

Socio-Cultural Conflicts in the Short-Stories of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding writers of Indo-Anglian fiction. He was a past master in sketching the social and cultural conflicts present in the social fabric in which the downtrodden people live in India. In his novels the themes which Anand specifically deals with are social awareness, the evils of feudalistic social set up, exploitation of women in the society of downtrodden classes, etc. If we look at conflicts in general, we find that they are multifarious in character, viz. mental, social, economic and so on. Anand's primary aim is to throw satirical light on the injustice, oppression and exploitation in the society. All his literary works are virtually works of protest—protest against social mal-practices and superstitions. Thus his creations do not merely mirror the social conflicts as he perceives to be present in the society, but they are a conscious protest to form an ideal human society as well. As a reformist and social thinker Anand the novelist has lent a valuable through his novels. His stories showcase the social conditions of the marginalised class, particularly in respect of social, cultural, racial and economic conflicts afflicting their lives. This paper seeks to trace briefly the social and cultural conflicts as reflected in the writings of Mulk Raj Anand, specifically his short stories.

Keywords: oppression, untouchability, protest, exploitation, social consciousness, conflict

Indian English literature has undoubtedly a very rich output of short stories. It has produced writers, specifically in the field of fiction, who have very realistically sketched the plight of the downtrodden people focussing sufficient light on their social status with reference to social values, custom and economic structure. The conflict between the haves and the have-nots has all along been a great subject in the gamut of fiction; it has been at the root of social unrests throughout the world. The disparity between the rich and the poor deserves focus. As we look at the causes of conflicts, we find that racial discrimination, untouchability, hatred and suppression are the major factors. The women are the worst sufferers; they have always been deprived of their human rights. An attempt has been made here to trace the social and cultural conflicts in some of the short stories of Mulk Raj Anand. These short stories are 'Lajwanti', 'The Tamarind Tree', 'The Parrot in the Cage', 'Birth', 'Lullaby' and 'Old Bapu'.

Anand was a humanist. In the opinion of Arvind Kumar Jha and Ram Kumar Naik, "Anand's commitment to the philosophy of humanism forms the very basis of his creative enterprises." Anand in his short stories has offered strong social satire. He has also presented an acute psychological analysis of the characters sketched. The Indian society is a mixture of a large variety of races, castes, tribes etc. The many-coloured variety has a positive aspect also; undoubtedly, it has given a rare integrity to the Indian society. The social and economic issues often have identical roots. Mulk Raj Anand is a socially conscious writer. He stood always in favour of social and economic justice. In his stories he deftly focussed on social conflicts of various types. Indian society has traditionally been a patriarchal one. This led to the marginalization of women; they have been subordinated and commodified. The exploitation of men over women is Anand's chief concern. Let us consider the short story Lajwanti. It is the story of a young Indian village girl. Lajwanti was an unfortunate figure; her own brother-in-law Jaswant harassed her regularly. She became a helpless victim of his lewd advances. Her mother-in-law kept rebuking her all the time. Her humiliation at the hands of her brother-in-law and mother-in-law became unbearable to her. But even then she was not at all prepared to surrender to the lecherous designs of her brother-in-law. She felt utterly helpless because her

husband was away from home studying B.A at a college. She found it difficult to save herself from the clutches of the perverted Jaswant. Thus finding no other alternative she ran away from her father-in-law's house. But she was not welcome even in her father's house. Her father grew angry. He could not realise the agony and suffering of Lajwanti and refused to give her shelter as well as protection. For him it was inauspicious for a daughter to come back to her father's house unceremoniously. Jaswant abused her by saying, 'Prostitute / bad woman is running away'. Her father's attitude also reflects male chauvinism; he too behaved in a cruel manner with her. He too believed like her brother-in-law that she disgraced her father-in-law's family by running away. She was thus so helpless that life became a curse for her; she said "There is no way for me .I am condemned to live.' In fact, Lajwanti's own state of imprisonment resembles that of a caged bird. Her father even avoided looking at her face .She was again sent back to her father-in-law's house. It was the most tragic and ironical part of the story. Her father was bogged down in superstition ; he even told Lajwanti 's in-laws to kill her if they so desired .He believed that it was customary for a married woman to return to her father's place with a son in her lap. Lajwanti's agony was unbearable and so she tried to commit suicide. But she was saved. The story of Lajwanti is about social conflicts having their roots in psychological perversion and superstitions. The agony of a pregnant woman is the subject-matter of the short story 'Birth'. The name of the pregnant woman was Parvati who had to work at breaking stones. She was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. As she was on her way to work, her parturition pain began. The members of Parvati's father-in-law's family were all very superstitious. They complained that her arrival in the family resulted in the mortgaging of their land as they had to meet the fares to Delhi. It was again believed by Parvati's father in law that the birth of a male baby would lead to the removal of all misfortunes. Parvati too believed that the birth of a boy would make up everything .She was in unbearable pain; 'She stamped the earth as though to beckon it, as Sita had done asking it to open up and swallow her hour of peril ' Thus we find that the pain Parvati suffered was tremendous; it was so because she had to choose between superstition and agony. In the long run we find that Parvati went to her work of breaking stones placing her baby in a basket. It is quite apparent that she is a helpless victim of exploitation, baseless superstitions and the curse of poverty.

The short- story *The Tamarind Tree* focuses on the common superstitions of the rural Indian society. This is the story of a young mother, Roopa, who has to live veiled at her in laws' house; it is so because she is afraid of possible stares at her. In the story we find Roopa feeling a strong desire to taste the sweet tamarind fruit. She is lost in remembrances of her innocent and jolly child hood days. The writer here lays bare meaninglessness and senselessness of the age-old traditional beliefs and dogmas. Her all out efforts to follow her in laws bear little fruit and she is very often reproached. The short-story offers here the pathetic picture of a woman who quietly suffers at the hands of her in-laws. Symbolically speaking, her plight is no better than that of a caged bird as she has no other alternative left but to lead a life of imprisonment.

Another worthmentioning short-story by the same author is *Lullaby*. Phalini is totally in the dark that he is actually the father of the child. She also wishes she is a young working woman. Her one-year old son Suraj Mukhi is on his death-bed and she is singing a lullaby to sooth the child into sleep. The harsh sounds produced by the factory lies in the background. At this she recalls her lover who too, likes her husband, her lover; but she too is 'caged here with her child'—the symbol of the caged bird here implies that she is also an imprisoned being who cannot chase her dreams. The memory of her bygone lover brings solace to her tormented soul. The child dies but the machine jazz goes on without any break. The condition of Phalini is all the more aggravated. A critic comments, "Both the human song and the machine jazz are repeated in the story, and no sensitive reader will miss the telltale symbolic significance of the fact that at the end, the lullaby stops when the child dies, but the machine jazz goes on uninterrupted"

In the same way, the story *The Parrot in the Cage* also sheds light on the helpless plight of an old woman named Rukhmani who has lost everything in the partition of India. She hails from Lahore to Amritsar as a refugee; and as we notice her we see that a caged parrot is her only companion. She sits on the fringe of a road a little away from Amritsar court and the parrot keeps asking her where she is and what she is doing. To this what Rukhmani replies is worthnoting, "Son, I don't know where I am. Nothing son, I am doing

nothing....only waiting ”. Thus the short- stories discussed here are concerned with cruelties meted out to

innocent have-nots. A note of protest against social exploitation and cultural insufficiency and indifference are adequately heard in most of his short-stories. His characters, here mostly women, suffer at the hands of the indifferent and cruel society they are part of. All of them are victims of the age-old social and cultural

apathy. Anand's stories offer social criticism and the desire to reform the society is quite apparent in his short stories.

Anand's short story 'Old Bapu' deals with the labourers and their humiliation at the hand of the rich. Old Bapu, the landless labourer, travels seven miles on foot. He is in search of a road-repairing job because only that way he can avoid starvation and hunger. The exploitation of the poor by the rich is acutely shown in this episode. The evil of untouchability is also presented in the story and it is very touching. Old Bapu is an untouchable and he is deeply pained to think of his own predicament as an untouchable: 'But I do not want to die –Hey Ishwar. Thus it brings out the heartlessness of the socially and culturally biased social set up. The short story finely sheds light on social, cultural and economic realities. Anand always wanted to be a voice of distressed humanity. "...what is writer if he is not the fiery voice of the people..." said Anand.

Conclusion

From the discussion and deliberation presented here, it can be easily understood that Anand was greatly concerned with socio- economic and cultural realities of his surroundings. The men and women and children whom he draws with so much care come from different walks of life. The women he draws are all deprived; they are all victims of an apathetic socio-cultural and economic set-up. He does not even hesitate to pick up an ordinary toilet cleaner to project in his short stories. Thus he protests against social and cultural evils like untouchability, oppression, hatred, inequality and injustice and sheds sufficient light on the conflicts between the rich and the poor, that between men and women- that is between male-dominance and subordination of women, age-old customs and the spirit of modernity and so on.

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