

Migration and Marginalization: The Tragic Story of Indentured Laborers in Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*

Soma Roy

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Pingla Thana Mahavidyalaya

Abstract

The novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* concern with the history of tea garden labourers in Assam. When tea plantation started in Assam there was a shortage of labour. The labourers were brought from various states of the country on the pretext of giving them good job and establishment. They were brought in unhygienic condition both through railways and ships. Once, they entered into the garden, there was no way out for them. Several generations passed but they remained as coolie only, toiling hard for their masters in the plantation sites. This, later on, formed the greater tea garden communities in Assam. They are one of the marginalized sections presently living in the North East India who migrated from Bihar, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and many other places of India.

This paper focuses on the migration of labours due to poverty and thus their real-life journey begins when they come to Assam tea plantation sites. They come across a very cruel and repressive community due to their socio-economic status. They are to struggle to live with hopelessness. They suffer from identity crisis. There is alienation and bewilderment among the coolies. This study involves discussion about the various kinds of issues like; migration, displacement, diaspora, slavery, suppression, identity and resistance.

Keywords: Migration, alienation, identity, suppression, diaspora

Introduction

In the 19th century the British converted a large area of land for tea plantation in India. For this purpose, they appointed commissioned agents to recruit labourers as the local people were reluctant to work in the tea gardens of Assam. The labourers were brought from various states of the country on the pretext of giving them good job and establishment. They were brought in unhygienic condition both through railways and ships. Once, migrated labourers entered into the garden, there was no way out for them. Several generations passed but they remained as coolie only, toiling hard for their British masters in the plantation sites. This, later on, formed the greater tea garden communities in Assam. The white officers often exploited the women labourers sexually. The labourers were also beaten up mercilessly by the white officers. The migrated indentured labourers were also exploited by the local money-lenders who gave them money on loan and charged high interest. Thus, they did not have any improvement in life. They were exploited economically, physically and mentally. Anand presented this history of the migrated tea garden labourers more poignantly in his novel *Two Leaves and a Bud*.

The novel, *Two Leaves and a Bud* deal with the history of the migrated tea garden labourers in Assam. The British started the tea plantation in Assam but had labour shortage. They then recruited agents to bring labours to the tea estate from different corners of the country. The agents went in search of labours in the remote villages where the villagers were dominated and exploited by the local Zamindars. They were often found in helpless conditions. The agents gave them false promises and convinced them that they would get lucrative job once they came to Assam tea estates. The novel "Two Leaves and a Bud" by Mulk Raj Anand offers a detailed account of the history and social conditions surrounding the migration of tea garden laborers to Assam during the British colonial era. The British started tea plantations in Assam in the early 19th century, but faced a labour shortage due to the difficulty of the work and the high mortality rate of workers in the region. To solve this problem, they recruited agents to bring laborers from different parts of India to work on the tea estates. The agents were often unscrupulous and took advantage of the poverty and desperation of the people they recruited. They would offer false promises of good wages and working conditions, and

many people were convinced to leave their homes and families to work on the tea estates. However, when they arrived in Assam, they found themselves living in cramped, unsanitary conditions and working long hours for very low pay. The novel also sheds light on the social and economic conditions of the laborers before they migrated to Assam. Many of them came from remote villages where they were exploited and oppressed by local Zamindars or landlords who held all the power and wealth in the area. They were often forced to work in harsh conditions for meagre wages, and had little hope for a better life. Through the story of "Two Leaves and a Bud," Anand exposes the harsh realities of colonialism and the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable by those in power. He also highlights the resilience and courage of the laborers who struggled to survive and resist oppression in the face of great adversity.

Mulk Raj Anand depicted the people of economically backward society who suffered a lot in due course of time where there is no escape for them. Anand leads his caravan of less miserable, and tells the West the story of true Indian- not the India of bejewelled Maharajas, polo-playing European officers and clubs and drinks, but the real India of the majority of Indians. Anand brings out the theme of exploitation of the contemporary society through his novel. His novel speaks for the migrated and indentured labourers of the tea garden. He was committed to the social issues and accordingly brought them up in his novel. He expresses fundamental human problems with universal appeal in them. Anand's novel reverberates the roaring of Indian souls who were forced to migrate. Mulk Raj Anand's novel "Two Leaves and a Bud" portrays the harsh realities of life for the economically backward society of India during the British colonial era. Anand's novel highlights the suffering and struggles of the laborers who were forced to migrate to the tea gardens in Assam due to poverty and desperation. These laborers were exploited and oppressed by those in power, and had little hope for a better life. Through his novel, Anand aims to show the West the true India - not the India of bejewelled Maharajas and European officers playing polo, but the real India of the majority of Indians who were struggling to survive under colonial rule. Anand's novel is a powerful critique of the social and economic exploitation that was rampant in India during this time, and he was committed to highlighting these issues through his writing. Anand's novel addresses fundamental human problems with universal appeal, and speaks to the plight of the laborers who were forced to migrate to the tea gardens. It reverberates the suffering

and the roaring of Indian souls who were caught up in a system that exploited them for profit. Overall, Anand's "Two Leaves and a Bud" is an important work of postcolonial literature that sheds light on the social injustices of the era, and highlights the resilience and courage of those who fought to survive in the face of great adversity.

Two Leaves and a Bud was written in the year 1937; it was the time when India was ruled by the British. It deals with plight of the tea garden labourers of Assam. Anand has successfully portrayed the sorrow and suffering of the tea garden workers in the novel. The novel brings out the ruthlessness of British colonial rule in India that exploited the tea garden workers to the last. It shows the problem of indentured labour who were compelled by the situation to take up the job as bonded labour in distant land to survive. These labourers soon came into conflict with the authority who brought all miseries to them. When they raised their voices against the injustice of British, they were crushed. The novel is about the tragic story of Gangu who lost his land, took up the job of bonded labour and came to the McPherson Tea estate in Assam. He faced utterly disgrace in the estate. He lost his wife and finally, he had to sacrifice his own life in order to save his daughter from a wicked English officer.

The *Two Leaves and a Bud* deal with theme of exploitation of the migrated indentured labourers. The central character, Gangu was exploited by local money-lender, Seth Badri Dass. He lost his ancestral property of three-acre land that was mortgaged to the Seth. He couldn't redeem them. As a result, he had to migrate and indenture himself in his old age with his family. He, being just one of his classes, was exploited at his native place that made him homeless. He approached a lawyer for his share out of mortgaged land. He informed that though his brother mortgaged them, he would not get his portion out of it as they were same family. It was the existing law system under British. This was the suffering of every under-privileged in British India. After being deprived of family inheritance, Gangu came to McPherson Tea estate in Assam to work as migrated bonded labour as the Sahukar, Buta Sing promised him good wages and land. This time, he fell into capitalistic machinery and had faced major tragedy in life. Here, he and his fellow labourers were exploited by the British officials and their Indian subordinates. He became the victim of British capitalism. The labourers were given starvation wages. They were compelled to work in unhygienic conditions. They had to drink polluted water. No system of pure drinking water was made in

the estate. As a result, they suffered from cholera and hundreds of them died every year. Gangu also lost his wife in malaria. At last, he was also shot dead by Reggie, an English officer who was about to rape his daughter. The English court declared Reggie as innocent.

The British planters adopted very cunning method to dominate and exploit the migrated labourers. They appointed some particular Indians to control and suppress the labourers with their lathi. When they raised their voice against injustice of the authority, the authority used the Indian warders to control them severely. Besides, they were also exploited by the Sahukars and other Indian staffs. Chaprasi Hamir Singh demanded money from Gangu for allowing him to meet the manager just after his wife's death.

Babu Shashi Bhusan also did the same for recruiting him in estate. Seth Dhanu Mal exploited the labourers and the Tibetans. He exacted money from the labourers by giving them loan on high interest. He deceived the Tibetans when they came to sell their products or crops. Some Indian warders exploited the indentured labourers to derive sadistic pleasure. Reggie Hunt used Neogi's wife as mistress. Neogi, being helpless had to surrender his wife to the white master, otherwise he would have to face dire consequences. Ranbir Coolie once refused to give his wife to the white officer, hence he was imprisoned and his wife was taken away forcefully by the white officer. Thus, the British exploited the migrated indentured Indian labourers in every possible way. In Mulk Raj Anand's novel "Two Leaves and a Bud", the theme of exploitation of the contemporary society is explored through the lens of the tea plantation system in Assam during the British colonial era. The novel depicts the ruthless behaviour of those in power towards the laborers, who were mostly recruited through deceitful agents like Babu Shashi Bhusan. These laborers were often from economically backward societies and were subjected to harsh working conditions and mistreatment by the estate owners. Seth Dhanu Mal, one of the estate owners in the novel, is portrayed as a cunning and exploitative figure who exacts money from the laborers by giving them loans at exorbitant interest rates. He also deceives the Tibetans who come to sell their products or crops to the estate. The Indian warders who were appointed to keep the laborers in check are shown to be equally sadistic, deriving pleasure from their power over the helpless laborers. Reggie Hunt, a white master in the novel, is depicted as having an affair with Neogi's wife. Neogi, being helpless and unable to resist the white master's power, is forced to surrender his wife to him. Ranbir Coolie, another labourer in the novel, is imprisoned for refusing to give

his wife to a white officer. This incident highlights the oppressive nature of the colonial system, which allowed the powerful to abuse their authority and exploit the vulnerable with impunity. Overall, Anand's novel paints a vivid and damning picture of the exploitation of indentured Indian laborers in colonial-era Assam. It exposes the dark underbelly of the tea plantation system and the callousness of those who held power within it. Through his work, Anand highlights the urgent need for social and economic reform to address the injustices faced by the most vulnerable members of society.

Conclusion

It has clearly been observed that the novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* is primarily based on the forced migration due to poverty and starvation. The novelist has recreated the reality of the society by portraying real life like situations. The novel portrays conspicuous evils like forced migration, exploitation of indentured labour, class distinction, poverty etc. that prevail in the society. This novel is written on humanitarian purpose that would never be out-dated with the tide of time. Mulk Raj Anand is a social realist and critic who likes to raise his voice against unjust and exploitation through his novel. He understood the degree of pain and suffering of his fellowmen and accordingly reflected the pathetic picture of the migrated labourers. Anand's novel shows grudge against apartheid and socio-economic disparity. At the same time, he shows his sympathy towards the deprived and deserted people. He was the crusader against exploitation and injustice. Anand supports that all the people must have freedom-social, economic and political without any encroachment upon each other's freedom. He believed in the brotherhood of man and a society free from unjust exploitation that forces people to migrate from their homeland.

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