

Characters of Mulk Raj Anand's Major Novels : A Critical Analysis

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Abstract. Mulk Raj Anand in his novels draws characters from the real society around him, people whom he happens to know in actual life. During his life's journey, some characters even haunt the novelist and compel him to write about them. 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. Mulk Raj Anand's realism is revealed in his efforts to establish his point of view in a very determined and powerful manner. Like Shaw, Mulk Raj Anand firmly believed that there could be no literature without any social purpose.

Keywords : Untouchable; realism; protagonist; social conflict; humanism; downtrodden.

All characters of Mulk Raj Anand's novels are remarkable for intimate touches of fidelity to life and intense realism. He has written about the suffering and tragedy of the downtrodden and the poor whom he has actually seen and known in his childhood and youth. Mulk Raj Anand remarks:

The passion which have occupied theme were, perhaps, my own dominant moods, and therefore, all those characters may be said to be part of the same autobiography of the torments, ecstasies and "passionate consciousness" of the last three generations. (Anand *Mirror* 14)

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 be protagonists 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.

Mulk Raj Anand's characters are both types and individuals. In portraying major characters like Bakha, Munoo, Gangu, Lalu, Nur, Ananta, Gauri and Krishan, Mulk Raj Anand skillfully employs the technique of the inner working novelist, and aims at exploring the intense sufferings of their souls. Besides the exposition of

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soul and psyche of his characters, he portrays vividly and realistically the contours of human body. Mulk Raj Anand portrays all characters, covering a wide and comprehensive range of the Indian social political scene, over a period of more than thirty years, from Maharaja to untouchable with equal vehemence and equal force. He attempted to introduce the downtrodden in the realm of novel and this is a memorable contribution to Indian English novel.

His interpretation of India is based on realism as his protagonists are based on the real characters with whom he freely mixed for play and friendship, paying no attention to their caste, class, creed or colour. As Mulk Raj Anand himself acknowledges in the 'Preface' to *Two Leaves and a Bud* :

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. ... 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 seeks to interpret the truth from the realities of his life. (2)

One of the social concerns that recurs frequently in his novels is the inequality between the wealthy and the poor. He expresses his deep sorrow and sympathy for the unfortunate poor and their inability to cope with the circumstances. He poses these problems of social inequity at large and also attempts to seek resolutions to the social conflicts. The resolutions that he proposes are the empowerment of the weak and the development of social consciousness and awareness for social growth. His novels also aim at wiping away social barriers and orthodoxy, casteism and communalism. His themes depict the complex social structure of society, which is devoid of humanism.

Mulk Raj Anand's first novel *Untouchable* deals with the problem of casteism in general and untouchability in particular, in vivid artistic terms and its artistic power is evident in every page of the novel. It lays bare the humiliating experience of Bakha who challenges the Brahmanical attitudes of high caste people. His biting satire against the high caste and the rich exposes their double standards.

He says that casteism is a crime against humanity and everyone who believes in human dignity should actively try to eliminate it.

Bakha, the hero of *Untouchable* is a victim as an individual of the caste-conscious society. The novel describes an inauspicious day in the life of Bakha who is made to feel that he is a sweeper's son and hence untouchable. A sincere and dutiful Bakha faces the abuses of society because of his low origin. The feeling of untouchability is so deep-rooted in his soul that it prevents him from taking any action against the sexual abuse of her sister, Sohini. All these insults and injuries strengthen his body and stiffen his soul. He faces all the abuses and does not die.

One of the social concerns that recurs frequently in his novels is the inequality between the wealthy and the poor. He expresses his deep sorrow and sympathy for the unfortunate poor and their inability to deal with circumstances. He depicts the complex social structure of society which is devoid of humanism. Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* are mainly directed towards the evils of class system. Through these novels Mulk Raj Anand shows that class system is a greater evil than even the caste system. A "low caste" man enjoys a lot of freedom in these modern days as long as he has money with him. But a "high caste man" who belongs to the wealthless class is in perpetual slavery. The tragedy of Munoo in *Coolie* and the horrible exploitation of Gangu and the ill treatment with Gangu's daughter, Leila, in *Two Leaves and a Bud* amplify this truth.

Coolie is a novel of the poor and the down-trodden. It offers a chance to the reader to experience the unending pain, suffering and prolonged struggle of the poor and as the misery of poverty is presented through an orphan boy, it particularly evokes a deep chord of sorrow in the reader. Through the character of Munoo, Mulk Raj Anand represents those numberless children whose childhood is lost in endless physical labour. Love, care and fun are strange words for them.

The plot of the novel is episodic in character. It is a chain of incidents joined together keeping Munoo as its central figure. But the portrayal of English characters, especially in the Bombay chapter is not realistic. Here Mulk Raj Anand's zeal for overemphasizing the picture of exploitation, to some extent damages his art and vision. The final part of the novel, where Shimla scene is introduced by the hackneyed device of accident is poor. This part of the novel gives the impression of being sketchy, hasty, and it is slightly unconvincing. But the overall impression that one gets of this novel is that it is a sensitive and impressive work. It remarkably succeeds in rousing our humane feeling for the poor and the oppressed and it possesses enough energy and fire to enkindle our soul to work for a society where compassion and kindness would be an unwritten law. K.R.S. Iyengar praises it and calls it, "A prose epic of modern India..." (Iyengar 267)

In his famous novel *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Mulk Raj Anand vehemently attacks the British teagarden owners and Indian merchants for their inhuman treatment to the labourers. The events in the novel are narrated in a well-structured manner. The coolies are overworked and underpaid. The novel is a powerful crusade against imperialism and capitalistic exploitation. As a social critic Mulk Raj Anand is extremely sensitive to the evils of capitalism and imperialism. Mulk Raj Anand's portrayal and open criticism of the British here is very harsh though but unconvincing. In the novel, of all the English characters, the most inartistically created is the author's own mouthpiece, Dr. John De La Havre, his frequent homilies condemning imperialism and capitalism and his role in the novel lacks credibility. It seems that there is too much of Mulk Raj Anand in the character of the doctor.

In the novels, which are better known as Mulk Raj Anand's 'mature novels', he is pre-occupied with struggle between the exploiter and the exploited.

Anand pleads in *The Big Heart* for industrialization with caution. Apart from this, the novel has many other things to say, such as removal of caste system, capitalism, male-chauvinism and the need for practising humanism as religion. It is the author's real-life experiences that help him to bring out properly the hero's perfections and imperfections. The supreme merit of *The Big Heart* is its powerful and realistic characterisation of the hero Ananta and his beloved Janaki. This vital experience of the novel helps the reader to extenuate its only weak less, that is, the polemical presentation of social problems. The theme of tradition versus modernity which forms the central conflict in the novel is convincingly portrayed. The death of Ananta in the defense of machine as well as the society's cruel character assassination of Janaki for not living the conventional life of a widow are the sins of traditions.

Anand's social concern is evident in his downright castigation of the "tradition-bound society". *The Road* is merely an amplification of theme of *Untouchable*, now viewed from a different angle and incisiveness. Bhikhu, like Bakha, is the victim hero, who is tried and tested by the antipodal caste distinctions and discriminations. In *The Road*, art and idea do not intermingle altogether well.

The main defect in the novel is the weak characterization. The protagonist, Bhikhu fails to emerge as the hero. All the enthusiasm and energy is derived from another character, Dhooli Singh, who actually appears to suppress the character of Bhikhu. Further the stage is cramped with the introduction of too, many characters, who divert the attention from the central character. The author's gratuitous introduction of the love motif too destroys authenticity of the novel. In spite of the minor defects, *The Road* has a powerful focus and it points out that the untouchables, tortured and condemned for centuries, deserve a better deal and this is possible

only if men give up the age-old belief in caste and karma and spread the message of love and tenderness towards one and all irrespective of the difference of caste, creed and colour.

In *The Death of a Hero*, Mulk Raj Anand once again rivets his attention to the Indian politics and deals with the post-independence era of unbridled violence and the resultant volcanic outburst of social conflicts. The protagonist of *The Death of a Hero* is a Christ-like figure. Through him Anand portrays the selfless heroism and sacrifice of millions of heroes like Maqbool. The principal concern of the novel is religious fanaticism and its impact on the society.

Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts, which presents the last days of Nur, an unemployed M.A. who has been suffering from consumption is, as the author rightly calls, a long story. The protagonist's childhood, his college life, his inability to get a suitable job, his married life with Iqbal are all presented as passing scenes before the eyes of the dying young man and the novel closes with his death. The novel reveals Anand's keen observation of the modern-day Indian muslim society. The novel's greatness lies in its deep and authentic search for illumination, in its lyricism and in its powerful and appealing theme, which brings out vividly the dangers of having an obsolete educational system. The most important thing in the novel is pain presented in a beautiful form which forces Nur to make a philosophical search into his past. The novel exposes those aspects of our education system which stand as major road-blocks to our national goal and prosperity. Nur symbolises the misery and misfortunes of millions of Indian youth who get university education and remain thereafter unemployed or under-employed.

In his other novel *Private Life of an Indian Prince*, Mulk Raj Anand explores the post-independence era of decadence of Indian princely states. The Prince himself is an interesting character because he typifies the author's own life and personality. Anand has written the novel mainly to achieve a personal catharsis through the creation of a hero broken by the destructive force of love. Mulk Raj Anand's women characters are very traditional, confined since he considers them the apostles of love, warmth and security. Mulk Raj Anand is saddened by the fact that the average Indian woman only has the status of a slave, bound for the service of heart and an instrument of fecundity. He has introduced in many of his novels the theme of women's hardship – Janaki in *The Big Heart*, the suffering widow and widowed Maya in *The Village Trilogy* being the landlord's daughter faces more restraints; Rukmani in *The Road*, whose marriage was delayed for want of money to give dowry. But in *Gauri*, Anand puts in her more voice to oppose their silent sufferings. Gauri, the heroine of the novel, becomes conscious of her individual talent and self-esteem and she defies the traditional society and decides to live

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freely and fearlessly. Gauri's struggle for survival can be viewed as individual's self-discovery and self-actualization.

Gauri's character is drawn with expert strokes and her gradual initiation into defying the customary male-domination is as indeed, an act of self-assertion. As Anand observes :

Gauri who believed in the worship of her Lord and master, wanted ultimately to conquer him with her devotion... and willing to wait like the Hindu wife and go patiently through everything. (*The Old Man and the Cow* 102)

Mulk Raj Anand used the novel as a medium for making people sensitive to ill-treatment of women. He also shows that unless woman herself comes forward and fights for her rights nothing can be done. Anand's greatest contribution towards the movement for the emancipation of woman is Gauri. It projects the evils of male chauvinism and society's ambivalent approach with regard to women and inspires the Indian woman to face the challenge by courageously working for her emancipation which alone can redeem the Indian society from destruction. As women are intrinsic part of the human race and integral part of the nation, Anand makes a touching appeal through Gauri for the women's emancipation.

In trilogy – *The Village, Across the Black Waters* and *The Sword and the Sickle* –, Mulk Raj Anand traces out the transformation of his hero, Lal Singh from an irresponsible Sikh youth to a committed revolutionary. Lal Singh's ostracism is both religious and social, and in his very act of defying the age-old religious sanctions, he is born into but also from the society in which he is condemned to live as an outcaste.

He is later drafted into the British Indian Army and joins the war as a professional soldier and his heart bleeds at the sight of death and destruction. His brief love-episode with Maya, wherein lies the redeeming feature of this otherwise sordid novel, is but a passing episode in the epic drama of pain and laceration. From Maya he gets the pulsating warmth in a world vitiated by caution, fear and resentment. In the third novel of trilogy Mulk Raj Anand concluded with a note of Lal Singh's quest for self-realization and self-actualization.

Anand lived in an age which threatened individual's sense of personal meaning in life. He wrote autobiographical novels to secure that sense of self. His autobiographical novels break the vice of reticence and overwhelm the reader with the expressive emotional honesty in all the four volumes – *Seven Summer, Morning*

Face, Confessions of a Lover and *The Bubble*. His confession in these novels is secularized rather than sacramental. Individualization and not salvation is his central pre-occupation in these novels. Everything is subordinated to the act of self-exploration and self-actualization. His earlier novels may have their epical range but their framework hindered the novelist from unlocking the secrets of his heart and psyche. The struggle of the individual becomes more significant in Anand's autobiographical novels. Anand adopts the first person narrative in these novels. *Morning Face* amply demonstrates that personal experiences can be transformed to another plane of understanding. Anand may be criticised for emphasizing much on body in *The Bubble*. But he does not like to call body a prison and an isolated lump of flesh and bone. The body is a living link with the world and it is more a liberator than a filter. If love is an outflow of surplus energy it has something to do with the self of vital needs of the body.

In most of Anand's 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 self-development. 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 novelist of Mulk Raj Anand's time dared to present this beautiful expression in his 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. 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 we can say that 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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