

## **Struggle for Survival in *Lajwanti* and *Old Bapu* by Mulk Raj Anand: A Comparative Study of the stories**

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### **Abstract**

The dominant themes in Mulk Raj Anand's fiction are poverty, slavery, exploitation and illiteracy. His stories effectively illustrate this world in miniature yet powerful way. The present paper intends to study the struggle for survival in the lives of protagonists of *Lajwanti* and *Old Bapu* amidst conditions of abject poverty. The paper compares their circumstances in which they are exploited and humiliated, their trials and tribulations. They feel suffocated and yearn for a little peace and comfort. It also explores the thematic issues of the stories on parallel lines. The paper traces their experiences as they try to survive against the combating forces in which they are treated like animals. In the end, their personalities come out to be heroic as they face the struggle with all the strength they have.

**Key words:** poverty, exploitation, humiliation, struggle, survival

### **Introduction**

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is one of the most renowned Indian writers in English who has been acclaimed at international level. His novels and short stories speak about the lives of oppressed and the exploited. The wide range of his short stories has overtones of strong social satire and deep insight into the psychology of the poor and downtrodden. He presents the plight of the men and women who are trying to survive struggling against the social forces. His stories *Lajwanti* and *Old Bapu* have protagonists who are the victims of the tyranny of the society. Facing adverse circumstances, they feel near death experience in their struggle.

The beginning of the story *Lajwanti* introduces its protagonist *Lajwanti*, a young married woman trying to escape from the clutches of her callous and lecherous brother in law *Jaswant*. The story opens on a hot and sunny afternoon in New Delhi. The hot loo coming from sun is compared to the fiery flames coming out of the mouth of a demon. Braving the scorching heat and drenched in sweat, *Lajwanti* hopes to reach *Gurgaon* to catch a bus to her father's house in *Pataudi*. The condition of poverty is revealed in torn soles of her chappals which is making her difficult to walk. After having walked for ten miles, she is dead tired in the unbearable heat and feels like dragging her legs. Afraid of her brother in law *Jaswant*, she avoids to stop for long to take rest in the shade of a mango tree.

The beginning of the story Old Bapu is similar to Lajwanti in many ways. The protagonist of the story Bapu is walking on the road on a hot and sunny afternoon.

The conditions of poverty are also similar as he has holes in his shoes and the skin is burnt by being exposed to hot metal road. He is also drenched in sweat as he has already walked seven miles from Shikohpur. Tiredness and exhaustion have overpowered him and he feels himself near death. So in both stories the protagonists share the physical discomfort and exhaustion of scorching heat and poor conditions.

Lajwanti and old Bapu share their struggle at the psychological level as well. A saga of pain and anguish is going on in their mind. As they are marching towards their destination, their minds are gripped in analysis of past life, their decisions and regrets. Lajwanti regrets that she should have compromised to the whims and demands of her brother in law. She should have borne the humiliation and exploitation at the hands of her in laws to stay at that place. She is forced to think in this direction as her husband Balwant stays far away and is less assertive.

"She felt the chords of guilt choke her dry throat: She might have borne the humiliation. She might have given in to Jaswant. She could have closed her eyes. Her husband Balwant was away at College. Her benevolent father-in-law would not have known. And the mother-in-law, who wanted son's son, more than anything else, would not have worried, even if she had come to know, because she favoured Jaswant, who worked on the land and not Balwant who wanted to be a clerk." (Greatest 53)

We also come to see the humble and sympathetic side of Lajwanti as she wanted to kneel down before the Almighty and ask for forgiveness for the sins she was being punished. At this juncture she wants to know the right path. In these difficult circumstances she is more anxious and worried for her pet, Maina, a bird. She did her best to protect the bird from heat and to provide her water. Bapu's mind was engulfed with past memories, his childhood, insults hurled at him by his relatives and his desire and decision to leave his house in spite of the pleadings of his mother to stay at that house and many others. The most dominant thought among them was his betrayal of his mother. The very thought of the death of his mother triggered a nausea in his body. The regret of defying his mother was too deep to be borne by him.

"His spirit tried to fly away from the ugly thought of betrayal of her, but its wings were rooted in coarse little body, and in spite of a cough, which he excited in his throat, even as he spat on the dust a globule of phlegm, the soul held the vision

of mother's dead face, eyes dilated and the teeth showing in the terror dark of their hut..." (Greatest 94)

He recalled the exploitation and humiliation faced at the hands his uncle Dandu Ram and others. The chain of thoughts suddenly broke and he found him face to face with the present problem, of not getting work that day.

Lajwanti and old Bapu face a villainous character in the stories at whose hands they are mortified and humiliated, exploited and treated like animals, Jaswant in the story Lajwanti and Sardar Ram Singh in the story Old Bapu. Jaswant was able to get hold of fleeing Lajwanti and treated her in the most callous way. Not to talk of the use of abusive language, he hit, slapped and molested her frequently in the course of the story. Lajwanti is humiliated, degraded and beaten publicly. An officer and his wife came to her rescue, but bad luck again took her in the clutches of the monster Jaswant, as she did not get the least support from her father, Hari Ram. He was a coward terribly afraid of the social customs and conventions. The fear of society subdued and overpowered his love and affection for his daughter. His poor conditions confirmed his decision of taking Lajwanti to her in laws house. At her in laws house the scene of Indian society took a cruel shape as Hari Ram almost begged to keep Lajwanti at that place.

".....And now I leave her n your care. Kill her if you like. But don't let her come to me without her lap full of son. I shall not be able to survive the disgrace if she comes again..."(Greatest 69)

A similar treatment of inhumanity and callousness is meted out to old Bapu at the hands of the contractor, Sardar Ram Singh. The meeting of old Bapu with the contractor doesn't seem to be a meeting between humans but an encounter between a ferocious animal and its prey. Bapu is addressed disrespectfully by Ram Singh. The gestures of fear on old Bapu indicates that his past experience with him has not been pleasant. He is made fun of his weakened frame and shoed away like an animal.

His old looks instead of inviting dignified and respectful behaviour receives abusive and insulting words, wrath and contempt of the contractor.

"Look at you, two-legged donkey that you are! One of your legs seems to be shrivelled, while the other feeble one seems to be waiting to drag it on....All of us have become lame a go hopping, tottering and falling, wishing for the Sarkar to carry us forward. Comic and undignified and shameless!..." (Greatest 97)

Bapu is used to this kind of rude and disrespectful behaviour, this is the reason that we find that he is upset more because of dearth of work than the humiliation and the insult. In both stories protagonists are abused, insulted and humiliated. Though in Lajwanti's case such treatment can be held responsible for her being a woman caught in the web of customs and conventions of Indian society, yet they share the helplessness of being the victims of poverty, slavery and illiteracy. There is similarity in the way they bear the insult in a humble way they share their meekness, submissiveness and modesty.

Lajwanti and old Bapu are pathetic and tragic characters. Their poignancy and misery move and touch the heart of the the readers. They get the worst treatment having best intentions in their hearts. The anguish and pain in their hearts are illimitable which they keep to themselves as there is no one with whom they can share their feelings. Lajwanti puts her heart out to her pet Maina as there is no one else to listen to her. Hari Ram, Lajwanti's father, afraid of people's taunts and comments, shows least interest in the suffering of her daughter and give priority to the conventions followed in the society. According to Hari Ram the return of a married daughter to her father's house is a disgrace to the family. Fearing people's reactions, he takes her daughter back to her in laws house knowing that her daughter will be tortured and mistreated throughout life. Not only this, he also asks for forgiveness for Lajwanti. Knowing very well his daughter's innocence and her vulnerable circumstances, he still finds him helpless and paralyzed to take any action or decision against the social norms. Lajwanti's mother is dead and her siblings are too young to understand or do anything for her. In these circumstances, she feels lonely and has to keep her miseries and woes to herself.

The ending of the stories trace their struggle to survive against the pressure of the forces working against them. Poverty and exploitation have reduced them to animals as they seek nothing else but survival. It is pitiable that human beings blessed with conscience, critical thinking and capable of myriad of emotions and feelings are treated like beasts. It is tragic to see their near death experience. Thoughts of death haunt their minds as they they don't see any ray of hope in their lives. Lajwanti knows the kind of life she will be living in her in laws house, so she decides to drown herself but she is rescued by the people. Life appears more horrible than death to her.

"There is no way for me....I am....condemned to live...." (Greatest, 71)

Bapu tries to ward off the idea of death from his mind and hopes to find work but the contractor makes fun of his fragile physique and taunts that he looks overage. He is so upset and frustrated that controls breaking down. He is anxious and worried about future as without getting work he will not be able to survive. Having uncertainty in his heart, his mind wavers between the thoughts of life and death.

The thematic similarities between the two stories are also very striking. The stories reveal the conditions of people living in abject poverty. It is ironic that hard working people are denied the right to life and work. Not to talk of their dreams and aspirations, their sole objective is to

find conditions for survival. Their purpose of life seems to escape starvation which brings them to the plight of animals. It is really ironic to see humans' beings in this pitiable state. As the author intimate us with their feelings and emotions, their strength and determination, their endurance and forbearance, the readers cherish a gesture of respect for them and salute the heroic side of their personality. Lajwanti and Bapu were the victims of the system which provides no relief even to the people who work hard. They share extraordinary patience and tolerance and fought with the circumstances with all the strength they had.

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