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Rebellious spirit of protest in select novels of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

Every protest-novelist is a great novelist. The most significant event in the history of Indian fiction in the 1930s was the appearance on the scene of its major trio, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Mulk Raj Anand, the eldest of the three has been the most prolific. His wholesome consciousness of the sources of evil and great imaginative power forms a strong foundation for his protest novels. He analyses the social problems and their roots. He rebels against social oppressors and every human predicament is unacceptable to him. Mulk Raj Anand identifies himself in this genre of protest-writers. His protest attitude is vital in his writing. He derives his fervent socialist faith and his vision of a modern egalitarian society. In this paper, I have taken his five selected Novels- Untouchable, Coolie, Two Leaves and a Bud, The Big Heart and The Road which accumulate Anand's social protest with humanitarian compassion against social evils for the sake of the underdog, underprivileged, and brutally oppressed sects of people.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, rebellious spirit, novels

Introduction

The flair for protesting against social evils is inherent in Mulk Raj Anand right from his boyhood days. He keenly observes how the underprivileged are put to unpalatable and inescapable sufferings and his direct experiences nurtured his feel for social protest. He is non-conformist and humanist armed with social consciousness. He takes the literature route to express his social protest on evils. He emphatically registers his protesting voice against social disintegrations, social injustice and economic inequality in his novels. He also deals with, in his novels, various social misgivings such as exploitation, casteism, male chauvinism, prostitution and so on which are due to social injustice and economic inequality and he duly record his protest through his characters.

Anand's protest element dates back to his childhood days. He writes;

The cruelty of this God-ordained system (Varnashram) came home to me when Bakha, a sweeper boy, brought me home bruised in the head by an accidental stone and my mother scolded him for carrying me and touching me. She bathed me even though I was bleeding. This little incident was to remain in my conscious-unconscious, and became a passion for justice against the age-old fixtures of non-human discrimination against untouchables. This passion became the protest implicit in my first published novel Untouchable. (The Sources of Protest in my Novels 23)

Anand is of the opinion that every single individual, he or she, is a God or Goddess and every act of predicament done to him or her is deemed that it is done to the God or Goddess.

Every human being is a God or Goddess. Thus every insult, every humiliation, every deprivation, every lowering of dignity, must be protested. (Ibid 25)

According to Anand, anger is a holy one when it is shown against any social evil. He says: "My protests are an expression of my holy anger." (Ibid 27) It is natural for every human being to rise against any social act that suppresses him. Protest novels strive to give life and revive the original sense of being a human to the affected ones. Anand values that the protest

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novel is the source of renewal of the human person. The concept of protest in these novels reminds us of a person, his innate quality and makes him a worthy being. Anand depicts his characters as struggling ones against anti-social acts on them. His protagonists are signs of protest and revolt. Anand says: "My heroes; anti-heroes may be the symbols of struggles." (Ibid 25) He feels that protests result in renaissance which is the passion for any human being. He opines: "Renaissance is the cue for all human passions to grow, ever in freedom, to higher consciousness." (Ibid 27) Anand's deep-rooted observation on social evils and his extraordinary insight led him to write his protest novels. His acquaintance with Gandhiji strengthened his protest attitude.

The Mahatma sent me to the people before I should write any more novels. From that time onwards my protest about the human predicament, under the Empire, and in the atmosphere of our own decay, often resulting from blind acceptance of bad habits and the taboos of the sage Manu and the Hadith traditions of Islam, became self-conscious. (Ibid 20)

Anand's heart melts to see the suffering mankind and this humanistic element in him activates his protest element. He writes thus:

I wished to recreate the folk, whom I knew intimately, from the lower depths, the lumpens and the suppressed, oppressed, repressed, those who had seldom appeared in our literatures.... (Ibid 20)

His heart aches to know that millions of unfortunate souls take only one meal a day. Fearlessness and dignity are the two great marks of human beings. They are the identity of mankind. But when these novel qualities are at stake, Anand revolts to revive these desired qualities. He writes:

I woke up every morning to see how men and women dreaded other men and women, how they were always benthead before the White Sahibs and the Bania moneylenders, landlords and Sarkari officers. (Ibid 21)

Anand's yet another childhood experience forms a prelude to make him an absolute social protestor. His writing a letter to God proves that a social protestor in Anand is on the making even when he was a child. He writes so:

When a young cousin of mine died at the age of nine of tuberculosis, I wrote a letter of protest to God in heaven, asking Him how He could take away the little innocent girl who had committed no sin! (Ibid 22)

His protest element goes to question even God.

Mulk Raj Anand, passionately concerned with the hardship of the life of villagers, their poverty, squalor and backwardness coupled with gross ignorance and the cruelties of caste, took upon him the task of attacking social snobbery and injustice. (Social Protest in Mulk Raj Anand: Critical Response to Indian English Fiction 10)

Anand has been advocating relentlessly for the welfare of the oppressed section of the society. He is very much concerned with the suppressed section. He wants it to become dignified and to get rid of ignorance, apathy and despair.

All these concerns together with the insights provided, make Anand's novels a part of protest literature. (Protest in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: Critical Responses 132)

The following is the critical examination and perceptive evaluation of Anand's protest novels namely *Untouchable*, *The Big Heart*, *The Old Woman and a Cow*, *The Road and Two Leaves and a Bud*.

Bakha, the protagonist in the novel *Untouchable*, is conscious of the injustice done to him. He fumes over the abuses and ill-treatment meted out to him by the caste Hindus. He is an outcaste and not considered even as a human being. He is dirty because he cleans the dirt of others. The sequence of incidents humiliates him and makes him resent inwardly. His soul cries in anguish. He gets abused wherever he goes. He does nothing but pollutes people. When Bakha is slapped, the accumulated strength of giant body glistened in him. His heart is filled with the desire for revenge. There is a mix of horror, rage and indignation in his mind.

Bakha's fumes with anger and instinctively jumps to take revenge for the insult to his sister. (Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: A Triumph of Narrative Skill, 10)

Bakha's blood boils when he hears that his sister is molested. His instinct tells him to take revenge on the person who attempted to spoil her. Bakha is not a dead log like his father. He is very much alive to feel and react. "There was a smouldering rage in his soul. His feelings rise like spurts of smoke from a half-smothered fire." (UT 57-58)

When he recollects the abuses and rebukes, he suffers extensively and his heart is filled with remorse. "Bakha is weighed down by the yoke of ancestral serfdom, his protest remains incipient." (The Rigidity of Caste System 15) His inherited subservience for generations runs through his nerves. His protest is a hidden one. Anand "musters enough guts to strengthen his characters to find their real fire in the furnace of fight of freedom." (Despair and Delight in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand 81) Anand is a pioneer and a forerunner of the protest-literature. It is very well revealed in his novels.

In *Untouchable*, the protest is against the tyranny of the caste system; in *Coolie*, it is against the inhuman treatment of the capitalist class; in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, it is against the colonial exploitation (Social Protest in Mulk Raj Anand: Critical Response to Indian English Fiction 22)

From the very core of his heart, Anand protests against "social maladies, human hypocrisies and individual idiosyncrasies." (Ibid 15)

The Big Heart portrays a low class Indian youth, Anantha, boldly championing and protesting for the cause of unemployed thathiar brothers and losing his life in the

process. He protests in strong terms the economic depravity, the result of which thathiars are not able to get even a square meal a day. They lose their job and their life is surrounded by misery and hunger just because a factory equipped with modern machines has come up.

The *Big Heart* of Anand stands as a testimony of protest against economic inequality. The artisans lose not only their jobs but also their bread due to industrialization. When the hard-core rebels show their protest and anger by destroying the machines in the factory, the protagonist, Ananta, loses his life while protesting in the Gandhian way against industrialization. The gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' gets widened day by day. The more the gap, the more is the disaster. The gap should be bridged reasonably to avoid any volcano erupting out and destroying everything.

The novel's basic aim is to protest against the industrialists who have, by establishing a factory, left the other thathiar brothers unemployed. (Protest in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: Critical Responses 134)

Ananta, the hero with 'the big heart', spends all his earnings in feeding the hungry souls, which scramble over a stinking rubbish heap on which four puris have fallen. The protagonist, "Ananta's protest is mainly directed against the political and economic conditions." (Ibid 135) Ananta motivates the workers to fight collectively and unitedly. He advises them to form a union and negotiate with the owners of the factory for getting their jobs back. He believes that protest in unity will serve the purpose. According to Saros Cowasjee, "Ananta is not a passive sufferer but is shown capable of protest against degradation." (The *Big Heart*: A Note 140) Anand emphasizes on collective efforts for protesting against social injustice instead of fighting single-handedly. Only collective consciousness and unity can protest effectively "against the shut-mouth omnipotent, omnipresent will of the Sarkar." (The *Big Heart* 46) Satyapal, a student-rebel, is a hard-core man and he preaches protest against the industrialists in the form of violence. He is for demolishing the machines, which left the thathiars unemployed. Ralia is led by Satyapal's ornamental and rhetoric of violence and breaks the machinery in the factory. Ananta does not want to destroy machines but wants only control over them. He is a reasonable protestor but Ralia is an extremist and an unreasonable protestor.

Knowing the impending disaster, Ananta runs towards the factory to stop the violence. But he gets killed by Ralia. Purun Bhagat Singh, a poet, feels that the protest protesters will shun violence and understand the significance of collective revolution in a united way, at least on coming to know of the death of Ananta. Mulk Raj Anand stresses through this novel *The Big Heart* that a collective protest is more effective than an individual protest.

Anand's *The Old Woman and the Cow* is the only novel in which a female protagonist, namely Gauri, takes the role of a protestor. Gauri is able to overthrow, with her protesting attitude, the oppressors. She is able to lead an independent life with dignity only due to her protest nature. She is a docile girl and respects her husband as God in spite of his ill-treatment, abuses and beatings. In the beginning days of her married life, she proves to be an average Indian wife. But later she is changed into a tigress. When she becomes pregnant, she is beaten up and driven out of the house. She reaches her mother's house and is sold by her mother to the

Seth for want of money to save the cow. "Gauri for the first time in the novel protests at being sold to Seth Jwala Prasad." (Protest in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: Critical Responses 130)

Gauri protests at being treated as a commodity and sold out. She allows a naive, half-suppressed protest to raise her lips. She even dares to curse God: "May the Gods die, if they favour these dogs!" (OWC 137) However, she withdraws her curse for fear of blasphemy. When her husband questions Gauri's chastity, she registers her protest loudly and when he tries to beat her, she says she will retaliate if beaten. When her mother-in-law comes abusing and taunting her, she protests and turns out the old lady from her doorsteps. She joins Dr. Mahindra's hospital and starts leading a dignified life.

The credit goes to Dr. Maheindra who has influenced her life; therefore, she realizes that her salvation does not remain in her endurance and obedience to an age-old corrupted society but in an active opposition to it. (Humanistic Note: A Study in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Old Woman and the Cow* 68)

Gauri's protest against evil is in itself good news of better things to come. Anand's literary life is all along marked by his relentless protest against inhuman practices. He not only shows his protest in selling a woman in *The Old Woman and the Cow* but also creates awareness on the status of the poor women in India.

It is all because of his profound love for mankind. K. Suneetha Rani says:

His (Anand's) literary life has been an incessant struggle, characterized by an intrepid protest against inhumanity and a boundless compassion for men. (A Dark Drama of Exploitation: An Approach to Two Leaves and a Bud 51)

Anand's humanitarian protest in favour of the downtrodden was his mission all through his life. According to N.P. Ravikumar:

His (Anand's) humanitarian protest and his desire to uplift the life of the downtrodden from their degradation, he felt that it was his mission in life. (Two Leaves and a Bud: A Proletariat Novel 115)

T. Vasudeva Reddy goes on to say thus:

Anand rebels at the irrational traditional ways and the cruel system of social exploitation and solemnly started a crusade against social exploitation. (A Crusade against Social Exploitation 46)

Anand revolts against the upper class and wages a holy war against exploitation.

His novels are, in unequivocal terms, a crusade against the injustice done to the poor peasants and the lower classes by the upper classes in the caste-dominant Indian society. (A Crusade against Social Exploitation 46)

Obviously, Anand's novels are an expression of his protest against social exploitation of the poor and the underprivileged. M.K.Naik says:

Anand's compassion for the underdog and his indignation at the exploitation of the Indian by the forces of capitalism, industrialism, communalism, colonialism and racism invest these two novels *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* with a great power. (Naik, M.K. Mulk Raj Anand 39)

Anand's protagonist, Gangu, in *Two Leaves and a Bud* loses his property in the hands of a wretched moneylender and moves to a tea plantation in search of life. Circumstantial compulsions make him protest against the evil done to him and his daughter. Gangu protests against the assistant manager, when he tries to molest his (Gangu's) daughter and loses his precious life in the mess. His daughter, Laila, is also a sign of protest. She, conscious of her youth and beauty, protests against Reggie Hunt's – the assistant manager's – lust. The black coolies clear the forests and toil to develop the plantation. But the soulless British manager and his Indian subordinates exploit them with their utmost cruel nature. The coolies have no other go than protesting against the exploiters for the sake of survival, where survival is an unanswered question. De La Havre, the kind-hearted doctor in the plantation, encourages the coolies to protest against the onslaughts of insults, gross injustices and indignities. The only option for the plantation workers is to protest and revolt against the estate managers' monstrous crime against humanity. The doctor questions the coolies why they do not protest vehemently and beat back the exploiters. It is the beginning of the protest. Though the coolies do not revolt instantly, they are getting ready mentally to protest in the days to come.

The protest of the affected ones against economic inequality is discussed as the central issue in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand. The exploitation of the people in the upper rung of the society and colonialism form the basis for economic inequality according to Anand. The tea plantation in *Two Leaves and a Bud* is a world within the world; the British managers are the exploiters. Gangu and the other coolies are the exploited. Their protest is squeezed and in ends in vain. What they achieved is nothing but losing their precious lives. The doctor suggests an organised protest against the oppressors.

The rebellious spirit is inherent in Anand and he cannot sit idle simply witnessing the sufferings of the underdogs. The Harijanas in *The Road* protest against the caste Hindus blocking the progress of building a road to the town and successfully complete it. For them the road not only leads them to the town but also towards progress. It is a sign of liberation and symbol of successful protest against casteism. Suresh Kohli says it is possible because of the newly found courage and determination of the suppressed people." (*The Road: A Fresh Appraisal* 209) According to Binod Mishra:

Anand's major novels highlight the individual's fight against society in various forms. His characters become rebels. (*Individual versus Society in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Anita Desai* 118)

Thus, the novels of Anand protests against the social evils namely untouchability, woman-slavery, economic

exploitation and social injustice elaborately. Anand's *Untouchable* and *The Road* describe the exploitation of the caste Hindus as the source of this social evil. Anand goes on to explain a subset of untouchables within the untouchables. The washerwoman Gulabi is an untouchable by herself but she refuses to touch Sahni, another untouchable. Anand quotes colonialism as the prime cause for economic inequality. The farm labourers of India, who are already poor, are made poorer in the hands of the Britishers. This sows the seed for the Communist party and organized protests against the exploiters in later years. He elaborately handles the subject of untouchability in his novels. The novels *Untouchable* and *The Road* stand as testimony of protest to this social evil. Protesting against untouchability and creating social awareness on this social evil must have been the objectives of Anand. He wrote these novels before independence, when this social evil was at its great heights. The novelist feels very much for the pitiable status of women and raises his voice of protest unequivocally. Gauri, the only woman protagonist of Anand, rebels not only against her husband but also the erring society.

The novels of Mulk Raj Anand stand as pillars of protest attitude; as testimonies of social protest of the exploited against the exploiters; as proofs that there is certainly a hope for the hopeless and their voice unquestionably reverberates on behalf of the voiceless.

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