

The Representation of British Imperialism and Racial Hierarchy in Mulk Raj Anand's "Two Leaves and a Bud"

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Abstract

This research paper examines the portrayal of British imperialism and racial hierarchy in Mulk Raj Anand's novel "Two Leaves and a Bud" (1937). Through close textual analysis and consideration of historical context, the study explores how Anand's narrative exposes and critiques the oppressive structures of colonial rule in India, particularly on tea plantations. The paper argues that Anand employs realist literary techniques, vivid characterization, and symbolic imagery to illuminate the economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and dehumanization inherent in the imperial project. By giving voice to marginalized Indian laborers and depicting the moral corruption of British colonizers, Anand's novel serves as a powerful indictment of imperialism and its intersecting systems of racial and class-based oppression. This research contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by elucidating how *Two Leaves and a Bud* functions as an important work of anti-colonial resistance literature that challenges dominant imperial ideologies and advocates for the dignity of India's subjugated peoples.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, British imperialism, racial hierarchy, postcolonial literature, tea plantations

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand's novel "Two Leaves and a Bud" (1937) stands as a searing critique of British imperialism in India and its entrenched systems of racial and economic oppression. Set on a tea plantation in Assam, the narrative follows the tragic experiences of Gangu, a poor peasant who relocates with his family in search of a better life, only to encounter brutal exploitation and injustice at the hands of British overseers. Through its vivid depiction of life on the plantation, the novel discloses the grim realities of indentured labor, racial

discrimination, and dehumanization that were intrinsic to Britain's imperial project in the subcontinent.

As a key figure in the Indian Progressive Writers' Movement, Anand sought to use literature as a vehicle for social critique and reform (Anand, 1963). *Two Leaves and a Bud* exemplifies this mission through its unflinching portrayal of colonial oppression and its consequences for India's most vulnerable populations. The novel's title itself alludes to the grueling manual labor required to pluck tea leaves, symbolizing the extractive nature of imperial economics (Narasimhaiah, 1983).

This research paper aims to analyze the representation of British imperialism and racial hierarchy in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, examining how Anand's narrative strategies and characterizations serve to unmask and challenge colonial ideologies and practices. By situating the novel within its historical context and drawing on postcolonial theory, the study will elucidate how Anand's work functions as a powerful piece of anti-colonial resistance literature.

The paper argues that through his realist depiction of plantation life, nuanced character portrayals, and use of symbolism, Anand constructs a damning indictment of the imperial system and its intersecting modes of racial, economic, and gendered oppression. By giving voice to marginalized Indian laborers and revealing the moral bankruptcy of British colonizers, *Two Leaves and a Bud* stands as an important literary challenge to dominant imperial narratives.

This analysis will contribute to postcolonial literary scholarship by offering new insights into how Anand's novel critiques and subverts colonial power structures through its content and form. It will demonstrate the enduring relevance of *Two Leaves and a Bud* as a work that brings to the light the human costs of empire and advocates for the dignity and rights of subjugated peoples.

Literature Review

The critical examination of British imperialism and racial hierarchies in Indian literature has been a subject of extensive scholarly attention. This literature review will focus on key works that have shaped our understanding of how colonial power structures are represented in Indian fiction, particularly in relation to Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*.

Meenakshi Mukherjee's "The Perishable Empire" (2000) provides a foundational analysis of Indian English fiction's engagement with colonialism. Mukherjee argues that early Indian

writers in English, including Anand, used the novel form to challenge imperial narratives and assert Indian identities. Her work offers valuable insights into the literary strategies employed by authors to subvert colonial discourses.

Priyamvada Gopal's "The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration" (2009) examines how Indian novelists, including Anand, used their works to reimagine national identity and history in the context of colonialism. Gopal's analysis of the political dimensions of Indian English literature provides a crucial framework for understanding *Two Leaves and a Bud* as a work of anti-colonial resistance.

Leela Gandhi's "Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction" (1998) offers theoretical perspectives on the representation of colonial power in literature. Her discussion of how postcolonial writers challenge Eurocentric narratives and reclaim subaltern voices is particularly relevant to analyzing Anand's portrayal of plantation workers.

Bart Moore-Gilbert's "Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics" (1997) provides a comprehensive overview of postcolonial literary criticism. His exploration of how literature can function as a site of resistance to colonial ideologies informs our understanding of Anand's narrative strategies in *Two Leaves and a Bud*.

Elleke Boehmer's "Colonial and Postcolonial Literature" (1995) examines the evolution of literary responses to colonialism. Her analysis of how writers like Anand used realist techniques to divulge colonial injustices offers valuable insights for our study.

This literature review reveals a gap in scholarship specifically focused on the representation of racial hierarchies in Indian tea plantation narratives. While much has been written about Anand's work in general, there is room for a more detailed analysis of how *Two Leaves and a Bud* portrays the intersections of race, class, and imperial power in this specific context.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, combining close textual analysis with historical contextualization and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. The primary methods used are as follows:

1. Close Reading: A detailed textual analysis of *Two Leaves and a Bud*, focusing on narrative techniques, characterization, dialogue, and symbolism used to represent British imperialism and racial hierarchies.

2. Historical Contextualization: Examination of primary and secondary historical sources to situate the novel within the broader context of British colonialism in India, particularly in relation to the tea plantation system.
3. Comparative Analysis: Comparison of *Two Leaves and a Bud* with other relevant works of colonial and postcolonial literature to identify commonalities and distinctions in the representation of imperial power structures.
4. Theoretical Application: Utilization of postcolonial theoretical concepts, drawing on the works of scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, to analyze the novel's engagement with issues of representation, resistance, and cultural identity.
5. Discourse Analysis: Examination of the novel's language and narrative voice to uncover implicit power relations and ideological positions.

This multi-faceted approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of how Anand's novel represents and reviews British imperialism and racial hierarchies. By combining close textual study with broader historical and theoretical perspectives, the methodology aims to produce a nuanced understanding of the novel's significance as a work of anti-colonial literature.

Data for this study primarily consists of the text of *Two Leaves and a Bud*, supplemented by Anand's other writings, historical documents related to British rule in India and the tea plantation system, and relevant secondary literature on colonial and postcolonial studies.

Limitations of this methodology include the subjective nature of literary interpretation and the potential for presentist bias in historical analysis. To mitigate these limitations, the study will engage with a diverse range of scholarly perspectives and maintain a reflexive awareness of the researcher's own positionality.

Historical Context: British Imperialism in India

To fully appreciate Anand's critique in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, it is crucial to understand the historical context of British imperialism in India, particularly as it related to the tea industry. The British East India Company began to exert control over the Indian subcontinent in the mid-18th century, initially through trade monopolies and then increasingly through territorial acquisitions and political influence (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). By the mid-19th century, the British Crown had assumed direct control over India, ushering in the period known as the British Raj.

The imperial project in India was driven by economic motivations, with the British seeking to extract raw materials and create new markets for manufactured goods (Cain & Hopkins, 2016). The tea industry became a crucial component of this economic exploitation. Tea plantations in Assam, where Anand's novel is set, were established in the 1830s after the discovery of indigenous tea plants in the region (Sharma, 2011). These plantations relied heavily on indentured labor, often recruiting workers from other parts of India under false pretenses or coercion.

The conditions on tea plantations were notoriously harsh. Workers faced long hours, meager wages, inadequate housing, and frequent physical abuse (Behal, 2014). The British plantation owners and managers justified this exploitation through racist ideologies that portrayed Indians as inherently inferior and in need of "civilizing" through labor (Sinha, 1995). This racial hierarchy was central to the maintenance of British imperial power, creating a system of social stratification that placed white Europeans at the top and Indian laborers at the bottom.

British imperialism also had profound cultural and psychological impacts on Indian society. Colonial education systems and administrative structures promoted Western values and knowledge while denigrating indigenous cultures and traditions (Viswanathan, 1989). This cultural imperialism contributed to a sense of alienation and inferiority among many Indians, themes that Anand surveys in his novel.

It is against this backdrop of economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and cultural domination that Anand wrote *Two Leaves and a Bud*. The novel's unflinching portrayal of life on a tea plantation serves as a microcosm for the broader systems of oppression inherent in British imperial rule.

Anand's Literary Style and the Progressive Writers' Movement

Mulk Raj Anand was a key figure in the Indian Progressive Writers' Movement, a literary collective that emerged in the 1930s with the goal of using literature as a tool for social reform and political activism (Malik, 1967). Influenced by Marxist ideology and anti-colonial sentiment, the movement sought to create a new Indian literature that would reflect the realities of the masses and challenge oppressive social structures (Zaheer, 2006).

Anand's writing style in *Two Leaves and a Bud* exemplifies the aesthetic and political principles of the Progressive Writers' Movement. He employs a realist approach, vividly depicting the harsh conditions on the tea plantation and the daily struggles of the workers.

This commitment to realism serves a dual purpose: it debunks the grim realities of colonial exploitation to a wider audience, and it gives voice to marginalized characters who were often absent from mainstream literary representations.

The novel's language is direct and unadorned, eschewing flowery prose in favor of clear, powerful descriptions that convey the brutality of plantation life. Anand frequently incorporates Hindi and Punjabi words and phrases into the narrative, creating a linguistic hybridity that reflects the complex cultural landscape of colonial India (Ramanan, 2012). This technique also serves to challenge the dominance of English as the language of literature and administration in colonial India.

Anand's characterizations are nuanced and psychologically complex, avoiding simplistic portrayals of heroes and villains. Instead, he shows how the colonial system corrupts and dehumanizes both the oppressors and the oppressed. This approach aligns with the Progressive Writers' belief in literature's potential to illuminate the social and psychological impacts of oppression (Coppola, 1974).

Through these stylistic choices, Anand creates a narrative that is both politically engaged and artistically compelling. *Two Leaves and a Bud* epitomizes how literature can function as a form of resistance, exposing injustice and advocating for social change.

Representation of British Imperialism

Anand's portrayal of British imperialism in *Two Leaves and a Bud* is multifaceted, exposing the various ways in which colonial power structures permeated every aspect of life on the tea plantation. The novel depicts imperialism as a system of economic exploitation, racial oppression, and cultural domination that dehumanizes both the colonized and the colonizers.

Economic Exploitation

At its core, Anand presents British imperialism as a system of ruthless economic exploitation. The tea plantation serves as a microcosm of the broader imperial economy, with Indian laborers toiling to produce wealth for British owners. Gangu and his fellow workers are trapped in a cycle of poverty and debt, their wages barely sufficient for survival. Anand writes:

"The coolies worked and slaved and died. The Company's shareholders got their dividends. The British Empire prospered. Tea was drunk by the rich people in England and America and Russia" (Anand, 1937, p. 78).

This stark juxtaposition highlights the vast inequalities inherent in the imperial system. The novel flaunts how the promise of better wages and living conditions used to lure workers to the plantation is a cruel deception. Instead, they find themselves in a state of de facto slavery, unable to leave due to accumulated debts and lack of alternatives.

Anand also evaluates the capitalist logic underlying imperialism through the character of Reggie Hunt, the British assistant manager. Hunt's obsession with increasing productivity and profits, even at the cost of workers' lives, exemplifies how the imperial system prioritized economic gain over human welfare. The novel thus presents imperialism as an extension of exploitative capitalist practices, with racial hierarchies serving to justify and intensify economic oppression.

Racial Hierarchy and Discrimination

The racial hierarchy underpinning British imperialism is a central theme in *Two Leaves and a Bud*. Anand unfolds a rigidly stratified society on the plantation, with white British officials at the top, Anglo-Indians and educated Indians in the middle, and the Indian laborers at the bottom. This hierarchy is maintained through various forms of discrimination and violence.

The British characters, particularly Reggie Hunt, repeatedly express racist views that portray Indians as inherently inferior, lazy, and in need of strict discipline. These attitudes are used to justify the harsh treatment of workers and to maintain British dominance. Anand writes:

"The trouble with these coolies is that they don't understand kindness. You have got to be strict with them. They are like animals" (Anand, 1937, p. 112).

This dehumanizing language reflects the racist ideologies that were used to rationalize imperial rule. By putting these words in the mouth of a British character, Anand uncovers the ugly realities of colonial racism to his readers.

The novel also examines how racial hierarchies create tensions and divisions among the Indian characters. The educated Indian clerk, Babu, internalizes colonial attitudes and looks down on the plantation workers, illustrating how imperial ideologies can be absorbed and perpetuated by the colonized themselves.

Cultural Domination and Alienation

Anand's portrayal of imperialism extends beyond economic and racial oppression to encompass cultural domination as well. The novel portrays how British rule sought to impose

Western values and norms on Indian society, leading to a sense of cultural alienation among the colonized.

This is particularly evident in the character of Dr. Gupta, the plantation doctor. Educated in Western medicine, Gupta has internalized British cultural values and attitudes, leading to a disconnect from his own cultural roots. His attempts to navigate between Indian and British worlds highlight the psychological toll of cultural imperialism.

The novel also investigates how imperial cultural domination impacts religious practices and beliefs. When Gangu's wife falls ill, the family's traditional religious rituals are dismissed as superstition by the British authorities. This conflict between indigenous spiritual practices and Western rationalism underscores the cultural tensions inherent in the colonial encounter.

Anand further illustrates the alienating effects of cultural imperialism through the character of Leila, Gangu's daughter. Exposed to Western education and values, Leila begins to feel estranged from her family's traditional ways of life. Her internal struggle reflects the broader cultural dislocations experienced by many Indians under colonial rule.

Through these portrayals, Anand presents cultural imperialism as an insidious form of domination that undermines indigenous knowledge systems and creates psychological conflicts for the colonized. The novel suggests that true liberation must involve not only political and economic independence but also cultural reclamation.

Dehumanization and Moral Corruption

One of the most powerful aspects of Anand's critique of imperialism in *Two Leaves and a Bud* is his exploration of how the colonial system dehumanizes and morally corrupts both the colonized and the colonizers. The harsh conditions on the plantation strip away the dignity and humanity of the Indian workers, reducing them to mere instruments of labor in the eyes of their British overseers.

At the same time, Anand shows how participation in this oppressive system morally degrades the British characters. Reggie Hunt's descent into alcoholism and sexual predation can be read as a metaphor for the corrupting influence of imperial power. Even the more sympathetic British characters, like the idealistic Dr. MacInder, are ultimately complicit in a system that perpetuates injustice and suffering.

By depicting this mutual dehumanization, Anand challenges the imperial narrative of colonialism as a civilizing mission. Instead, he presents it as a morally bankrupt system that damages all who participate in it, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

Resistance and Agency

While Anand's portrayal of imperialism is overwhelmingly negative, the novel also sketches moments of resistance and assertions of agency by the Indian characters. These acts of defiance, though often small and ultimately futile within the narrative, serve to challenge the totality of imperial power and assert the humanity of the oppressed.

Gangu's refusal to accept injustice, even in the face of severe consequences, is one such example of resistance. His confrontations with British authorities, while ultimately leading to his death, demonstrate a refusal to be completely subjugated. Similarly, the workers' attempts to organize and demand better conditions, though brutally suppressed, indicate a growing consciousness of their collective power.

These instances of resistance, however limited, suggest that imperial control is never absolute. By including these moments in the narrative, Anand points towards the possibility of more organized anti-colonial resistance and foreshadows the eventual collapse of British rule in India.

Symbolism and Imagery

Anand employs powerful symbolism and imagery throughout *Two Leaves and a Bud* to reinforce his critique of imperialism. The tea plantation itself serves as a potent symbol of colonial exploitation, with the act of plucking "two leaves and a bud" representing the extractive nature of imperial economics.

The contrast between the lush, green tea gardens and the squalid living conditions of the workers symbolizes the stark inequalities of the colonial system. Anand writes:

"The tea gardens stretched for miles and miles around, virgin, green, fresh with the sap of spring... But the coolie lines were like open sewers" (Anand, 1937, p. 45).

This juxtaposition highlights how the beauty and wealth of the plantation is built upon the suffering of the workers.

The novel also uses weather and natural imagery to reflect the oppressive atmosphere of colonial rule. The relentless heat and humidity of Assam become metaphors for the suffocating nature of imperial control. Conversely, the monsoon rains symbolize both destruction and the possibility of renewal, hinting at the potential for change and resistance.

Gender and Imperialism

While the primary focus of *Two Leaves and a Bud* is on racial and economic oppression, Anand also searches how imperialism intersects with gender dynamics. The novel depicts

how colonial structures exacerbate existing patriarchal systems, creating multiple layers of oppression for Indian women.

The character of Sajani, Gangu's wife, embodies the particular vulnerabilities faced by women under colonial rule. Subject to both the patriarchal authority of her husband and the racial and class-based oppression of the British, Sajani's life is marked by constant struggle and suffering. Her death in childbirth, without access to proper medical care, serves as a stark indictment of the colonial system's neglect of women's health and wellbeing.

The threat of sexual violence against Indian women by British men is another recurring theme in the novel. Reggie Hunt's attempted rape of Leila not only symbolizes the broader violence of colonialism but also highlights how imperial power structures enabled and protected such abuses. This incident displays the hypocrisy of colonial claims to moral superiority and "protection" of Indian women.

Anand's portrayal of these gendered aspects of imperialism adds depth to his overall critique, illustrating how colonial oppression was experienced differently based on intersecting identities of race, class, and gender.

Comparative Analysis: Two Leaves and a Bud in the Context of Colonial Literature

To fully appreciate Anand's contribution to anti-colonial literature, it is useful to consider *Two Leaves and a Bud* in relation to other literary works addressing British imperialism in India. This comparative analysis will focus on how Anand's novel both aligns with and diverges from other notable texts in its representation of colonial power structures and racial hierarchies.

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) is often considered a seminal work of Anglo-Indian literature. Like Anand, Forster critiques the racial prejudices and cultural misunderstandings inherent in the colonial encounter. However, Forster's novel primarily pores on the experiences of British characters and educated Indians, while Anand centers the perspectives of poor, rural laborers. This shift in focus allows Anand to denounce aspects of colonial oppression that are largely absent from Forster's more genteel portrayal of Anglo-Indian relations.

George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), written just a few years before *Two Leaves and a Bud*, offers another point of comparison. Orwell, like Anand, presents a scathing critique of British colonial administration and the racist attitudes that underpinned it. However, Orwell's narrative is primarily concentrated on the moral corruption of the British characters, while

Anand gives equal weight to the experiences and inner lives of his Indian characters. This difference in perspective allows Anand to highlight a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of colonial society.

In contrast to both Forster and Orwell, Anand's work can be seen as part of an emerging tradition of Indian writing in English that sought to challenge colonial narratives from within. His contemporary, Raja Rao, similarly used the English language as a tool of resistance in his novel *Kanthapura* (1938). Like Anand, Rao focused on rural Indian characters and incorporated indigenous linguistic elements into his narrative. However, while Rao's novel is steeped in Hindu mythology and spirituality, Anand's approach is more secular and directly political.

Anand's work can also be productively compared to later postcolonial novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). While Rushdie's magical realist style differs greatly from Anand's social realism, both authors use innovative linguistic techniques to subvert the dominance of standard English and represent the hybrid nature of Indian identity under and after colonial rule.

In the context of these comparisons, *Two Leaves and a Bud* stands out for its unflinching portrayal of the economic realities of colonialism, its centering of subaltern perspectives, and its direct challenge to imperial ideologies. Anand's novel represents a significant shift towards a more confrontational and explicitly anti-colonial literature.

Reception and Impact

Upon its publication in 1937, *Two Leaves and a Bud* received mixed reviews, reflecting the polarized attitudes towards British imperialism at the time. In India, the novel was celebrated by nationalist and leftist circles for its powerful critique of colonial exploitation. The Indian literary critic K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar praised Anand for his "passionate identification with the exploited masses" and his ability to "give artistic shape to raw chunks of bitter experience" (Iyengar, 1962, p. 318).

In Britain, however, the novel's reception was more contentious. Some critics praised Anand's vivid portrayal of plantation life, but others accused him of exaggeration and anti-British bias. The controversy surrounding the novel led to it being briefly banned in India by the colonial government, which only served to increase its popularity among nationalist readers (Cawasjee, 1977).

The impact of *Two Leaves and a Bud* extended beyond its immediate reception. The novel played a significant role in raising awareness about the conditions on tea plantations and contributed to growing criticism of British colonial practices. It became an important text in the emerging field of postcolonial studies, offering scholars a vivid exploration of the intersections between race, class, and gender in colonial India.

Anand's work also influenced subsequent generations of Indian writers in English. His commitment to representing the lives of ordinary Indians and his use of vernacular expressions within English prose paved the way for authors like Bhabani Bhattacharya and Khushwant Singh, who continued to explore themes of social injustice and cultural identity in post-independence India.

In the broader context of world literature, *Two Leaves and a Bud* stands as an important example of how colonized peoples used the language and literary forms of the colonizers to challenge imperial power. The novel demonstrates the potential of literature to serve as a form of cultural resistance and to give voice to marginalized perspectives.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* offers a powerful and multifaceted critique of British imperialism in India, exposing the economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and cultural domination inherent in the colonial system. Through his stirring portrayal of life on a tea plantation, Anand illuminates the human costs of empire and challenges the ideological justifications for colonial rule.

The novel's representation of imperialism is notable for its comprehensiveness. Anand navigates how colonial power structures permeate every aspect of life, from economic relations to cultural practices to intimate personal relationships. By centering the experiences of poor Indian laborers, he gives voice to perspectives that were often absent from colonial and even some nationalist discourses.

Anand's critique extends beyond a simple binary of oppressor and oppressed. He shows how the imperial system corrupts and dehumanizes both the colonizers and the colonized, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. This nuanced approach allows for a deep exploration of the psychological and moral impacts of colonialism.

The novel's depiction of racial hierarchies is particularly incisive. Anand exposes how racist ideologies were used to justify economic exploitation and maintain British dominance. At the

same time, he shows how these hierarchies created divisions among Indians themselves, complicating simplistic notions of colonial resistance.

Two Leaves and a Bud also makes important contributions in its exploration of gender dynamics under colonial rule. By highlighting the particular vulnerabilities faced by Indian women, Anand adds depth to his overall critique of imperialism and illustrates how colonial oppression intersected with existing patriarchal structures.

Stylistically, the novel instantiates the principles of the Progressive Writers' Movement, using realist techniques and direct language to expose social injustices. Anand's incorporation of Indian vernacular expressions into English prose represents an early example of the linguistic hybridity that would become a hallmark of postcolonial literature.

In the context of colonial and postcolonial literature, *Two Leaves and a Bud* stands out for its unflinching portrayal of colonial exploitation and its centering of subaltern perspectives. While other writers of the period also critiqued aspects of British rule, Anand's novel is notable for its comprehensive and direct challenge to imperial ideologies and practices.

The enduring relevance of *Two Leaves and a Bud* lies in its powerful illustration of how literature can function as a form of resistance to oppressive systems. By raising voice to the voiceless and exposing the human costs of empire, Anand's novel continues to resonate with readers and scholars grappling with the legacies of colonialism and ongoing forms of global inequality.

In conclusion, *Two Leaves and a Bud* represents a significant contribution to anti-colonial literature and postcolonial studies. Through its representation of British imperialism and racial hierarchies, the novel puts forward a fierce imputation of colonial rule while also pointing towards the possibility of resistance and change. As such, it remains an important text for understanding the complexities of the colonial experience and the power of literature to challenge oppressive systems.

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