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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of women in Mulk Raj Anand's short stories, focusing on the recurring theme of endurance within oppressive socio-cultural structures. Anand's narratives portray women as marginalised figures who endure systemic patriarchy, emotional neglect, and social injustice. Through symbolic imagery, particularly that of the caged bird, Anand captures the psychological and physical confinement of women. Stories such as Lajwanti, The Parrot in the Cage, The Tamarind Tree, and The Silver Bangles reveal how women internalise suffering while simultaneously exhibiting resilience. This paper argues that Anand not only reflects the harsh realities of traditional Indian society but also subtly critiques its rigid gender norms. By analysing character behaviour, symbolism, and narrative tone, the study highlights endurance as both a condition imposed upon women and a quiet form of resistance.

Keywords

Endurance, Feminism, Social Realism, Patriarchy, Women's Oppression, Symbolism, Indian Literature

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The real place of women in a traditional Indian society is a burning theme in the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand. His stories present a wide range of women characters, who are typical of the social milieu from which they come. The stories not only display the picture of the self-sacrificing, silent and submissive woman, but also offer an in-depth study in human psychology. Anand, a novelist, editor and art critic, had contributed to Indian awareness of this need for social change.

In the short stories of Anand, the image of a caged bird has been obviously used to symbolise the confined and helpless woman. The story that best illustrates this symbol is "Lajwanti." "Lajwanti" is the story of a young, motherless rustic girl, whose husband is away at college. She finds herself an easy target of the amorous attentions of her lascivious, pockmarked brother-in-law, Jaswant. Jaswant is already married, but his wife is a cow and is not able to protest against her husband's advances towards Lajwanti. Lajwanti has tried her best to evade Jaswant; she even slapped him when he once tried to approach her. But she finds herself in a helpless state, because her mother-in-law connives at Jaswant's doing. In sheer desperation, Lajwanti runs away to her father's house, but is sent back, and in the end, tries unsuccessfully to drown herself in a well. As she is rescued and gains consciousness, she cries out, "There is no way for me . . . I am . . . condemned to live" (Naik, p. 166). The caged mainas that she carries with her in her flight is evidently symbolic of her own situation, but the stark realism of her plight is unmistakable.

Lajwanti is shown trudging along to her father's house in Gurgaon, carrying with her the maina bird in a cage. The trapped, docile and dumb bird symbolises Lajwanti's helplessness. Lajwanti talks to the maina bird, but it only fluttered its wings in the cage. Lajwanti's long absence has raised suspicions at home, and Jaswant has set out to search for her. When Lajwanti heard Jaswant calling at her to stop at once, "she merely ran with the instinct to fly, to get out of his reach." (p. 88). The maina bird also fluttered its wings wildly and, apprehending danger, it shrieked and cried. Jaswant ran after Lajwanti like a wild beast. He caught hold of her and twisted her wrist. She tried to get away from his grip, but he overpowered her. She sat dumbly, suppressing even her sobs. A large crowd gathered, but none intervened. Luckily, an engineer and his wife who were passing by came to Lajwanti's rescue. The engineer's wife heard Lajwanti's story and managed to send back Jaswant. She allowed Lajwanti to proceed to Gurgaon, to her father's house.

When Lajwanti arrived at her father's house, with the caged maina in her hand, she was not welcomed by her father. Her father dared not look at her face, because a daughter coming home without due ceremony was inauspicious. She was offered a mat, which was given only to guests, indicating that now this was not her

home. She was like a guest and was supposed to go back to her husband's home. Her father took her back to her in-laws' home. On the way, the maina in the cage looked as if it were dead. The bird seemed still, and Lajwanti spoke to her in wordless words, "My maina, tell me what will happen now? My heart flutters, as you often do when you are frightened of the cat coming to eat you, and I do not know if Jaswant will relent and not pursue me anymore. But perhaps now that my father has brought me up like her, husband Kirodhar would never know that he (the lover) was the father of Phalini's son."

Phalini often dreamt of her lover, and for days she had scanned the horizon of the sky above the city towards the north in the direction where he had gone. But he didn't seem to be anywhere in the large, breathless space. Again, the symbol of the caged bird is used to describe Phalini's helplessness as a sense of endurance. Phalini thought that her lover was "wandering perhaps happy and free, while she was caged here with her child" (p. 47). Phalini's grief is further aggravated by the death of her son. Her piercing shrieks tear the ceiling as she wails over the dead child. Crazy and agonised, Phalini tears her hair; there is no escape from this pathetic state of affairs. Phalini, the caged bird, "slapped her cheeks and beat her palms on her breast, crying in a weird low voice, "Hai Hai" (p. 42).

In the story "Parrot in the Cage", the sense of endurance in the form of a caged bird is very clear. The story presents Rukmini, an old woman who has lost everything in the holocaust of the Partition of India and whose sole companion during the migration from Lahore to Amritsar is a pet parrot. Like the maina in the previous story, the parrot here carries a symbolic suggestion; it perhaps shows how the old woman's deprivation is so total that her nearest and dearest now is not a human being but a bird. The parrot is caged and alone and keeps asking Rukmini, "Where are you going?" and "What are you doing?" But Rukmini is not able to give him a satisfactory answer, for she herself doesn't know where she is going and what she wants. She goes to meet the Deputy Commissioner, who might rehabilitate her. But the Commissioner is dismayed by showing no concern for her, Rukmini is caught in street violence and a lathi charge by the police. Fortunately, she was saved by someone in the crowd. A gram seller makes her sit under the shade of a nearby tree. The parrot's monologue "Ni to Kithi hai?" continues and seems to air the old woman's feelings of insecurity and displacement. She feels lost and alone, and this is expressed by her anonymous, meaningless replies, "Nowhere, son, nowhere I am going." (p. 111). Just as the parrot is caged and mindlessly singing the same old song. Similarly, the old woman is alone, and there is no way to escape her miseries and loneliness.

The story ends at the pathetic moaning of the old woman “I don’t know where I am! I don’t know . . .” (p. 114).

“Birth” also presents the sense of endurance. Parvati, a poor peasant woman in an advanced state of pregnancy, is compelled to work at breaking stones, owing to the strained circumstances of the family. The birth-pangs start as she is proceeding to her work alone, but, in this hour of trial, she refuses to panic. Her father-in-law kept a respectable distance from her; he was almost lost to view. Parvati had been blamed by her mother-in-law for bringing about the decline of the whole family. When Parvati married into and entered the house as a daughter-in-law, the son was born. But at this moment, her father-in-law’s concern was more for the son that Parvati might bear for him than for her. Parvati, a truly traditional Indian woman, also believed that if she were able to give the old man a grandson, it might compensate him for the slow agony of his ruin through the debt and the draught. Even when the birth pangs become intense, “she stamped the earth, as though to beckon it, as Sita had done, asking it to open up, but she steadied a little” (p. 4). She could see her father-in-law as a speck of dust away. She finds that her native rustic ruggedness is reinforced by an inner strength derived from her deep-seated, simple peasant faith in the gods. As she lies writhing on the ground, she sees a vision of Goddess Kali in the sky. This gives her so much courage that when the child arrives, she is able to manage the necessary midwifery herself. At this moment of crisis, “she was gasping for breath, a helpless grey bird, smothered by the overwhelming forces that rose from her belly” (p. 55). She thinks of Ramu, who had rushed off to work, leaving her to bear the pain all alone. She longed to touch a sympathetic hand or limb or anything while the excruciating pain gnawed at her entrails. But soon, like a traditional Indian woman, she cursed herself for thinking ill of her husband, the Lord and Master, whom her parents had married off to and whom they expected her to worship. Once again, the picture of a poor woman suspended between life and death is shown, smothering like a helpless grey bird. At the end of the story, we find Parvati putting the baby boy in her basket and going to break stones again. Her father-in-law shows the least concern for Parvati. He picks up the boy from the basket and hopes that perhaps his coming there would turn luck in favour of them.

A different mood characterises “A Village Idyll”, a story most appropriately entitled. It gives a delightful picture of youthful love in a rural setting. A lyrical nature description is a remarkable feature of this story. Anand again uses the bird symbol to show the status assigned to Govind and Gauri in a traditional Indian social set-up. The lovers meet at the village pond and the lentil fields. Gauri, veiled in sheaths of innocence, smiling demurely, is impatiently pursued by Govind. “He

leapt towards her like a tiger towards a young doe” (p. 62). As the lovers rejoice in the delightful setting, Govind is shown protecting Gauri from Lehna, the son of the village landlord. When Govind sees Lehna at a little distance away, “Govind flapped his arms like a protective male bird covering his mate under his wings for Lehna was his rival. Gauri snuggled up to him, like a cooing female bird” (p. 63). The symbols of the tiger, male bird, young doe and cooing female bird are highly suggestive of the characteristics attributed to Govind and Gauri.

In the story “Tamarind Tree”, a young and expectant mother cannot satisfy her longing for the taste of the sharp, sweet tamarind fruit. At her in-laws’ home, she was kept veiled under her head cloth. She kept her face covered with the head cloth against possible stares. Her lips had become pale, dried by sighs and muffled breath in which she uttered words in answer to others from behind her head cloth. The picture of the veiled Roopa resembles a stifled bird in a cage. The image of the caged bird is suggestive in this story. Roopa remembers with a heavy heart her days as a girl, when she jumped, capered, ran and climbed trees. Now, as a daughter-in-law, her childhood innocence and freedom were abandoned. Even now, as a bride, she is unhappy that the fear of elders and the weight of conventions and traditions have made it impossible for her to communicate with her husband. She is greatly disappointed to see “that her inner impulses always remained where they were, incommunicable even to her man. She felt she wanted to cry. And she covered her face so as not to be seen in her weakness. She strangled the cry in her belly.” Despite her efforts to obey and please her in-laws, she is rebuked by them. In desperation, she rushed to the inner sanctum of the barn and lay down on the bridal bed that had come in her dowry. The traditional Indian woman is again shown suffering in silence, sacrificing her desire, spending her days like a helpless caged bird, with no freedom to spread her wings.

In the “Silver Bangles”, her betrothal by her mother is unjustly accused by the lady of the house, Mrs Goel, of having stolen the bangles. At the end of the story, it becomes clear that Mrs Goel, who is sexually frigid, is actually jealous of the attraction her husband feels for the sweeper girl. Her accusations against Sajani are aimed only to hide her own sense of inferiority to the untouchable beauty. Giving vent to her complex, Mrs Goel sighs, “Oh, between this bird here and me, there stands a shadow of despair . . .” (p. 276). Mrs Goel screams at Sajani, “Go get out and never enter this house again! Thief, you have not only stolen the bangles but also my . . .” (p. 282). Sajani bears the humiliation in silence and lowers her head “as a dove dives off the earth to fly across the valley, threatened by a rough wind . . .” (p. 282) and quietly went out of the house.

These tales of pathos present a sense of endurance. Lajwanti, Roopa, Rukmini, Parvati, Sajani and similar women of Mulk Raj Anand represent a hopeless status of women in traditional Indian society. In the book, *The Brides Books of Beauty*, Anand gives a very real picture of the low status of women in India. *The Brides Books of Beauty* was published in 1947 but it holds even today “obviously, woman in India has sometimes been exalted as a goddess, but mostly pampered as a doll or kept down and oppressed . . . the Indian woman merely drifted along and became bound to men, more and more as a slave, less and less as an individual apart . . .” (1947, p. 30).

Anand, the champion of the downtrodden, outcasts, waifs and derelicts, does not fail to picture in his short stories the predicament of a woman who is another pitiable prey to the rigid social order. He gives a realistic picture of the inevitable struggle of women against the degradation of women by the male chauvinists in our country. Anand does not stop merely with the portrayal of human problems. As a responsible artist, he suggests various solutions to the different problems, carefully refraining from imposition of any kind. As said earlier, Anand is certain that the cause of all human misery is man’s inhumanity to man.’ A careful study of Anand’s stories reveals to us his vision of life, his masterly treatment of social evils and the solutions that he suggests for all problems. Anand is certain that the protest is the preliminary requisite to break down all barriers of evil and pave the path of progress. Anand is more effective when he interprets life as it is. This is especially true when he depicts women and children.

Thus, Mulk Raj Anand focuses on the woman’s predicament and struggle to find an identity for herself. Disappointed by the rigid social pattern, gender bias and her own petty human foibles, the woman presents a sense of endurance.

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