

## Depiction of Indian Society in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand

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### 1. Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the greatest novelists of Indian English literature. He is also the most distinguished contemporary humanist of the time. Although he prefers to express his creative urge in a foreign language, yet he is a pure Indian both in thought and spirit. He has a great concern for down trodden people of Indian society and his novels, therefore, throw light on the existing pains and predicaments of 'have-nots.' His novels present minute pictures of Indian society with special focus on the plights of poor people. Anand's, nearly five decades of fiction writing, has earned for him immense reputation both in India and abroad. He was awarded Padma Bhushan in 1967.

The creative artist of our age has to become a god, independent of his creation, revealing his omnipresence through a pervasive insinuation of his compassion or understanding of all his characters, through the varying tensions of their lives in search of personal relations.<sup>1</sup>

Anand emphasized on the dignity of man without respecting caste, creed and wealth. The chief characteristics of his humanism are his plea for the exercise of compassion as a living value, his conception of the whole man, the deep significance he attaches to art and poetry as instruments for developing whole man, his crusade against superstition, feudalism, and imperialism. The theme and subjects of Anand are chiefly aimed at portraying the contemporary social situation as seen and felt by the individual. More often than not, Anand's individual finds himself in an unenviable circumstances, being a prey of feeble traditions and savage customs, a defiled social order or a cruel administration.

Delineating graphically the helpless individual in his pitiful and helpless state, Lakshman Shastri, the editor of Contemporary Indian Literature rightly observes:

Dr. Mulk Raj Anand is a unique type of optimistic humanist who is capable to move the most pessimistic man to action. He is a very sensitive lover of all that is good and lovable on earth—good books, fine pieces of art, good manners. He stands for lasting peace and friendly relations between nations. At the same time he is also ruthless critic of all that is worn out and decaying—dehumanising and degrading customs, manners, outdated social and political institutions, reactionary thoughts and ideologies. As a disciple of Tagore and Nehru, Dr. Anand has made painstaking efforts to understand the soul of this land which has been expressing itself through Indian thought and Indian culture. It appears to us that it is the profound knowledge of Indian mind on the one hand, and critical assessment of the various outdated social systems and institutions on the other, that has made Anand an uncompromising agitator and organizer.<sup>2</sup>

Anand is thus a humanist to the core. It is his constant faith in humanism that has perhaps made him a lovable man with infinite charm and interests. He is a true friend, a tireless worker, an excited organizer, a prolific writer, an unceasing champion of the cause of the poor and the submissive, a savage combatant against inequality and injustice, and above all, a trustworthy humanist with endless faith in man and creative arts.

Anand exposes the contemporary situation through an analysis of the predicament of the man and woman he knows. Anand saw Indian in terms of enslavement, caste, poverty, religious archaism, saluted the woman that reside in Anand's world are all preys of habit where man is ascribed the pride of place and thus allowed the socio-cultural confirmation of the female banishment.

Anand's writings are to be studied in relation to nineteen thirties movement in England. For, as a writer he was shaped in the 'thirties when social problems were more important than the individual, and when the old 'Fates-God and 'nature'- were superseded by the new 'Fates-Economics' 'Politics,' since they governed the common man. Anand lived in London for over twenty year from 1924 to 1945, and naturally profoundly influenced by the 'thirties movement. In London he came under numerous literary, political and social influences and it is there that the sources of his synthesis Marxist thought can be seen. He realized the significance of the 'thirties movement, since it began to see political, social and human causes as genuine impulses for the novel and poetry. Hence, a close understanding of the thirties movement is essential to comprehend correctly Anand's entire political philosophy.

Under the impact of this movement, it became a fashion and a compulsion to be an amateur Marxist. The new humanism, a new belief in brotherhood and the value of the life of every single breathing man and woman. Also, they believed that it should be a propaganda, and that it should principally deal with class struggle. The writers were deeply involved in the struggle for a new society. Anand actively participated in almost all the important conferences and activities of decade. He happened to read Karl Marx's letters on India which considerably clarified and strengthened his thoughts. Though he did not take up party membership, yet he followed his new creed vigorously. Not only this, he edited Marx's letters for the Indian public. He was deeply impressed by the human values underlying Marxism, and among these values, according him, "the dignity of man is the highest."<sup>31</sup> Besides, Marxism unfolded to him an interpretation of, and a solution to, the miseries and hardships of his fellow human beings. Written under the influence of the 'thirties movement, Anand's early novels are mainly a literature of protest. Like many books of this period, they describe the daily life of the oppressed and offer glimpses of the oppressors. They belong to a kind of

social realism which lays stress on human misery without clearly showing the possibility of a better future.

Anand's central preoccupation in his writings is with humanism. He regards art and literature "as the instruments of humanism."<sup>32</sup> The creative artist should have ardent love for human beings, especially the downtrodden, and should offer them his own exuberant passion by sharing with them 'the burning and melting' which is an intrinsic aspect of life at its intensest. This enables the writer, as well as the reader, to maintain the equilibrium in his life, and live cheerfully even in the face of the tragic events of the world. This humanism was, in Anand's case, the compulsion to write books. He came to grasp it under the influence of Marx, Guru Nanak, Gandhi and others, and it was the outcome of the synthesis of the best in Asia and Europe. In *Apology for Heroism*, he states his position as a humanist in the following words:

I believe, first and foremost, in human being, in Man, in the whole man...

The humanism which I prefer does not rest on a Divine Sanction... but puts its faith in the creative imagination of man, in his capacity to transform himself, in the tireless mental and physical energy with which he can, often in the face of great odds, raise himself to tremendous heights of dignity and redeem the world from its misery and pain...(pp137-41)

Anand's humanist philosophy finds its most systematic expression in his book. *Is There a Contemporary Indian Civilization?* He elaborates it as follows:

1. This humanism places man in the centre of all things.
2. This humanism believes that matter precedes mind in any metaphysical attitude towards the universe.
3. This humanism believes that man is an evolutionary product of the matter of which he is part.
4. This humanism, which puts man in the centre of the Universe, believes that human beings possess the potential power to understand many problems, hitherto undreamt of, both in relation to themselves and to nature.
5. This humanism believes, in opposition to all theories of fatalistic acceptance of God, predestination and determinism, that human beings, conditioned by man's history, possess genuine freedom of creative choice and action.
6. This humanism believes in an ethic which is based on human psychology and human values, in the earthly existence, achieved through the relations of persons and persons, and persons and society.
7. This humanism believes that the individual attains full manhood by integrating his personal satisfactions and continuous creative self development through significant creative work with hand, the heart and the brain...
8. This humanism believes in the widest and deepest possible development of creative art and the awareness of beauty.
9. This humanism believes in the brotherhood of man through the affirmations of love.

10. This humanism believes in the application of imagination, reason and scientific method in all human undertakings, making room for the undertakings of different instincts and emotions.
11. This humanism believes in the constant questioning of the basic assumptions and convictions of inventive science, employing throughout, human tests based on moral values.
12. This humanism wishes to connect itself to international humanism, so that, in spite of differences, a comprehensive universalist outlook may prevail....<sup>3</sup>

M.K Naik rightly says, "R.K. Narayan is the novelist of the individual, just as Mulk Raj Anand is the novelist of the social man"<sup>4</sup> *Coolie* is the domestic servant because of poverty. *Untouchable* narrates about the miserable condition of outcastes and social hypocrisy of religious people. *Tow Leaves* and *a Bud* throws light on the exploitation of the peasants by the Assam tea estate owners and attractions attitudes of Britishers.

*The Village*, *Across the Black Water* and *The Sword and the Sickle* forms a trilogy and express, Anand's sharp critical approach towards the traditional values of rural society. *The Big Heart* reflects truthful pictures of class and caste segmentation among people of the society. *The Old Woman and the Cow* depicts the miserable condition of farmers in the post-independence days. *Private Life of an Indian Prince* gives an account of dying feudal system in Indian.

Anand had a great love and respect for ancient Indian culture, which played subsequently a remarkable role in the formation of his philosophy of life. The writer once says:

The kind of humanism, in which I believe the kind of world I hope for...is yet integral to the Indian tradition in which I grew up.<sup>5</sup>

During his literary career, Anand created several philosophical works, besides works of fiction, in which he depicted particularly the problems of humanism, some works are: *Letters on India* (1942), *Apology of Heroism* (1947) and *Lines written to on Indian Air* (1949). But the human problems have been discussed in explicit manner in the book, *Is There a Contemporary Indian Civilisation* 1963. Anand says:

This human philosophy for India today as the acceptance of man as a centre of all our thinking, feeling and activity, and the service, for the greater good of all humanity.<sup>6</sup>

*Bakha*, the hero of Anand's first novel, *Untouchable* 1935, represents one of the most depressed castes of sewage sweepers. The sweeper is rather worse than a slave because the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever. He is born and brought in a much difficult social situation. He could not go to school for studies because he could defile the pupil of higher caste by his touch. But many innocent children are still seen willing to play with him in the evenings without being afraid that

the could defiled by his touches. Such situation makes readers to feel and realize intensely the painful life of the down trodden people.

Coolie (1935) analyses the caste problem of Indian society in a different way. Munoo, the main protagonist, belongs to the Rajput community, one of the higher castes in the caste hierarchy. Munoo, however, undergoes sufferings not less than those experienced by the untouchable Bakha, Munoo, says:

Caste did not matter. I am a Kshatriya, and I am poor, and Varma, a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial, because he is poor. No, caste does not matter... There must only be two kinds of people, in the world: the rich and the poor.<sup>7</sup>

Munoo is of opinion that caste is not the reason of sufferings but in fact social status decides a person's stands in the society. Anand's trilogy, consisting of the novels, *The village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1941) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), portray realistic pictures of the life of factory and plantation workers, its tiring works, constant events and malnutrition turning their lives into miserable and sinful. The life of a protagonist, Lalu Singh, lives a wandering life of an Indian peasant latter of a soldier of the First World War, and finally of a leader of the peasant movement. Lalu returns to his village after wandering of several years on the various fronts during the First World War, after injuries and captivity. Later on Lalu Singh becomes one of the leaders of the peasant union "Kisan Nagar," and gives reasons to the peasants the necessity of unity and consolidation for successful fight against landlords and money lenders. The novelist is keen to see down trodden people fighting against the oppressions. The worker Ratan, in novel *Coolie*, has been shown to be fighter-hero while working as a tradition leader. He fights with a number of people for increase in wages and Munoo, Hari and Shiboo join the workers trade union. The novels further show us the preparation of the Bombay workers for a general strike for their

right to work, for improvement of their economic status and for attainment of human dignity. The theme of class struggle raises the humanistic significance of the novel to a very high standard.<sup>8</sup>

The hero *The Big Heart* Ananta is a revolutionary worker with an experience of political struggle. He is aware of the advanced theories of Indian Marxists like G.M. Adhikari and N.M. Joshi. He has chosen the words of N.M. Joshi to follow whole-heartedly: "Forget yourself. Efface yourself. If need be sacrifice yourself for the good of others." His life is devoted for service of the people. The protagonist of *The Sword and the Sickle* reveals a decisive role of the people struggle for freedom of India. He condemns the Gandhian theory propagating non-violence. The Indian soldiers openly reveal in *Across the Black Water* that they had to serve in the Britisher's army not for defending the government, but simply because they are compelled by the poverty and hunger. *The Death of a Hero* (1963) thematically deals with the major events in Kashmir and the Indo-Pakistan armed conflict after partition of the country.

*The Private Life of an Indian Prince* narrates the tale of the Maharaja of Shampur, Ashok Kumar, or called also victor in the European style. The novelist shows in the novel that the feudal lord is ready to show any meanness for the sake of wealth and throne. In order to win their favour, he offers the American to use the territory of the principality for war purposes. The entire population of Shampur started protesting against their rulers negotiation with the Americans. A strike is declared and all the shops of the city are closed. The demonstrators raise slogan; "Down with Raja." Bool Chand, one of the characters of the novel, delivers the speech, "His Highness is a trespasser on the sacred soil of the Indian Union." The people's resistance becomes so strong that the plan of the Raja becomes completely frustrated. The fictions of Mulk Raj Anand are therefore full of realism and humanistic thought.

## References:

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