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SKETCHING MULK RAJ ANAND AS A POSTCOLONIAL WRITER

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ABSTRACT

Very often we find critics projecting Anand as a Dalit writer. It is beyond doubt that he reflected the plight of the underdogs in depth and detail. But this article explores a new facet of Anand's writings. In his writings he has not only raised concern for the oppressed but has protested against the oppressors. Though he has not been that much articulate but we can mark an implied undertone of protest which makes him postcolonial through and through. Here the article has traced out the postcolonial elements present in his *Untouchable* and *Coolie*.

Key words: postcolonialism, dalit, subaltern, untouchable, coolie, discrimination, emancipation



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This article explores the spirit of postcolonialism in the writings of Mulk Raj Anand. In his novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie* he not only reflects the exploitation of his contemporary society but also he has posed strong objection to the system. The society was ridden with so many categories of social exploitations based on religion, caste, class, poverty, education, marriage and sex. Anand in his fictional writings stages a three-fold protest against the political domination of colonialism, the economic exploitation of feudalism and capitalism and the religious bigotry of Hinduism. Anand's emergence as a protest writer is thus the natural outcome of his exposure to man's inhumanity to men which reached his apogee during the colonial era.

The industrial, feudal and social exploitation portrayed in his novels may be added to more facts, medieval exploitation and the exploitation which still continues in the post-British period because these elements are still present in India till today to some extent. So committed is he to his creed that Anand endeavors to apotheosize man and tries to bring amelioration to the millions of hapless Indian masses subjected to the worst forms of sociological indignity, apathy, boredom and ugliness. He endeavors to restore to the India's 'lost generation' of untouchables, of coolies, and of indentured laborers.

Anand is fired with a missionary zeal which makes him one of the finest expositors and propagandists. His objective is commensurate with his ideological predilections and the social values he tries to uphold. He believes in the dictum that the novelist must go beyond the surface and touch the root reality, the boredom and ugliness, which punctuates the lives of the inarticulate Indian masses. Anand has written in his *Apology for Heroism*:

Any writer, who said that he was not interested in la condition humaine, is either posing or yielding to a fanatical love of isolation- a perverse and clever defense of the adolescent desire to be different. (09)

He also feels that “a writer must go straight to the heart of the problem of our time, the problem of human sensibility in present complex world, the tragedy of moral man.” (78) He neither shies away from his ideological commitments nor does he feel ashamed of using fiction for all his propagandistic purposes. So committed is he to his creed that Anand endeavors to apotheosize man and tries to bring amelioration to the millions of hapless Indian masses subjected to the worst forms of sociological indignity, apathy, boredom and ugliness. He endeavors to restore to the India’s ‘lost generation’ oh untouchables, of coolies, and of indentured laborers.

He was aware of the suffering of great many people who were exploited. The memory of their suffering began to obsess him and paved the way for his writings. At an impressionable age he has become aware of the religious hypocrisy and bigotry in Indian society and of its injustice thriving on anachronistic practices. Such practices include untouchability, feudalism and economic exploitation of the have-nots by the haves. Furthermore, during his stay in England he had also read the letters of Karl Marx and had been considerably influenced by his human concerns and values. Various experiences of his life have made him a militant critic of the baser elements of the Indian tradition. Anand belonged to a period which was infused with the cruelty of the affluent. As a champion of the underdogs, he throws light on the psychology of both the exploited and the exploiters. He raised his voice against untouchability, cruel masters over innocent workers and fallacies which were prevalent during his time through his writings. His fictions represent the form of contemporary society vividly. The social set up of his period particularly before pre-independence looms large in his fictions. Anand is one of the few writers who lived and lived intensely through all the phases of colonial experience and who continually rendered it into a range of exploratory discourses. His pronouncements on literature and fiction writing that appeared in a number of articles constitute a theory of literature that is invaluable in the context of the emergence of post-colonial theory. Anand establishes cross-cultural links among all post-colonial writers and views them as fellow travelers in their common pursuit of the emancipation of man.

Anand is passionately concerned with the inarticulate Indian men and women and the atrocities perpetrated on them by the complicity of social and economical orders which in fact constitutes the cause for his vociferous protestations. He writes in an angry reformist way, like a less humorous Dickens of the personal feelings induced by moribund social values and touchingly speaks of the miseries of the countless Indian untouchables, coolies and laborers. As professor K.R.S. Iyengar points out:

Thus, when Anand started writing fictions, he decided he would prefer the familiar to the fancied, that he would avoid the highways of romance and sophistication but explores the by-lanes of the outcastes and the peasants, the sepoys and the working people. It was, however, no laborious exercise of the self-conscious proletarianism. To Anand it was merely the easier and more natural way; he was himself of the proletariat. It is the atmosphere of the late twenties and early thirties, the air was filled with the dust of politics and infected with the fumes of man’s inhumanity to man, but it was not altogether unrelieved by hope. It is also worthy of mention that Anand is a committed writer. (334)

Growing up under the colonial society, and writing as a colonial and post-colonial, Anand stays close to the multifarious manifestations of this historical encounter. The colonial experience is a live experience to him and his writing is therefore linked to this theme directly. Spending his childhood in the cantonment of Mian Mir and Nowshera, Anand was constantly conscious of the presence of the alien masters. He stood in awe of them, feared their power and resented their domination. Early in life his admiration for the Sahibs was shattered by the unjust punishment meted out to him by the Adjutant Sahib of his father’s regiment. As Anand *salaamed* and stared at the officer, waiting for the latter to smile, the officer got irritated and swished his cane. Anand was even more disheartened to see the passive submission of his father to the power of his White boss.

Anand was only eight when he witnessed the cruelty of a British brigade taking three hundred innocent lives of the Pathans in the Nowshera cantonment. He saw the corpses piled up in the graveyard and this left a lasting and terrifying impression of the British on his innocent mind. Later in 1919, when a curfew was declared in Amritsar, Anand went out to see that curfew. But he was arrested, flogged and detained in the police station overnight. In the same year he witnessed another tragedy wherein nearly three hundred women were shot dead by the British regiment as a punishment for their disobedience. All these incidents of colonial violence left such an indelible impression on Anand's psyche. Colonial authority was not the only structure of hierarchy that Anand noticed. By the time he was nine, he knew that there were superiors and inferiors all around him. The caste structure that discriminated a section of people as untouchables and privileged certain castes over the others; the caste systems in which the rich controlled the poor; the regimentation within the cantonment where the native officers behaved exactly like their White bosses, and the patriarchal hierarchy in which all decisions were taken by the male - all these came to be so deeply inscribed in his psyche that his creative work confronts these issues. Anand in his fictional writings stages a three-fold protest against the political domination of colonialism, the economic exploitation of feudalism and capitalism and the religious bigotry of Hinduism. Anand's emergence as a protest writer is thus the natural outcome of his exposure to man's inhumanity to men which reached his apogee during the colonial era.

Anand is no doubt a true humanist whose heart bleeds for the cause of common people who are neglected and oppressed. He writes out of an acute social consciousness that is vitally concerned with politics and society, that is with the function of power in a given society and its effect on the moral, social and cultural and even aesthetic values of the people in that society. He is convinced of the social obligations of a creative writer and holds that art cannot be divorced from its social functions. Anand is a spokesman for art for people's sake. He believes that a writer in an emerging society has multiple roles to play. A writer should play the role of a teacher, guide, mentor and reformer and conscience-keeper of the race. Anand himself tells us in his 'Apology for Heroism':

The theme of my work is the whole man and the whole gamut of the human relationships rather than only one single part of it. Just as I desire a total and true humane view of experience, a view of the whole man, in order that a completely new kind or revolutionary human may arise, so I have been inclined to stress the need for a truly humanist art commensurate with the need of our time. (59)

Anand has brought back the Indo-Anglican novel from history and romance to the hard realities of the present. He has made it from the mere entertainment or escapist light reading into an instrument of social reform. Anand writes with a purpose. His purpose is to focus attention on the suffering, misery and wretchedness of the poor which results from the exploitation of the underdogs of society by the capitalists. Through his art, he has rendered valuable service by highlighting the plights of the underdogs of society by enlisting our sympathy for them. Anand is seen at his best for exposing the exploiters of his contemporary society so as to place them in their fictions. He vehemently criticizes the decayed aspects of the Indian tradition. In the words of M.K.Naik:

Anand is at his best when exposing the limitations of the decayed Indian traditions and championing the cause of modernism as a cure for the ills of Indian society and when in doing so, he maintains his balance. (23)

Anand's obsession with exploitation widened from its social aspects to economic and political ones from novel to novel in the early stage of his career. The exploiters of his novels are big landlords, money-lenders, tea-planters, temple-priests, trade men, school masters and other high class people. The exploited are the untouchables, landless peasants, laborers, coolies etc.

Like all themes in art, the theme of exploitation in Anand's novels also has its correlates in his life as well as the life around him. He gained firsthand knowledge of the under-privileged. Anand lived in the society of the children of untouchables in his childhood as a young man. Naturally, therefore, Anand developed a feeling of tenderness and sympathy for the down-trodden, which promoted him to portray their exploitation in his novels. In most of the novels of Anand, the economic status has been presented as more crucial than the religion based social status as a factor in exploitation. The economic exploitation as portrayed in his novels stems from the political situation in India under British imperialism. Feudal and usurious capitalism, which

existed in India in those days, joins hands with the British industrial capitalism as a factor in exploitation. The mill owners engineered communal riots in order to divert the attention of the laborers. The British Government connives at the communal riots and exploits its Indian citizens to strengthen its hold on them.

Social exploitation in Anand's novel has three broad categories. There are social exploitation based on organized religion, extra-religious, social exploitation involved in defective marriage and education, and finally, the sexual exploitation. To the industrial, feudal and usurious exploitation portrayed in his novels may be added to more facts, medieval exploitation and the exploitation, which still continuous in the post-British period because poverty persists in India to no small extent.

The conflict in all his novels is not a clash between the equals; it takes the form of exploitation of a less fortunate and less privileged group by a more powerful and privileged set of individuals. The two groups involved, therefore, turns into victims and victimizers, and the writer's sympathy for the former becomes obvious. While presenting and elaborating the theme of conflicts in the different facets of human experience, Anand never loses an opportunity to portray the conflicts basic to his contemporary society- the colonial conflict.

The relation between the white master and the native, the predilections and prejudices that color this relationship and the ultimate dehumanization, such a relationship results in- all these issues figure prominently in Anand's fictional work. It is not mere political freedom that man has lost in the empire but psychological freedom to think independently. Anand offers a careful evaluation of the social laws and values that perpetuate a colonial mentality, and underscores the urgency for making a new social order. Colonial experience thus informs and shapes the contours of fictional troupes in Anand's works.

Anand lays stress on the demand of the present; he refuses to be bound by stale custom and orthodoxy. In fact his novels convey emotional truths as well as social realities. The beauty of his art and fiction is well realized by way of analysis and interpretation of social problems such as exploitation of the poor as seen in *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. *Untouchable* gives a realistic touch that deals with a hegemonic structure peculiar to India that is the caste system. Anand throws light on a heterogeneous field where different kinds of exploitations are at work with different systems of domination. The hero of *Untouchable* is a sweeper boy named Bakha, around whom the whole gamut of action moves. Bakha occupies a position of subalternity in more than one scheme of exploitation: class, caste and colonial subjugation. Anand portrays him as a symbol of psychological slavery that pervades a colonized society. He combines wide experience with architectonic skill, cosmic vision with objective truth, as in *Coolie*, a novel instinct with epic amplitude and magnificence. Anand's focus is here on the economic exploitation of the Indian peasant and worker by the oppressive forces of capitalism and colonialism. He portrays the predicament of the industrial workers through the tragic tale of the protagonist, Munoo who is a village lad. The story of Munoo is the story of every exploited individual in India and the patterns of life are intended to show the pitilessness in the lives of millions of people who are condemned to lead a life of an unending saga of social degradation. Like Premchand, Anand too is a serious novelist and a passionate reformer, a critic of life. He traces the roots of social injustice and moral degradation to the disruption based on cooperation and brotherhood and the growth of inequality and tyranny based on class and caste scruples.

Caste system, though seemingly related to Indian milieu or the Hindu community has a universal dimension which needs to be recognized. It is therefore surprising that barring Anand, no other Indian writer has projected it in any significant terms. The fact that even after the passing of the Untouchability Offences Act in 1955, the evil of untouchability still persists in the country. It reflects a deep rooted prejudice which affects the human behavior and poses an intractable problem. Social discrimination will hinge in our society. Exploitation of the subaltern is all pervasive, though their form and proportion might be different from the cases of Pre-Independence era.

The origin of untouchability is an enigma to modern history but it is generally held to be a perverted outcome of the caste system. As time passed by, they divided themselves for different occupation. Those who took to learning became Brahmins, undertook governance became Kshatriyas, took to trade were Vaishyas, and those who served to these three classes became Shudras. But in actual practice this original principle of

division of labor did not sustain for long. The result was that original four divisions became watertight compartments and degenerated later into the present day caste system. Another view holds that these untouchables were broken men and then followers of Buddhism. In their fallen days, they did not assimilate themselves with Vedic Hindus or give up beef eating and so they were degraded and segregated as Untouchables.

The practice of untouchability continues and Dalits continue to live outside villages, excommunicated from society. They are denied entry into temples, they are not allowed to share community wells, they are forced to drink water from separate glasses in some rural cafes and they are frequently attacked or abused if any sign of defiance is shown. When they cross an upper caste house, they routinely alight from their bicycle and push it rather than ride it. Sometimes they take off their footwear till they clear the exclusion zone. The police are reluctant to register their complaints or investigate cases filed by them. Some decade-old massacres of Dalits have not yet reached the prosecution stage. Strangely the Shudras or the backward castes have become advocates of political Hinduism or Hindutva, and have emerged as the biggest threat to Dalit rights. The backward castes have progressed economically over the past century, and being peasant communities, their interests clash with those of the landless Dalits.

The basis of everyone's rights lies not in their religious identity or affiliation but in their humanity. Dalits need education and training in Human Rights. As victims of superstitions, they need exposure to rational thinking. The succor and superstition of another religion will do little to change the lot of the Dalits. The problem of untouchability is more than an issue of law and order – it is a deep rooted, millennia-old malady that afflicts society. Unless the Dalits have belief in them and are empowered to assert their own humanity, unless they themselves discover their inherent human dignity, they will continue to be where they are – on the extreme of society. But empowerment of the Dalits will come only when their fractured movements are united on the basis of democratic principles. Emancipation is a personal achievement, and the victim needs to enact his or her own emancipation.

Caste system which is very much prevalent in our society separates the high caste people from the low caste by birth. This class hierarchy sows seed for exploitation. The high caste men look down upon the low caste men. The so called caste Hindu exploits them. This is the greatest sin that mankind often commits. Swami Vivekananda remarks: "The greatest national sin is the neglect of the masses and that is one of the causes of our downfall". (327) Anand through his writings has waged a war against those intimidating social forces and has tried his best to uphold the dignity of the Dalits.

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