginity metaphorically means subordination to male dictator. The bestial treatment of Regie Hunt on women in the coolie lines denotes the male despotic aggressiveness. Regie's sexual violence emphasizes the intense vulnerability of women – European or native. They are not allowed to speak on their behalf. Sohini, Sajani, Parvati and Lakshmi are all mute creatures derided by circumstances beyond their jurisdiction.

Untouchable though welcomed by the readers as a work by a Kshatriya who is articulating the voices of the Subalterns suffers from great drawbacks. A major part of the society of those times witnessed Dalits' uprising. Many of them voiced themselves by burning books like *Manusmriti*, drinking water from the wells from where it was prohibited, fighting for their right to education. But Anand who is writing for the Subalterns has not put in such important information. The historians have always neglected the version presented by minorities, in the same manner Anand also has overlooked their case. We sympathized with the protagonists but we know sympathy is offered to the inferiors.

In conclusion I want to state that though Anand has faltered to some extent in his representation of the subaltern, he has obviously set a stepping stone to change so that the subaltern could be included in the mainstream of Indian society. Anand has created a new space for historiography. It is to be seen as a fresh intervention and interpretation of for the neglected sections of society by helping to locate the subaltern, if not by asserting their moral rights. He has tried to place the differently positioned social groups within the larger mainstream society for achieving a free, equal and just society.

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