

Choice of Characters in Mulk Raj Anand's Novels

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Abstract: *Mulk Raj Anand was a staunch believer of doctrine of humanism. Therefore he was very much sensitive to the sufferings of the people belonging to lower classes and castes. According to his theory of novel, Anand believed that a novel must not be only reportage of social events. He emphasizes on the idea of realism in the novels. But he talks about poetic realism. Following the theory of novel, Anand has made people from dirt and dust as protagonist of his novels. It was for the first time in Indian writings in English, barring some exceptions in regional writings, that the marginalized appeared as protagonists in his novels. The latrine sweepers, indentured coolies, tea estate workers, subjugated women, poor factory workers appear in his novels as heroes (rather anti heroes as Anand calls them). By making the underdogs as heroes, he had broken the tradition of English novels having heroes from the elite class. Anand was perhaps the first novelist who had made the unprivileged bottom dogs as heroes of his novels. By doing so he had taken the tradition of Sharat Chandra, Tagore and Premchand to great heights. Almost all of the protagonists in his novels were reflections of the real life people whom Anand had met or acquainted from close quarters. His protagonists like Bakha, Munoo, Gangu, Nur, Makbool Sherwani were real life people whose life and sufferings Anand had seen very keenly.*

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Mulk Raj Anand is one of those novelists whose contributions have brought Indian writing in English especially fictional works a special position and identity in the world literature. He is perhaps the first Indian novelist in English who gave voice to the voiceless by making the ordinary and unprivileged people heroes of his novels. We find untouchable latrine sweepers, plantation workers, coolies, farmers, factory workers, oppressed as protagonists in the various novels of Anand like *The Big Heart, Coolie, Untouchable, Two Leaves and a Bud, The Road, The Village Trilogy, The Old Woman and the Cow*. Thus his art is not for art's sake but it is for life's sake. Anand's place in Indian literature in English and is unique and unparalleled. When Anand appeared on literary scene, only elite class was central concern of his contemporaries as well as the predecessors in fiction. The lower class people had no place in the literature especially in the fictional writings. His novels proved as harbingers of revolution in this regard by introducing heroes from soil and dirt. Iyengar rightly comments:

In writing of the pariahs and the bottom dogs rather than of the elect and the sophisticated he had ventured into territory that had been largely ignored till then by the Indian writers...None of them cared to produce realistic or naturalistic fiction in the manner of Balzac or Zola. It was Anand's aim to stray lower still than even Sharat Chandra or Premchand to show to the west that there was more in the Orient than could be informed from Omar Khayyam, Lipo, Tagore or Kipling. (Iyengar qtd. in Azam 19-20)

Anand was perhaps the first novelist who had made the unprivileged bottom dogs as heroes of his novels. By doing so he had taken the tradition of Sharat Chandra, Tagore and Premchand to great heights. Another significant aspect of his corpus was that he had portrayed these lowly and lost as they were in real life with all their desires, aspirations and struggle for existence and the consequent failure against the power and authority, and tradition. Owing to his realism, humanism and social protest, Anand becomes a pioneer novelist.

2. CHARACTERS IN ANAND'S NOVELS:

Anand's choice of characters is in accordance with his theory of fiction. For Anand, novel has been a medium of expression of his deepest concern for the underdogs of the society, for the deprived and the rejected people who were marginalized either by caste or class in one way or the other. Since Anand believed in the dictum of 'arts for life's sake', he wanted to write about these marginalized folk, their problems and their struggle with the society. Though fictional works, in general, mostly deal with the imaginary characters, Anand has presented real people in his novels. Anand has confessed that there has always been a strong connection between his life and his writings throughout his literary career (*Sources of Protest* 18). Most of the characters in his novels are those whom he knew in real life. About his fictional characters who were modeled after the people with whom he chanced to live at one or the other stages of his life, Anand writes in his special preface to *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1951):

All these heroes, as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories were dear to me, because they were the reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth. And I was only repaying the debt of gratitude I owed them for much of the inspiration they had given me to mature into manhood, when I began to interpret their lives in my writing. They were not mere phantoms... They were flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood, and obsessed me in the way in which certain human beings obsess an artist's soul. And I was doing no more than what a writer does when he seeks to interpret the truth from the realities of his life (Anand, *Two Leaves and a Bud*).

These characters not only obsessed Anand but forced him to pen them down in novels. The choice of characters in a novel is determined to a large extent by the exigency of the period in which the novel is written and by the writers own interests, whims and idiosyncrasies (Arora 3). While writing novels, Anand has portrayed the real people—the people who were marginalized by society on the basis of caste and class. Indian writing in English or Anglo-Indian fictional works rarely presented such characters. Anand took a bold and fearless step by going to lowest stratum of the society to pick his heroes from the soil and the dirt. His heroes are downtrodden sweepers, coolies, the unemployed coppersmiths, indebted farmers, exploited wives and poor simple soldiers. Poverty and suffering are the badges of their class. They live and die, unwept, and unsung. His choice of characters and his objectives of writing novels were altogether different from other contemporary novelists. Anand confesses:

My novels were intended to be different from those of others, departures away from the upper and middle section fictions. I wished to create the folk, whom I knew intimately from the lower depths, the lumpens and the suppressed, oppressed, repressed, those who had seldom appeared in our literature, except in Sarat Chatterji, Prem Chand, Bibhuti, Tarashankar and Maneck Bannerji (*The Sources of Protest* 20).

The novelists that Anand mentioned above had represented the lower class and their hardships in works which were written in regional languages. But in the field of Indian writings in English, Anand is perhaps the first to write about this 'motley crowd' who were so far completely ignored by other contemporary Indian fictionists.

Anand wished to expose the hypocrisy, brutality, social snobbery, illogical conventions and prejudiced notions prevalent in the then Indian social system. Through the novels, he presented the Indian peasants, villagers, their poverty, squalor and backwardness coupled with gross ignorance and cruelties of caste system. His novels provide a larger canvas to the disinherited, the disadvantaged and the marginalized. For the first time, the other side of Indian society was brought in stark colors before the world. For this presentation of real India, he chose real characters from life instead of creating imaginary characters. Anand had been intimate with them in his childhood and youth. He had observed and experienced their thoughts, actions, reactions, feelings problems and joys. He had studied their feelings from so closely that he could easily identify himself with others.

His first novel *Untouchable* portrayed the tragic story of a sweeper boy, Bakha whom he adored as a hero from his childhood, "because he was physically like a god, played all the games superbly and could recite whole cantos from the epic poem *Heer Ranjha* of Waris Shah..." (*The Story of My Experiment* 5). He was compelled to write about his tragedy which lay in the fact that this extra ordinary talented boy was always received humiliations by majority of people around him only because of his low caste and could never get a chance to go to school.

The characters like, Munoo, Gangu, Bakha, Gauri, Lal Singh, Nur, Maqbool Sherwani, and others are real people whom he met and knew their life. His heroes are small and common men. These heroes are not able to fight for their liberation because they are ignorant and uneducated and they belong to the marginalized classes. It may be a tea-plantation laborer Gangu caught in the meshes of civilized slavery of plantation or it may be Munoo, the coolie who eventually dies of consumption. The case of Ananta who dies in a scuffle with mad Ralia is also not different. All of them are targeted by the inexorable economic and social forces which toss this way and that till they break to pieces.

Like heroes, Anand's heroines are also sufferers, simple and sincere women. The women, in general, have always been marginalized by the male dominated societies. Anand witnessed the period in which women in Indian society were treated as subservient and subordinate. Hence, he has portrayed women as they were in real life. His female characters belong to marginalized class. Janki, the mistress of Ananta; Maya, the widowed daughter of the landlord or even Gauri in *The Old Woman and the Cow* suffer at the hands of society only because of being women.

Anand's major characters can be broadly divided into two groups—the victims and the victimizers. Bakha, Munoo, Ananta, Lalu Singh, and Nihal Singh, are victims. They are humble, kind and generous souls. They are on the side of the right. In the other group, there are the hypocrites, the misers, selfish parasites like Mahant Nandgir in *The Village*; Pandit Kali Nath in *Untouchable*; Seth Gokul Chand and Lalla Murlidhar in *The Big Heart*; Jimmy, the foreman in *Coolie* are all victimizers who are on the side of the wrong.

There are some other characters also who do not belong to either of these groups. They are good intentioned mentors of public conscience but powerless to mould the currents of events. We find one or two characters of this type in each novel of Anand. Modernist poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar in *Untouchable*, Puran Singh Bhagat in *The Big Heart* and

Dr. Mahindra in *The Old Woman and the Cow* are such members of public conscience who are mentors of public conscience. In the words of Mulk Raj Anand himself, such characters are “all incarnation of the contemporary talkative intellectuals including me who are brown sahibs trying to become Indians but seldom succeeding in doing so” (Letter to Agnihotri 158). He recreates these characters in his writing not as it is but artistically and imaginatively. He wishes to portray his characters with truth and in that truth lays the reputation and recognition of Anand as a novelist. ‘In probing into the mind of his characters, Anand aims to bring out what is essentially human in them, fusing the inner psychological reality with the outer social reality. This internal rhythm that he tries to establish in his characters should be in unison with the very rhythm of the life around. This, in fact, is the real poetry of Anand’s fiction (Ramakrishna 8). Anand is a novelist of characters. Most of his novels begin with characters. Though his characters are taken from real life but they are considerably transformed by his creative imagination. His characters are natural human beings endowed with flaws and weaknesses and hence facing trials and tribulations of life every now and then. They are common people. By making the common folk as heroes, Anand has brought true Surrealism into the Indo-Anglian fiction. His heroes are not endowed with any heroic or superhuman attributes. Rather they seem pathetic being crushed under the burden of oppression. Anand has shown the skill to make the readers feel empathy for them.

3. CONCLUSION:

Anand deliberately and purposefully chose characters from soil and dirt because he wanted to write about their struggle for existence, struggle for identity and their problems. Anand’s protagonists evince a pattern of progression from passivity to self sacrifice and self awareness, through suffering. They are from lower strata of the society. They are marginalized in one way or the other. They are marginalized on the basis of caste, class or gender. Their journey of life is beset with unending problems, pestering troubles, unspeakable pain and dreadful agony. Suffering is the defining, indelible and persistent hall-mark of their life as it is of all the people in general who face marginality. They struggle in vain for their dignity and identity. They face dire socio-economic segregation and agonizing exclusion. Continual exposure to the cruelties of life begets in them the bitter awareness of their lowest social standing and position. This shuddering awareness emboldens a few of them for retaliation. But only a few of them unhesitatingly react and revolt whereas others cower back to the cocoon of inaction and passivity.

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The author has been working as an assistant professor in English in Shree Shivaji Arts, Commerce, Science College, Rajura, Dist. Chandrapur since year 2000. He has 20 years experience of teaching at graduation and post-graduation programs. He has completed a UGC sponsored Minor Research Project on *A Comparative Study of English Language Teaching in English and Marathi Medium Schools/Colleges from Grade 8 to Grade 12*. So far he has published 18 research papers in various reputed national, international journals and conference proceedings and has attended 42 conferences/seminars. He also worked as an organizer for *One Day National Seminar on English Language Teaching in Rural Areas: Problems and Solutions* in 2011 in the home institution. He has recently submitted doctoral thesis on the works of Mulk Raj Anand to Gondwana University, Gadchiroli, Maharashtra.