

Mulk Raj Anand's Treatment of Women in His Novels

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It is often said or one may find after reading some novels of Mulk Raj Anand that Anand is not much concerned with women characters. It is a fact that most of his novels are even without a female character. But this position of the plot should not strengthen the impression that he is step-motherly or insincere in the conception of female characterisation. This allegation against Mulk Raj Anand doesn't stand totally justified. In some of his novels or almost all the masterpieces, we can say, like Leela in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *Black Waters* and *The Sword and the Sickle* Janaki in *The Big Heart*, Gauri in *The Old Woman and the Cow*, women characters play major roles in his novels. They have been portrayed with delicacy and they speak their lot in the contemporary society. Leila speaks a lot about how the capitalistic set up of pre-independent India exploited the mutability and sexual modesty of the women among the underdogs. Particularly during the powerful Zamindari regime, poor Indian women, were subjected to sexual exploitation of Zamindars and landlords against which there was no legislation at their rescue. Of course, Anand is not as concerned with women as Premchand. It is natural that the problem of Indian women does not loom large in his novels. It is true that he focuses his main attention on men but it is equally true that a few women figure prominently in his novels. As for example, when Anand speaks about Bakha in *Untouchable*, Munoo in *Coolie*, Lalu in trilogy, Anant in *The Big Heart*, he does not miss to refer to Maya, who in the trilogy shares Lalu's fate and Janaki, the dying mistress. Leila and Gauri are equally important and memorable women characters. Jack Lindsay in this respect observes:

Anand can depict all the fine, gentle , self-sacrificial qualities of the Indian wife and her dilemmas in the new epoch. Not that he romantically falsifies; he shows the ragging, petty, demanding types as well as the self-denying and brings out well here the strains of the new situation ... (Lindsay 30)

Anand's women always play a minor and subordinate part. They are passive but firm with innate goodness and strength of endurance. They are defenseless before any unknown enemy and equally unknown and inexorable forces. His female characters are for setting the idea of chastity and purity, love and beauty, discipline and abstinence against lasciviousness, cruelty and hate. He has achieved complex pattern of multi-layered dialects. Woman's psychological treatment is a frequent theme for Anand. A woman appears with psychology of struggle to protect himself against man's inconsiderateness. But he delights and excels in drawing the psychology of the ideal women committed and dedicated to the preservation of her cultural heritage. Leila in *Two Leaves and a Bud* falls prey to the sex-hungry Reggie Hunt. She assumes importance as an important female character. Therefore, he ran amok after her and attempts to outrage her chastity and modesty. A more diabolical and wicked inhumanity is evident in the jury comprising whites and whites alone, and none else, which lets the culprit go unpunished despite attempting at such a barbaric heinous crime. Anand has described the beauty and Punjabi simplicity of Leila with loving and zealous care. She has been portrayed as the embodiment of pure, unflawed rural culture in all its elemental purity. She continues to be the novelist's ideal till the end. Even where she made to yield to Reggie Hunt, she demonstrates a psychology of considerable discretion mingled with inspired respect. Her psychology is everything. There is nothing physical and sensual about her attraction. She is fully alive to her social responsibility and to the demands of social and personal decorum. Instead of adding or aggravating Reggie's lustful passion, she cherishes the psychology of being an exploited female soul. She cannot allow her reputation to be sullied or jeopardised or her modesty be scandalised. This is the reason why she neither protests nor surrenders rather gives a psychology of neutrality. Anand commands efficiency and knack to measure the inscrutability of female nature. It is not an ordinary job to gauge the psychology of female nature. All that one does is to take a few dips into it. To penetrate into a woman's mind and explore each and every wave arising in it is beyond the capacity of Gods themselves, what to speak of human beings. Although this statement has been made humorously, yet it reveals the liveliness and individuality of the picture of women drawn by Anand.

Most of Anand's women are women soliciting our sympathy. They are the bearers of truth, of dedication and service to humanity, love and compassion for all. It may go against male egotism, but it has been

disguised to free the race from the insidious clutches of cruelty and illusion. Even though divine justice casts down its revengeful thunders upon them, they do not give up the psychology of their ideals. Their steadfastness, love and loyalty are controlled by some inner psychological force. Women like Sajani, Leila and Gauri can never develop the fighting spirit against God who had made their plight miserable. Leila sees the physical liquidation of her father for the sheer defense of her modesty and chastity. Sajani agrees to become widow for no fault of her or her husband, Gauri in *The Old Woman and The Cow* suffers at the hands of her mother, mother-in-law and her husband. Tragedy overtakes all these characters in an incalculable degree, yet they remain steadfast and sincere.

Gauri is a first class escapade in the pursuits of life. After leaving her husband's house she comes in contact with a city doctor named, Colonel Mahendra. She is utterly helpless in the circumstances here, but her boldness and strong moral fortitude never gives in. She is subjected to a sale in the hands of a lusty sahukar at Hosiarpur. She is in all boldness there. She does not even develop the psychology of surrender and submission to lasciviousness. She anyway manages to seek a rescue for that and reaches her village. The ultimate consequence is that she protests against the cruelty and cannibalistic inhumanity of her husband. When he asks her to prove her chastity and integrity, she quits home and becomes a free bird out of her nest. All this renders her a city romancer again. In an attempt to defile Gauri's and Leila's beauty and virtue one notices exploitation of women in its most hideous form. Gauri has been maltreated not only by an outsider like lustful Sahukar but also by her wicked husband and other household members who fail to recognise her exemplary sacrifice she has made for seeking a settlement in simple happy life. Her tragic flaw is the wealth of that sentimental psychology with which she has been surmounting exploitations and maltreat her. With her body attempted to be befooled and sullied, she is mentally prepared and bold in the pursuits of struggle for existence. Both Gauri and Tess have to see inwardly with their inner defilement and Pandu and Angel Clare will be the males towards whom they look forward with the psychology of expecting love and rapport from them which is not going to happen. Gauri at such a critical juncture of her life is pleasantly surprised to note that the entire household is ready to live by her sexual exploitation. Therefore, she is subjected to a nasty kind of sale. Owing to this act she becomes an object of overwhelming affection in the house. She had never experienced this thing before. She very well thinks that she is being looked after by

the whole house as a defiled feminine thing against which even her husband does not come to her rescue. The theme of the novel *The Old Woman and the Cow* is thus an old folk theme in which a woman is not generally shown to be a lowly creature struggling for existence. She is rather shown as an object of prowess and chastity. But the treatment of Anand is very different from that found in folk literature. In folk literature, we find the miserable and pitiable lot of women. For Anand to treat woman in that folk light was rather difficult because he had seen with his naked eyes their miseries and sorrows. As far as female exploitation is concerned, the exploiter happened to be a high born lord. In *Two Leaves and a Bud* the exploiter is a white planter who is the byproduct of the capitalistic system. The tyranny of the white goes a step above and entraps the modesty of a blooming Punjabi girl. There is a psychological implication in such a character drawing of women. This is a leap towards the concept of woman's liberation throughout India in particular and many other Indian and English writers in general.

Women's struggle to protest themselves against men's inconsiderateness is a frequent theme with Anand. He delights and excels in drawing the ideal Indian women in the teeth of their sexual exploitation and victimisation. If Premchand is a great freshner and renewer whose influence remains immense, Anand is a great entertainer and enlightener. He portrays not women but a suffering woman, not man but a living man-man as he is. However, a living man can be sublime in thought and action. He can be slave to his deep dark bitter belly tension. He can be sublime and ignoble at the same time. His women are driven by themselves to succumb to the lure of the lives of heroines, to love, to fail, to revolt and sometimes to stick to unshakable firmness. Like most of his contemporaries, Anand is obsessed with social evils but he knows that the evils are not irremediable. The remedy lies not in insularity but in tolerance, not in discord but in harmony and unison, not in hate but in nurturing the sense of universal brotherhood. John Bayley in *Tolstoy and the Novel* has remarked :

The immediate and involuntary sympathy that we feel for both Leila and Gauri perhaps, identification rather than sympathy stays with us throughout the novels. With Gauri specially, Anand rises to the highest art, to his practice of letting the individual appear in the light of his point of view. (Bayley 207)

In his novels, Anand creates an atmosphere of the evocation of feeling and of genuine love and common purpose of humanity at large. It is his moral attitude that fills his novels with human sympathy and gives them a richness and unfailing optimism of life. In his determination to preach, Anand presents life as something preordained. The lives of Gauri, Leila and Sajani are witnesses. They in disguised effort to teach directly the ideals of his own Vaishnav faith of love and compassion can be seen in all the novels with the participation of female character. The prolonged argument on the attractions of the material and the physical phenomena and those of spirit and of chastity and purity is presented in almost all the novels with the novelist's usual creative and dialectical skill. Gauri is ready to quit her home and hearth for maintaining her purity and chastity of Sita but never allows love to be degraded. Leila is given to adultery and loses her father only on that account. Sajani despite heinous sexual molestation of her innocent daughter becomes widow simply on this account. How painful is her lot which makes her undergo moral indictment and bereavement, yet full of commitment to the society which is committed to the feudal way of life. All these happenings remain in our mind like large conceptions upon which epics are constructed. Gauri's sacrifice is unforgettable as Adam's eating the fruits of the forbidden tree. It is as lofty as that of chaste Sita, despite abduction. By comparison with such classics the badness, if any, of the plotting or the unconvincing aspects of the episodes in Anand's novels are as irrelevant as the unconvincing aspects of say, for instance, the legendary anecdote of Yayati. Once a certain degree of imaginative intensity is reached as for example, Reggie Hunt sexually molesting and torturing Leila, we lose all concern with what is ordinarily called realism. The question whether Gauri's husband, Sahukar and Reggie Hunt are life-like or convinced only simply knows, Gauri becomes a household word in the village, popularising that struggling woman who earns her living by her physical effort and sacrifice. She is as conspicuous as Lear disinheriting Cordelia or notorious Ravan abducting Sita. Even the love-hate relationship among different characters in almost all the novels is made so much bitter because it represents Anand's repudiation of the artificial realism. It further establishes that Anand scorns the artificial realism of some of the contemporary authors and novelists. The character of Yasmin in *Confession of a Lover*, her illicit affair with Krishna Chandra are artistically at least. They are not at par with *Tom Jones* or *Vanity Fair* but justify the recent realistic novel to a major extent. The conversation in which Mama Dayal Singh tries to instill religiosity in Krishna renders him unsuccessful in rectifying Krishna.

It comments on degradation of mankind, the materialism of the west, the desirability of change in the western attitude towards progress etc. It is like certain ones in *King Lear* :

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these ? (*King Lear* III. iv. 28-32)

Thus Anand's art of characterisation strengthens the fact that most of his well-known female characters are tragically handicapped, a widow, a deserted young wife, an emotionally starved young daughter, a young wife unable to save her husband unless by selling her body. The plight of these women unfolds a motley canvas of social history. The hero or the heroine in a novel by Anand is not just a human type but the focus of all the novelist's quests. Like all great realists in fiction, Anand, too, investigates the social being of man, the role of four classes – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. He dwells on the conflict of their interests and the nature of social clashes and cleavages through the individual human type.

Works Cited

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