



A CRITICAL RECEPTION ON SELECTED NOVELS OF MULK RAJ ANAND

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ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand's half a dozen novels deal with the social issues in pre-independent India. Unlike the other Indian Social novelists Sarat Chandra or Prem Chand, Anand dealt with the lowest strata of Indian Society – *the untouchables, Coolies, Sepoy* etc., He has literally immersed into the flowing, vibrant core of humanity and he feels its grief to the very marrow of his bones. M. R. Anand's special quality is that he had the first hand experience of all that he wrote. Speaking as a novelist, he said that he came across people who had rather forced him to put them down in his novels. Throughout his literary career, Anand wrote about real people whom he knew quite closely. Critics argue that his socially conscious works have shed keen insights on Indian affairs and enriched his country's literary heritage. His plight has been explored by the writer in sympathetic but objective way. An analysis is done in this paper to bring to light the critical evaluation by various famous critics on Mulk Raj Anand selected novels.

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INTRODUCTION

A critical analysis is subjective writing because it expresses the writer's opinion or evaluation of a text. Analysis means to break down and study the parts. Writing a critical paper requires two steps: critical reading and critical writing. Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is one of the best known novelists in English in India. Translated into many languages in India as well as abroad, he has been universally acclaimed as a progressive writer. The present anthology of recent critical essays probes into his internationally reputed novels like *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Gauri* as well as his various collections of short stories. The critical perspective is fresh and innovative, embracing the latest critical theories and schools.

In the words of Saros Cowasjee,

"No Indian writer of fiction in English comes anywhere near Mulk Raj Anand in providing

a social and political portrait of India from the time of the Delhi durbar of 1911 to the demise of the Indian princess following Indian Independence in 1947".

Along with R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao, Anand is credited with establishing the basic forms and themes of modern Indian literature written in English. At the core of his writing is a humanist philosophy that incorporates elements of socialist political and economic theory.

His personal experiences and the reform of India's political, social, and cultural institutions are major elements in Anand's writings. Such early fictional works as *Untouchable*, *The Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) dramatize the cruelties inherent in the caste system and the suffering induced by poverty. *Untouchable*, for example, was inspired by the author's childhood memory of a low-caste sweeper boy who carried

him home after he'd been injured; the boy was, however, beaten by Anand's mother for touching her higher-caste son. The book was a revelation to readers unaware of the circumstances of life in a caste society and sparked extensive critical debate. Anand's interest in social themes continued in *The Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, which relate the tribulations of working-class life in India. Critics assert that in his early work Anand employed a markedly polemical style when attributing India's social problems to the caste system, British rule, and capitalism. His style and thematic focus shifted to more psychological and humanistic interpretations in such later works as *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953)—which explores the emotional and mental deterioration of a young royal who neglects his duties in pursuit of an affair with a peasant woman—and in the autobiographical novels comprising his "Seven Ages of Man" series, in which he relates the events of his life through the character Krishan Chander. The first volume in the series, *Seven Summers* (1951), spans the first seven years of the author's life and explores the interplay of reality and imagination unique to childhood. In *Morning Face* (1968), Anand recounts the inadequacy of his early education and the cruel treatment he and other students endured at the hands of their schoolmasters, memories that led the author in later years to campaign for educational reform in India. *Confession of a Lover* (1984) explores the pain of a lost love during the author's college years. *The Bubble* (1984), which covers his life as a student and young writer in London, includes much discussion of his involvement with the Bloomsbury Group writers.

For his realistic portrayals of the social and economic problems suffered by Indians because of the caste system and British colonial rule, Anand is considered by many critics to be one of India's best writers. The value of his novels, according to Margaret Berry, "is the witness they offer of India's agonizing attempt to break out of massive stagnation and create a society in which men and women are free and equal." Although Anand's early works were faulted by some critics for stereotypical characterization, didacticism, and melodrama, critics have noted a restraint in later novels that enhances

the persuasiveness of his appeals. Krishna Nandan Sinha has remarked: "While the later novels retain the passion for social justice, they sound greater emotional depths."

No one in India, had yet written the epic of suffering adequately because the realities were too crude for a writer. Further it was not easy to write an epic in India while all the intricate problems of the individual in the new world had yet to be solved. Mulk Raj Anand touches new themes. His first novel 'Untouchable'. It tells about a day's event in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy. The novel 'Untouchable' indeed offers a telling comment on what might be regarded as a running sore in the Indian body politics. The novel tells about the conflict between two classes of society; though the conflict there is not between untouchables and the caste Hindus; it is between a class of artisans and a class of capitalists. Though 'Untouchable' was the shortest of all his novels, it has made the most effective impact on Indian readers. The novelist shows the real condition of the bottom dogs with a remarkable objectivity. It exposes the sorrows and sufferings that the caste Hindus inflicted on the scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters etc. The sweeper is the worst and the most miserable creature among the low castes. He stands in the lowest rung even in the hierarchy of the castes among the low castes. In the words of E. M. Forster:

"The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disgusting object to call out and warn them that he is coming"

E. M. Foster in the preface of *Untouchable* observes that: *Bakha* is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometime weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive, we can recognize broad intelligent face, graceful torso ... as

he does it nasty job or stumps out in artillery boots, in the hope of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in his hands. Anand with his remarkable skill portrays Bakha's helpless, frustration, anxiety and agony to the degree that he has become embodiment of his own creation or in other words the creator and the creator co-mingle at one point. Through the character Bakha in *Untouchable*, Anand highlight the condition of inhumanity faced by them in the society. The *untouchable* covers the event of a single day in the life of the low caste boy Bakha, in the town of Bulashah. Anand concludes the novel with a note of faith and idealism. As Bakha returns his mind is raised with the hope that soon the flush system would come to the sweepers and people like him: "Can be free from stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society. Bakha fervently hopes for the dawn to his nature of work and his relevance in the society without the label of an untouchable. Anand meticulously brings out the inner life of Bakha. It was growing concern for metaphoric untouchable in all cultures and walks of life.

Anand's novels are a powerful portrayal of the social, economic and political upheavals of his time. But the focal point is that times and again he sympathized with the oppressed. Being a great champion of the modern 'Subaltern Theory' he had a tilt towards the poor and the down-trodden. With goodness of his heart he shares joy and sorrow of common men and women in both the novels '*Coolie*' and '*Untouchable*.' The 'Other' in the form of Munoo ('*Coolie*') or Bakha ('*Untouchable*'), or Gangu ('*Two Leaves and a Bud*'), finds its own voice to sing his own song. These unsung heroes had one thing in common they belonged to the teeming millions who, according to Anand, were the victims of civilization and its offspring like poverty, colonialism, capitalism, urbanization, industrialization, communalism, casteism etc. For Bakha and Munoo happiness was but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain. Both the characters suffered from some sort of spiritual and mental crisis but could not raise themselves up to ameliorate the gloom or to establish their self-

identity. Bakha could not come to terms with three solutions he was given. His hopes were never realized. Similarly, Munoo's urban life turned out to be hellish. He died while suffering from tuberculosis. According to Saros Cowasjee, Anand "could not show that victory which was a marked feature of proletarian literature of the thirties in Europe". A stoical acceptance of fate marked Anand's characters. But Cowasjee's words can be set aside by saying that even in the stoical acceptance of fate by the heroes of Anand there is a sense of passive heroism in them because sometimes "silence is more eloquent than words." His novels proves instrumental, with a missionary zeal, in arousing the conscience of the people by showing the endless struggle of the oppressed - the poor and the destitute. M.K.Naik observes: "The author's compassion for the exploited and the down-trodden is pure and intense but does not degenerate into blend hysterics or dull preaching; one of the aspects of exploitation is presented in '*Coolie*'. This is exploitation of the Indian by the white man and poor by the rich." The relevance of Anand's novels in India will remain inevitable so long as we are unable to relieve ourselves from the curses of poverty, untouchability and social apathy. Anand does not recognize pure art or 'art for art's sake', but he believes in the social significance of literature. To echo his own words- "...what is a writer if he is not the fiery voice of the people..."

The critic Margaret Berry, (1971) can only regret that with such noble matter, Anand's considerable talents and energies should so early and so long have operated in the restrictive climate of a doctrinaire aesthetic. (p. 97)

Margaret Berry in *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist* (1971); In attacking Indian institutions, Anand employs, in his novels, direct and indirect means. Direct assault occurs in the author's own commentaries and, in narrative or dramatic framework, as discussion and debate between characters or monologue and soliloquy of single characters. Indirect attacks appear in plots, settings, situations, episodes, above all in characterizations, as these are affected by Indian institutions.

Anand's novels present caste as only one element 'in the complex texture of social and

economic particularism and inequality in Indian society.' The author nevertheless sees this system as crucial, 'tying together all the other elements into a rigid structure.' At every level of society the characters more or less precisely understand their caste positions and, except for the reformers, acquiesce in caste cruelties....

[With] untouchability, Brahmanism is a major target of Anand's attack on the Indian social order. Even Brahmins of lowly occupation—waterboys, cooks, other menials—are typically portrayed as grasping, hypocritical, lascivious bullies, distinguished only by circumstances and crudeness from temple priests and family chaplains. Such figures are Lachman of *The Untouchable* and Varma and Lehnu of *The Coolie*. (p. 45)

A striking example of the relationship appears in *The Big Heart*. Here Anand coordinates caste, class, and communal affiliation with a completeness not apparent in *The Coolie* or *The Sword and the Sickle*. (p. 48)

The Village and *The Road* are strong in portrayals of popular Hinduism, with its fear of avenging gods, its personal ritualistic devotion to chosen deities, its notions of *karma*, *dharma*, and *maya* as providing explanation for present suffering, motivation for present action, hope for future good. The end result of popular religion, as Anand portrays it, is fatalism, passive acceptance of present evils as somehow divinely ordained and best endured without revolt. Such an attitude is viewed as radically discouraging to social change and productive of what one character describes as 'the abjectness into which the gentleness of their religious faith and the power of their priests ... had schooled them.' (pp. 49-50)

While Anand's novels show sympathetic acceptance of much Western thought in social as well as political and economic spheres, towards Christianity they display little understanding or sympathy. When Christianity does appear, as in Colonel Hutchinson's preaching of the Gospel, Lal's interview with the Bishop in *Across the Black Waters*, the love interests of Clara Young of *The Old Woman* and of Dorothy Thomas and June Withers of

The Private Life, it is quickly dismissed as a religion productive of narrowness, easy toleration of war, self-indulgence, arrogance, stress on sin, and hostility to sex. (p. 54)

Only once does Anand give sustained attention to this theme, but certain abuses against 'the welfare and freedom of women' recur frequently in his novels. Women as workers in factory and field are seen as subjected to greater cruelties and deprivations than men. Low-caste girls are portrayed as easy prey for upper-caste lust, as with Sohini of *The Untouchable* and Leila of *Two Leaves and a Bud*.... Young wives are depicted as easily cast off.... (p. 56)

Besides negative ideas about love and marriage, however, Anand has some positive views, expressed directly only in the late *Private Life of an Indian Prince*.... Anand's attack on conventional Hindu marriage is also re-inforced by his approval of 'free love,' as it is exercised by the lovers of *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *The Sword and the Sickle*, and *The Big Heart*. These partners are portrayed as enjoying a basically true and good union outside conventional marriage. (pp. 58-9)

Along with his protagonists' felt need of education, however, Anand points out, especially in *The Lament* and *Seven Summers*, abuses in Indian education. Brutality, perversion, favoritism, extortion, are typically attributed to schoolmasters, along with rote learning devoid of understanding and a deadening curriculum. Higher educational levels are marked by caste snobbery, inculcated in Indian homes, and by development of scorn for common work.... (p. 60)

In contrast with such men Anand presents a few English characters who struggle to alleviate the lot of the exploited. The poet-physician John de la Havre of *Two Leaves* is one.... In general, Anand portrays no meaningful human relations between the races.... (p. 69)

In *The Big Heart* Anand approaches most nearly to a balance between his humanist insights and his sociological zeal. Regrettably he does not fully achieve the goal. What finally spoils that work is that what should have been the most humanist of emphases, *bhakti*, is, in this novel, made the tool of a political cause.

Krishna Nandan Sinha, in his Mulk Raj Anand (1972); Anand's place among other Indo-Anglian novelists is unique.... He has been the most authentic interpreter of responsible human experience *here and now*. His vision of the vast human concourse, his serene contemplation of characters and situations, his control of words and sentences, and, above all, his choice between alternatives make him perhaps the foremost and most significant novelist of today's India. (pp.134-35)

Mulk Raj Anand in his novels represents a departure from the tradition of Indian fiction in which the bottom dogs had not been allowed to enter the pages of the novel and act as protagonists. He allowed the poor and the underdogs to enter the pages of his novels. His characters are from the lower strata of society, like the sweeper, the peasant, the plantation labourer, the city drudge, the sepoy and the coolie, and treats them with sympathy and respect as human beings.

M. K. Naik, in his Mulk Raj Anand (1973); His chief limitations are exactly those that mar his longer fiction also. Time and again, his compassion for the underdog bowls him over; his indignation at the injustice of traditional practices erupts into hysteria; and he can seldom resist the temptation to squeeze the last tear out of a pathetic situation. (pp. 149-50)

In most all his novels, from *Untouchable* to *The Bubble*, man is a central figure. All his novels are novels of responsibility, of involvement of creative tension and its resolution, of profound humanism and moral values. Mulk Raj Anand's main aim is to reveal an idealistic humanistic vision of life. He writes with the aim of helping to raise the untouchables, the peasants, the coolies, to human dignity and self awareness. Mulk Raj Anand's novels show a happy blend of idealist; revolutionary socialism and a comprehensive historical humanism which is rare in the contemporary novel. In his novels Mulk Raj Anand attacks hypocrisy, superstition, and caste and class prejudices. Mulk Raj Anand, deals with man as a social being with a moral purpose capable of selfdevelopment. Mulk Raj

Anand's literary contributions map the pre-independence and modern India. His novels universalize issues, which concern every man, every community and every country. He produces a tragic vision of life but also finds resolutions to the problems it presents. In his novels he envisions a world permeated with love and good will.

No other novelists of Mulk Raj Anand's time dared to present this beautiful expression in their creations. It is therefore concluded that Mulk Raj Anand is very successful in depicting characters. In characterization he seems to give importance to Indian culture and ethos. When he finds that the Indian tradition is alter this tradition. "Untouchability", is one of the great examples of this type. Mulk Raj Anand's heroes remain passive witnesses to all the social and psychological traumas heaped upon them by the soulless social custom. To conclude, Mulk Raj Anand's characterization is not meant for characterization only, it is meant to give a new turn or direction to the Indian society.

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