

COLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MULK RAJ

ANAND 'S

TWO LEAVES AND A BUD – A CRITIQUE

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“And so everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English. But no place could ever really be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would ever be English.” (58)

Colonialism involves the coadunation of imperial power, and is demonstrated in the liquidation of the dominion, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to rule the natives of occupied countries, often by violence. Elleke Boehmer attempts to define colonial literature as literature “which is assumed to be literature reflecting a colonial ethos, usually lacks more precise definition, partly because it is now not much canonized, and partly because it is so heterogeneous” (2). Britain emerged as the supreme power of the world post 1815, or more precisely during the reign of Queen Victoria. Economically, politically, socially, and industrially, England went on expanding its empire with all its might. Colonial literature, therefore, reflects

the impact of colonization on the colonized in writing of that period. This literature, written mainly by cosmopolitans, and also by autochthons, during colonial times in Britain and other parts of the empire, discusses mainly the Britishers' relationship with the colonized. Colonialist narrative is more concerned with colonialist experience. It pictured the world in which British imperialism was accepted as an order of things, where the Queen ruled the empire. The colonized were ruled as they should be; no doubt, her people gained a vital place in history.

Indian English Literature originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under the colonial rule. It is one of the most authentic voices of India. Indian English fiction has been entangled with the socio-political environment of the country. The Indian English novelists sought to depict India in its various aspects – social, political, cultural, economical etc. They have proved their mettle in portraying powerfully the real grandeur of the poor and the downtrodden and their capacity in reorganizing the world. Though Indian English novel has received a good deal of critical attention over the years, the social purpose with which a large number of novels have been written, has confounded the serious concern of many critics. Bhabani Bhattacharya opines, "I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view. Art is not necessarily for art's sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me as a sound judgement" (9).

The Indian English novel has emerged not simply as a pure literary exercise, but as an artistic response to the socio-political situation existing in the country. For, the factors that shaped and moulded the growth of the Indian novel arose as much from the political and social problems of a colonized country as from indigenous narrative traditions of ancient culture. The struggle for independence in India was not merely a political one, but it was also a social one.

The social struggle included the fight against caste system, illiteracy, poverty, superstition and many other social evils prevalent in the country. The pre-independence scenario inspired many Indian English novelists to register the sensibility of politically subjugated and socially oppressed and depressed people. The Indian English novelist was aware of the fact that he should not merely imitate the condition of the colonized over the colonizer, but in “seeking the strength and fertility of his own cultural sensibility and socio-cultural experience”. This realization resulted in the narration of the socio-political and cultural milieu of the nation. The Indian English novel, in its sturdy and steady augmentation, has been depicting social, economic and political oppression of the individuals with their authors taking a humanitarian stance. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan, popularly called the ‘Towering Three’, revealed a mark of their stature, each in his own characteristic way, the various possibilities of Indian English fiction.

The present paper delves into the way how colonial consciousness is portrayed in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Two Leaves and a Bud*. Anand is a celebrated novelist with a global recognition. C.B.Christesen, writes, “He (Anand) is one of the most stimulating men I have ever met.....Above all, he has insisted on the need for VALUES – the civilizing values which help nourish an enlightened and humane society” (3). Mulk Raj Anand is an artist of universal recognition and greatness. His prominent novels are *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942). *The Morning Face* (1968) won him Sahitya Academy Award. To Anand, casteism is an age-old lie made by the powerful and wicked in society to uphold discrimination. His prime concern as a social critic is to remove caste system as it damages social cohesion by giving certain sections of society an unfair advantage over others permanently. He is the champion of the toiling masses,

downtrodden and under-privileged. He is engaged in highlighting the cancerous effects of class system in more than one novel. In his “Apology for Heroism”, Anand points out that the modern writer has to play a constructive role in the reconstruction of the human society. Anand’s novels cover the entire cultural perspective of India.

Two Leaves and a Bud recounts the dashed hopes of Gangu, a Punjabi peasant, who has been lured under false promises to work in the appallingly unhygienic conditions of a tea estate in Assam. In this relentless tale of woe, Gangu is systematically starved before being shot dead by a British officer, who also tries to seduce his daughter. The realistic portrayal of the grim life of the plantation coolies adds to the pathos of the novel.

Indian society experienced a qualitative structural transformation during the British rule. The British economic policies, patently imperialistic, were mostly exploitative and suppressive, designed for ethnic subordination. The tea estate, in *Two Leaves and a Bud* is a world within a world that projects ethnic intolerance, suspicion, cruelty, and exploitation of the poor coolies by the colonizers who bring about a sort of “Internal Colonialism”. Colonial literature revolves around certain key themes: “the introversion of the colonial mission, or colonial drama; the masculine aspect of that drama; the representation of other peoples; and the resistant incomprehensibility or unreadability of the colonized beyond” (58). One could find all the themes expressed in Anand’s *Two Leaves and a Bud*.

The locale here is Macpherson Tea Estate in Assam, to which Gangu is inveigled by false pretences. He is accompanied by his wife Sajani and their two children, Leila and Buddhu. The novel opens with a highly philosophical note: “Life is like a journey”. But the protagonist’s journey is an unpleasant journey, which is arranged by Buta, the Sardar and coolie-catcher of the estate. The very opening chapter foretells the destiny of the poor Gangu:

“I have only a few years to live; and I should have liked to die among my kith and kin rather than in this jungle, already three days’ and nights’ journey from Hoshiarpur. For a moment, he felt as if the worm of death was crawling through his belly, and gnawing at the flesh inside him;.... (2)

Within a year of his arrival at the tea estate, Gangu dies at the hands of a colonizer, Reggie Hunt. Buta, the Sardar deceives Gangu with his ‘golden’ promises, the worst being the credit given to the colonizers. When Gangu asks whether the Sahibs of the estate are kind, Buta replies, “Just like *mai-bap* (mother and father)”. Buta adds that Gangu will become the owner of a field which is a gift of Sahibs. It is too powerful a temptation to resist. But the Sahibs do cheat him.

At home Gangu is exploited by Seth Badri Das, the moneylender and in Assam he is exploited by the imperialist machinery of the Tea Estate. Soon after their arrival, Gangu is shrewd enough to realize that they have been doomed for ever. But he makes up his mind to fight back. Gangu is appalled at the way Buta joining his hands with a humility (which is not exhibited anywhere), when he comes face to face with Babu Shashi Bhushan Bhattacharya. The entry of a Sahib (Britisher) brings queer tension in the air, “so that the coolies went pale with fear and excitement”. Croft-Cooke is the Manager of the tea plantation and Reggie Hunt is the Assistant Manager who waits for Cooke to retire so that he will take the coveted place of becoming the Manager of the tea estate.

“The promised paradise of plenty” with its rich vegetation is only a mirage for Gangu. “First water, afterwards mire!” says the neighbour Narain. He adds that it is a prison which has no bars. The chowkidars keep an eye on the coolies always. If any coolie tries to escape, the chowkidars bring them back promptly; they go round at night with a lamp and open every door to see whether all coolies are at home. The dark drama of exploitation of the coolies is enacted

against the bright background. The coolies have to work hard throughout the day at meagre wages. After a week of hard labour in the plantation, the amount given to the coolies is so meager. Gangu gets three annas, two annas for his wife and daughter and three pice for his son. Way back at his home, Gangu himself earned eight annas a day, working in his landlord's land.

The hazardous working and living conditions of the coolies is powerfully portrayed in the novel. The coolies' lanes are so dirty that they have become the breeding place of mosquitoes. Dr. John de la Harve, the only philanthropist among the Britishers, finds the ecological conditions terribly unsuitable for the coolies. The picture of hook-worms among the puddle of urine formed itself in his mind. Millions of mosquitoes hatch under such 'favourable' conditions. He wishes that the syndicates could stop and think for a minute to save the plantation from the tide of cholera. The main cause of the disease is contaminated water. It would cost a lakh or two lakhs to supply clean water. But the British imperialists are not ready to spend money even though they mint millions of money.

When John has a cup of tea at Croft-Cooke's he mutters "The hunger, the sweat and the despair of a million Indians!" He thinks, "Yes, why not let the natives run their own show? It is their country. And we have really no right in it" (21). John attacks Croft-Cooke saying, it would be criminal not to do anything about the contaminated water. Cooke promises that he will see to the condition, but nothing is done, because he considers the coolies "sub-human". The doctor suggests mosquito nets and is ridiculed by Cooke.

The heart-rending incident is the death of Gangu's wife because of cholera. The fever Gangu had the previous night left him to catch Sajani. The pathetic part of the demise is that Gangu has no money for his wife's last journey. He approaches Burra Sahib for loan. He has to give Sikh Chaprasi, and Shashi Bhushan a part of the loan he may get from Cooke. But Cooke

drives him away telling he is under “segregation”. So Gangu is forced to get loan from Bania, an evil incarnation, and struggles to pay it back.

The colonial mistress Mrs.Croft-Cooke, half-whining and half-aggressive, calls the natives “born liars”. She calls the khansamah, the old Ilahi Bux, as “Lie-Box”. When the doctor talks in favour of the natives (“actually Indians are good at languages”) Mrs.Cooke comments: “these natives are lazy. And we must not spoil them. They are born liars. And they steal. I caught a coolie woman plucking roses from our garden the other day, and I shoed her off.....we must not spoil them” (23). Mrs.Cooke does not want her daughter Barbara to go alone among these thousands of coolies.

The poor plight of the peasants in the hands of the Reggie Hunt, the Assistant Manager of the plantation is highly pernicious. The coolies shudder at the entry of ‘Raja Sahib’, as he is addressed. Since his arrival at the plantation, flogging a coolie is a common occurrence. “The wild swing of their axes, the sharp sweep of their scythes and the clean cut of their knives filled Reggie with a belligerent passion for destruction” (46). Reggie is of the opinion that the colonizers have to be strong with the colonized, lest they should be cheated by the natives. As the name suggests, Reggie Hunt is always on the hunt for coolie women.

Mulk Raj Anand discusses the deplorable conditions of women in the hands of the colonizers. The women coolies have to leave their children in the baskets before engaging in the work. They are put under the torrid sun. When they return, they find their children in dust, drain or even dead. A coolie woman is seen chased to work when she is feeding the child. The coolie women are never safe in the hands of Reggie Hunt. Gangu’s neighbour Narain says, “He is always drunk. And he has no consideration for anyone’s mother or sister. He is openly living with three coolie women.....Nobody’s mother or sister is safe in this place” (42). The coolies

get land for cultivation by offering their wives or daughters to Reggie Hunt. Neogi Gurkha gets five acres of land and many other gifts for offering his wife to Hunt. This causes jealousy among other coolie women, which ends in a quarrel. Hunt commands the chowkidars to strike some of the coolies, who in turn take shelter in John de la Havre. John asked the coolies to meet Burra Sahib for demanding justice.

Colonial stories are laden with tea-times, club life, sports and their associated etiquette and patterns of behaviour. In this novel, Croft-Cooke, Reggie Hunt and other imperialists of the estate spend their time going to club, playing polo etc., They also organize a special hunting expedition for the entertainment of His Excellency, the Governor of Assam. For his sport, the coolies become scape-goats. One coolie is attacked by the tiger.

Towards the end of the novel, we see Gangu in his highly philosophical stature. He contemplates “Do all good men die here, and others live on?” Death is considered a release in the life of the poor peasants. Reggie Hunt’s deadly eyes fall on Gangu’s daughter, Leila. He asks her to come to his bungalow. Leila refuses. Infuriated, Hunt reaches her hut and asks her brother to call Leila. Buddhu shouts “Father, Father”. Reggie tries to run away but meets Gangu. In his rage, he shoots Gangu and flees. This is followed by the three-day trial. A jury of seven European and two Indian members finds Reggie not guilty on the charge of murder or culpable homicide and he is discharged. *Two Leaves and a Bud* can be said to have the following set-ups:

- Colonizers against the colonized
(the ghastly treatment given to the poor peasants by the imperialists)
- Colonizers against the colonizers
(John De La Harve speaks for the coolies and is dismissed from the royal service)
- Colonized against the colonized
(the coolies are exploited by Sardar, Shashi Bhushan Bhattacharya, Bania etc)
- Colonized for the colonized

(Narain, Gangu's neighbour comforts Gangu by giving him a helping hand)

- Colonizers for colonizers
(Reggie Hunt 'assists' Croft-Cooke and His Excellency in exploiting poor coolies)

The novel delivers a strong indictment of the moral character of the East India Company officers. Throughout the long tale, Indians are mere shadowy figures in the background. Anand presents a disturbing picture of a harassed underdog, a helpless victim of oppressive forces. He condemns the dehumanizing social evils and feels alarmed to see the life of the poor people. Anand's fiction may be called a "protest novel." The exploited and the down-trodden bear the brunt of misfortunes. Exploitation, permanent indebtedness and perennial struggle to make both ends meet cringe them. They have little courage to rise up to the situation.

Anand arouses a deep sense of pathos but also makes the reader aware of an urgent need for social reform. Social deprivation in the class-ridden society finds a graphic representation in this novel. Alistair Niven says: "In most of Anand's novels there comes a crucial moment of realization when the main character fully understands his place in the social order". Gangu, in this novel, surprisingly realizes the fact, the moment he arrives at the tea plantation.

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observes, "As a writer of fiction, Anand's notable marks are vitality and a keen sense of actuality. He is a veritable Dickens for describing the inequities and idiosyncrasies in the current human situation with candour as well as accuracy (78).

In order to show the need of social awakening Anand has introduced Marxism through Dr. John De La Havre and Miss Barbara, as a recipe for the cure of many of the social evils. John, though a colonizer, has all concern and humane tendency for the poor coolies. He opines, "the black coolies clear the forests, plant the fields, toil and garner the harvest, while all the money-grubbing, slave-driving, soulless managers and directors draw their salaries and dividends and

build up monopolies.”The managers of the plantations are devoid of pity and sympathy, and always indulge in drinking, debauchery, snobbery and brutalities. To conclude, in the words of Boehmer, “The European in the Empire rejects the native, yet he also requires the native’s presence in order to experience to the full his own being as a white colonialist”.

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