

MULK RAJ ANAND AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SUBALTERN: RE-READING ANAND'S NOVEL TWO LEAVES AND A BUD

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the concept of subalternity in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Two Leaves and a Bud*, focusing on how the narrative portrays the oppression and marginalisation of Indian labourers under the British colonial rule. Through the character of Gangu, a poor Punjabi labourer, Anand exposes the harsh realities of colonial exploitation, class hierarchy, and racial discrimination on a British-owned tea plantation. The analysis draws on subaltern theory, particularly the works of Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the Subaltern Studies Group, to illustrate how Anand's depiction of subaltern voices challenges colonial authority and highlights the resilience of the oppressed. Critical scenes within the novel, symbols of resilience, and Anand's narrative style provide a profound critique of the colonial structures that perpetuate subjugation. This study positions *Two Leaves and a Bud* as an essential contribution to Indian literature in English, shedding light on the struggle for agency and identity among the subalterns in colonial India.

Keywords: subaltern, marginalisation, hegemony, exploitation, tea plantation, poverty

The word 'subaltern' derives from two Latin words – 'sub' meaning 'below' and 'alternus' meaning 'all others'. Traditionally the term 'subaltern' is a British military word denoting a junior ranking officer in the British army. However, the Subaltern Studies is indebted to the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who first used this term in his book *Prison Notebooks* to denote "Non-hegemonic groups on classes" (Gramsci, xiv). The Subaltern Studies Collective or Subaltern Studies Group, a group of scholars cum historians interested in re-reading history and writing subaltern history of South Asia, was influenced by the writings of Gramsci. One of the founding members of this group, Ranajit Guha defines the term "as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" (Guha, vii). A section of subaltern studies scholars believed that Gramsci used this term to denote a particular class, 'proletariat'. They argued he used the word 'Subaltern' as a codeword to hide his reference to proletariat in order to avoid prison censorship during his captivity. Even the Subaltern Studies Group believed to have elaborated Gramsci's narrow definition of this term. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "I like the word 'subaltern' for one reason. It is truly situational. 'Subaltern' began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was used under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism 'monism', and was obliged to call the proletarian 'subaltern.' That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn't fall under strict class analysis" (Spivak, 141). On the other hand, a section of critics and authors like Marcus E Green emphasised that Gramsci didn't confine the word 'subaltern' to a particular class, rather referred to slaves, peasants, women, people of different races, religions and cultures to denote subalterns. According to Gramsci, the dominant groups maintain their domination in two ways - by coercion or seeking permission of the subalterns to be dominated. The processes by which the dominant or ruling groups succeed in receiving the consent of the dominated groups to be subjugated can be called 'hegemony', popularised by Gramsci himself. To discuss Italian history, Gramsci emphasised that *Risorgimento* or 'unification of Italy' was not a national movement because it excluded the masses, peasants from political and cultural participation, and was led by a small section of educated, middle class and aristocratic people. In the context of

subalterns, it is relevant to refer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "... in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history, and cannot speak..."(Spivak, 41).

The most crucial of phase in the history of the Indian English novels started in the nineteen thirties by the major trio – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao - popularly called the 'Towering Three'. It is obvious that Indian English literature emerged as the inevitable result of the introduction of English education in India by the colonisers. Though these authors were educated in English, they never failed to showcase social, cultural, economic and political conditions of the contemporary Indian society. They have highlighted the social evils that were prevalent in Indian society - casteism, class oppression, illiteracy, poverty, superstitious belief. In doing so, the daily sufferings of impoverished Indians reflected in their writings turn into the sad music of suffering humanity.

The education in India during Mulk Raj Anand prioritised western culture over Indian tradition. He recounts this situation through narrating his own upbringing in his autobiographical treatise *Apology for Heroism*, "I grew up like most of my contemporaries, a very superficial, ill-educated young man, without any bearings" (Anand, 15). This illness superficially received a rude shock when he voluntarily participated in the Gandhian movement and consequently, was imprisoned for a short period. Then, going to England for pursuing research, he became interested in the ancient Indian art, and was influenced by the liberal left wing politics. Having been influenced by both the Indian and contemporary European traditions, his novels have been weighed by the 'double burden' on his shoulders – "the Alps of the European tradition and the Himalaya of my Indian past" (ibid. 67). His interest in the Indian tradition made him concerned over the underprivileged, suffering people of India. On the other hand, the European tradition, especially contemporary Marxist ideals made him a firm believer in revolutionary socialism. The blending of these two makes him a worshipper of egalitarianism and sympathetic about human sufferings which in turn become dominant themes in his novels. Anand's protagonists don't possess any heroism or superhuman qualities nor do they have any aristocratic background. They are under-privileged, impoverished, proletarian men and women. They are the victims of the circumstances, the existing social orders which they are unable to defy, alter or transgress. Anand depicts the socially deprived and ostracised individuals - the untouchables, the coolies, the peasants, the coppersmiths not with an aim to uplift them to heroic stature; rather he is interested in narrating their journey from self-alienation to an epiphanic world where the springs of sympathy, camaraderie and brotherhood are dried out. In his literary world, literature and life are developed in a parallel manner.

His first novel, *Untouchable* showcases the evil practice of casteism in contemporary Indian society. The protagonist, because of being untouchable, is not allowed to have a family name, and is thus acknowledged by his first name, Bakha. By Profession, he is a young sweeper who along with his family undergoes humiliation, torture and exploitation by the upper-caste Hindus. His sister Sohini, who is not allowed to collect water with her own hands from the communal well on the ground that the touch of an untouchable would make the well impure, becomes an object of lust for a Hindu priest who assaults her physically by grabbing her breasts.

His another novel *Coolie* describes the tragic journey of orphan Munoo, who with little education and no employable skills, goes out of his uncle's house to ear his own living. His several roles as the servant to a middle class family, the factory worker, the coolie and the rickshaw puller are indicative of predicament of the working class, culminating in his premature death at the age of fifteen: "In the early hours of one unreal, white night he passed away - the tide of his life having reached back to the deep." (Anand, 317) Many critics consider *Coolie* to be a 'proletarian novel', an indictment on colonialism, capitalism and industrialism. To pursue and portray the realistic picture of the subalterns and portray them artistically and vividly in the novels have almost become a mission in Anand's life. In the preface of the novel *Two Leaves and a Bud*, he points out the reasons that drive him to write about them:

“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 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 their lives in my writings.” (Anand, 06)

This novel is set against the backdrop of colonial India, an era marked by economic exploitation, social stratification and marginalisation of indigenous people. Through his detailed narrative, Anand illustrates how colonialism was not only a political triumph but also a deep rooted economic, social and cultural domination of India's marginalised populations. The novel begins with a philosophical note: “Life is like a journey”. The journey of the protagonist in this novel is not philosophical but painful, not of joy but of systematic subjugation by the colonial 'system'. Gangu, an innocent villager of Hoshiarpur in Punjab is survived by his wife Sajani and two children, Buddhu and Leila. Taking advantage of his innocence, Buta Sardar, a coolie catcher, beguiles Gangu to migrate to Assam in search of a better fortune. This journey from Punjab to Assam is the first step for the entire family to enter the realm of tragedy, deprivation and devastation. Gangu becomes a coolie in a tea plantation area of Assam, MacPherson Tea Estate. Taking advantage of his innocence, Buta Sardar, a coolie catcher, beguiles Gangu to migrate to Assam in search of a better fortune. This journey from Punjab to Assam is the first step for the entire family to enter the realm of tragedy, deprivation and devastation. Gangu becomes a coolie in a tea plantation area of Assam, MacPherson Tea Estate. During the British colonial period, tea plantations in Assam and other parts of India became symbols of the exploitative practices of the Empire, where local laborers, often coerced into work through debt or other oppressive mechanisms, endured harsh conditions and low wages. These plantations, controlled by British companies, exploited Indian labor, disregarding the cultural, physical, and emotional well-being of the workers. The tea state in this novel is no exception.

The ‘promised land’ in Assam tea plantation, Gangu realises, is a land of perpetual slavery when his neighbour Narain narrates and shares his own life experiences. He was brought into the tea estate on a contract of three months, but detained for last twelve years. The locale is a prison house which is intangible but inescapable, imperishable. The chowkidars are watchdogs at night who using lamps keep watching the houses of coolies so that none can escape from the “prison”. Gangu's hopes are dashed when Narain narrates the atrocities inflicted upon coolies by police, manager and planters: “About three thousand men, women, children were lying at the station. No train would take them...” (ibid. 32). Instead of getting land for cultivating as per the contract, Gangu ends up receiving a meagre amount of money at the cost of weeklong toil. He receives less than eight annas which is hardly enough for a person to feed his family. Gangu realises the promise of high wages made by Buta was a trap, and he succeeded in his mission. To exemplify the deceiving qualities of Buta Sardar, Gangu refers to a class and a caste – barber and Brahmin – “Never believe a barber or a Brahmins, for the one arranges marriages, and has to describe an ugly girl as a fairy, and the other draws horoscopes; and must make the evil stars appear the luckiest” (ibid. 8). This statement shows that the Indian subalterns in the colonial period were exploited not only by the Britishers but also by a section of their fellow countrymen belonging to particular classes and castes.

The unhygienic conditions affect coolies not only in their workplace but also in their living area. Their lanes are so filthy that they become the breeding grounds of mosquitoes, resulting in malaria in an epidemic manner. The British manager pays no heed to bear the cost of one or two lakhs to supply fresh water to the coolies. For him, the Indian coolies are "sub human" and they don't deserve a better life.

Lack of food and fresh water followed by abusive words meted out to them by the tea planters makes them the worst sufferer physically and psychologically. Though Gangu and his family suffer from Malaria, it can't resist Gangu from performing his duties.

The suffering from Malaria culminates in the unfortunate death of his wife Sajani in his own arm crying for medicine. His helplessness is exacerbated when he has no money even for her proper funeral or cremation. He has no other option except begging for money from door to door. His condition reminds us of Munshi Premchand's story, *The Shroud*. In that story, Madhav, an 'untouchable' along with his son Ghisu begs for money from the villagers so that he can purchase a shroud for his dead wife Budhiya. Unlike Madhav, Gangu is neither lazy nor alcoholic, but a victim of injustice, exploitation and poverty. Gangu requests Shashi Bhushan to arrange some money from the 'mai-bap' Croft-Cooke. But he is badly beaten and driven away by Cooke. Both Shashi Bhushan, the colonised and Cooke, the colonizer seem to be apathetic towards the labour. He has not a single penny and his wife's deceased body has been lying in the house for two days.

Two sides of the Britishers (the colonisers) are portrayed by Anand in this novel. Characters like Dr. John Harve and Barbara represent generous, philanthropic outlook of few Britishers in India. After surveying insanitary conditions of the coolies' residence, Dr. John approaches Reggie Hunt to take some needful steps for preventing cholera. He advocates that the Indians should run their own country and the Britishers have no right in it. He thinks about the poverty, the sweat and the hopelessness of millions of Indians. He assures Gangu about getting land for cultivation. Barbara, the only daughter of Mr. Croft-Cooke, befriends the coolies. On the other hand, Croft-Cooke, the Manager of the tea estate, Mrs. Croft-Cooke and Reggie Hunt, the Assistant Manager, typify evil sides of the colonisers characterised by ruthlessness, barbarism and superiority complex. Mrs. Croft-Cooke considers the coolies to be liars, lazy and thieves. She has shooed away a coolie woman who dares to pluck roses from her garden. They visit clubs, playing polo in their pastimes, and arrange expeditions for the amusement of the Governor of Assam where the coolies become victims.

The entry of Reggie Hunt at the plantation makes the coolies terrified: "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." To describe the condition of Third World women, Spivak argues, "...the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (ibid. 41). Her statement finds relevance in this novel. The physical exploitation of women coolies by some vulgar, lustful, wicked Britishers is portrayed in this novel. The name Reggie Hunt is indicative of his hunting nature, and coolie women are hunted in this context. An alcoholic, Reggie is having no consideration for anyone's mother or sister. Three coolie women live with him to satisfy his lust. The coolies can get land for cultivation if they mortgage their wives and daughters to Reggie Hunt. His animalistic nature is portrayed in the following manner:

"She yielded to him, her body limp and contorted into a silent despair, her eyes a gaze at the wild sensual heat in his face, her heart turned inwards at the cold virginity that seemed to freeze her at the contact with him. He made a sudden up charge, as if he swung her body hard, hard, harder, tearing the flesh of her breasts, biting her cheeks and striking her buttocks till she was red and purple like a mangled corpse, ossified into a complete obedience by the volcanic eruption of the lust." (ibid. 186)

Reggie's wanton lust for the youthful Leila brings ultimate catastrophe in Gangu's life. His burning desire for Gangu's daughter is narrated by Anand in the following manner: "Slim young body defined by the narrow girth of her skirt and the fine stretch of her bodice, her whole demeanor like a bird that would flutter in the hands of the shikari." (ibid. 121)

As Leila is unwilling to surrender her chastity before Reggie Hunt, she turns down the offer of visiting his bungalow. The womaniser Reggie madly pursues her, reaches her hut and asks her to come out. As soon as Gangu attempts to save her daughter, Reggie arbitrarily shoots Gangu that results in his death.

The tragic incident is followed by a trial that lasts for three days. A jury of seven Europeans and two Indian judges finds no crime against Reggie that sets him free from the charges of murder. It showcases that the judicial system in colonial era is nothing but a puppet at the hands of colonisers who attempt to safeguard the wrong doings of their countrymen and reduce the idea of justice to mockery. Through the verdict, the honourable country has justified and supported the Britishers' culpable act like assassination. In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Mulk Raj Anand offers a poignant examination of subalternity within the context of colonial India, focusing on the oppressive structures that define and constrain the lives of marginalized laborers like Gangu. The novel sheds light on the subaltern experience in colonial India, presenting readers with a nuanced view of the daily hardships, silencing, and alienation endured by the oppressed. Anand's portrayal of these struggles challenges the glorified narratives of colonialism and underscores the moral cost of exploitation, both economic and cultural. Anand's legacy in postcolonial literature is marked by his commitment to representing the marginalized and giving a voice to those who were historically silenced. His work stands as a critical intervention in Indian English literature, inspiring future writers to explore and represent the struggles of the subaltern.

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