

Sub-Alternist Creative Vision in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand



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Abstract

The present paper lights upon the act of recognition of the universality of Anand's novels in the light of post-colonial theory; fashionably called subaltern theory which gained currency in 1980s in the works of renowned cultural critics and historians like Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak, Parth Chatterjee and others, seeing as to how, with his flair for pointed observation and concern for the whole canvas of human values with its moral convictions and humanistic dimensions, the need for reforms, with a control over material causes that determine human destiny, Mulk Raj Anand, "the chief spokesman of the Indo-Anglian 'Literary Naturalism' with a proletarian bias", recurrently conveys ideas, messages, ideology, sensitive awareness with a view to seeing life as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected happenings, regarding life as full of meanings, hallmarked by design and purpose with Anand's introspection into the future of humanity, with his fictional world duly discovering a new texture and new story for his novels, which touches our emotion and sensibilities and arouses imagination and stimulates intellect.

Introduction

The novel is a literary genre without a binding formal tradition. This has advantages and disadvantages. It can be adopted to any material and any period. We have had prehistoric, historic and contemporary novels but also rapid motion projections into the future. The novel can enter any present, any temporal current or temporal mode. It is in this interest and with this mode of writing that Mulk Raj Anand who appeared at significant crisis in culture and whose characteristic impulse was to divert the current of tradition into new and hitherto unknown channels and who wrote his novels which caught a special fascination for modern literary imagination and cast a great illumination over this troubled world, employing a technique wherein the accent falls a little differently, the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored, whereby the writer discovers, explores and develops his subject, conveying its meaning and finally evaluating it.

This article subjects the phases and nuances of Anand's novels to a close scrutiny of his perceptive study in the light of sub-altern theory which it has mapped out in bold relief. Some thinkers use the term subaltern in a general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes- a person rendered without agency by his or her social status. Others, such as Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak use it in a more specific sense:

"Just a classy word for oppressed, for other, for somebody, who's not getting a piece of the pie..... In Post-Colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference- Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern... Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word "sub-altern They should see what the mechanics of discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern".¹

Thus subaltern theory, reflected by Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak and Ranjit Guha focuses on the signifier. This branch of the theory emphasizes the way in which the colonialist discourse has socially constructed the signifier from the Colonial language, giving no real voice to the oppressed and Colonized.

The term used by Marxist Antonio Gramsci is considered to be a synonym for proletariat, possibly as a code word in order to get his

writings past prison censors, while others believe his usage to be more nuanced and less clear cut.

In several essays, Homi Bhabha, a key thinker within Post-Colonial thought, emphasizes the importance of social power relations in his working definition of "subaltern" groups as oppressed, minority groups where presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group. Subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power. Bhabha focuses on the fact that ideas are expressed in the dominant discourse in which the oppressed and Colonized are not well-versed, so they are not as skilled as expressing their valid claims as their Colonial masters are. Consequently, the claims of the oppressed are often expressed in poor imitation of the master discourse, and thus, not given good faith hearing by those skilled in the use of the dominant discourse.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos uses the term 'sub-altern Cosmopolitanism' extensively in his 2002 book *Toward a New Legal Common Sense*. He refers to this in the context of Counter-hegemonic practices, movements, resistances and struggles against neoliberal globalization, particularly the struggle against social exclusion. He uses the term interchangeably with cosmopolitan legality as the diverse normative framework for an "equality of differences". Here, the term subaltern is used to denote marginalized and oppressed people specifically struggling against hegemonic globalization critique". Subaltern is now regularly used as a term in history, anthropology, sociology, human geography, and literature. Hooks describes the relationship between the academic and the subaltern subject:

*"No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself a new. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the centre of my talk."*²

Edward Said's work on "Orientalism" is related to the idea of the subaltern in that it explains the way in which Orientalism produced the foundation and the justification for the domination of the 'other' through Colonialism. Europeans, Said argues, created an imagined geography of the Orient before European exploration through pre defined images lay outside of the know world. Europeans defined themselves by defining the differences of the Orient. This laid the foundation for the Colonialism by presenting the Orient as backward and irrational and therefore in need of help to become modern in the European sense. The discourse of Orientalism is Eurocentric and does not seek to include the voices of the Orientals themselves.

The term subaltern first emphatically figures in the writings of Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci who used it to refer any person or group of inferior rank and station whether because of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. Subaltern is a term that commonly refers to the perspective of persons from regions and groups outside of the hegemonic power structure. This can be justified from the article "A Small History of Subaltern Studies" by Dipesh Chakrobarty: "The word subaltern itself-and, of course, the well-known concept of "hegemony" so critical to the theoretical

*project of Subaltern Studies go back to the writings of Gramsci"*³

"Subaltern Studies" began in early 1980s as an "interventions in South Asian historiography". While it began as a model for the subcontinent, it quickly developed into a "Vigorous postcolonial Critique". It was later borrowed by a school of Indian historians like Ranjit Guha, Gyanendra Pandey, Gyan Prakash, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Parth Chatterjee and David Hardiman who appropriated the concept to offer alternative historiographic accounts of Indian past by foregrounding the classes, communities or groups which have been ousted from the official records of history. The concept got its more powerful exponent in Spivak who used it to deconstruct literary misrepresentation of women in gendered culture and literature. If we apply the category subaltern to the social and cultural study of Indian society, the most prominent groups which can be called subalterns emerge out to be dalits, women, and peasants. In case of Dalits, their claim to subalternity is undisputed. They have been obvious. Victims of 2000 years old subordination. The nature of this subordination has been both physical and coercive. In the Western word marginality and subalternity are attributed to colour and race. In India, it is born with the birth of a person in a specific caste divided into four "Varnas" that put superiority of Brahmins over Kshatriyas and Vaishyas and Shudras.

Thus, Subalternity has emerged as a very powerful discourse whose agenda is not only to interrogate the hegemonic repressive mechanisms of the past bent also to foreground the subalternity as a dominant discourse of difference. Now taking Mulk Raj Anand in our perspective, we come across the plight of the subalterns and their marginalized life in *Untouchable* (1935) and see how they are discarded from the mainstream to live as abandoned creatures:

*"The outcaste colony was a group of mud-walled house that Clustered together in two rows, under the shadow of both the town and cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather workers, the washerman, the barbers the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcastes from Hindu Society."*⁴

Thus the very opening of the novels entails hegemonic exclusionary mechanism of Indian society which has forced such communities to live outside the main village. The novel is the story of Bakha and covers only a day of his daily routine in a stream of consciousness manner and his family includes Lakha, Rakha and Sohini, mother being dead long ago. The freakish outburst at him is abominable:

*"Keep to the side of the road, you low caste vermin! Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you Cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning"*⁵

Lalla who is "polluted" continues to explode abuses on Bakha:

*"Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig!... I'll have to go-o-o going to business and now.... Now on account of you, I'll be late."*⁶

The situation of sohini can be compared with spivak's "Third World Women". As Bakha manages to

take Sohini away from the courtyard of a temple, she tells him how the priest had made improper suggestions to her. We have numerous examples of uppercaste men taking sexual advantages of young 'untouchable girls and women' in Premchand's novels. Bakha is impregnated with the lure of hope at the reformative speech of Gandhijee:

*"I am an orthodox Hindu and I know that the Hindus are not by nature, Bakha heard the Mahatma declaims. 'They are sunk in ignorance. All public wells, temples roads, schools, sanatoriums, must be declared open to the Untouchable. And, if you all profess to love me, give me a direct proof of your love by carrying on propaganda against the observance of untouchability..... Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the Untouchables and the protection of the cow.'"*⁷

Anand would have us believe that the anguish and agony of Bakha issues from religion. Religion has led to his subalternity, a fact Gandhiji agrees to. If *Untouchable* is a microcosm, *Coolie* is microsm, that Indian Society. *Collie* is a powerful social tragedy due to the artistic treatment of the cruel, in human social forces of poverty and exploitation. It deals with the economic exploitation of one man by another, of the lower class by the upper class. In fact the so-called Dalit literature has its origin in Indo-Anglian fiction and the genesis of such writings could well be traced back to 1935 when Anand wrote his *Untouchable* followed by *Coolie* and they are in tune with subaltern spirit. Anand says that "to work for subalterns is to bring them into speech".⁸

Coolie is a universal human tragedy where Munoo is a universal figure. *Coolie* portrays the travails of coolie in a class-ridden society. His life is a saga of pain and suffering. Of course, Anand's socialism got inspiration from Gandhi and Karl Marx. The Marxists oppose marginalization. On the grounds of race and class. They regard the subaltern as the peripheral class. Orientalism is the same work in this direction *Coolie* is written in a picaresque mode, in which "Poverty itself is a Caste". The subaltern Munoo is a victim of another type of subalternity, that is to say, economically marginalized. Munoo says:

*"I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, and Verma, a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial because he is poor, No caste doesn't matter..... There must be only two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor."*⁹

Two Leaves and a Bud (1936) is also an epitome of subalternity, making an aggressive attack on the dehumanizing effects of imperialism, of capitalist economy and its concomitants such as suffering and misery, exploitation and harassment of helpless labours on the tea plantations of Assam. Gangu, the protagonist of the novel is an older version of Munoo. The son of innocence sung by Munoo in *Coolie* is supplanted by the song of experience sung by Ganju. Caught in the tweezer grip of a piece of land, he agrees to go to Macpherson Tea-Estate Assam. The picaresque journey of Ganju and his wife Sajani, with their daughter Liela and son Buddhu has been arranged by Buta the Sardar and having reached there he has the soul-consuming taste, with all promises being shattered like nine pins:

*"This prison has no bars, but it is never the less an unbreakable jail..... There used to be a roll call every night before I came"*¹⁰

Ganju, who was under segregation, approaches for loan and encounters the wrath of Croft Cooke as such:

*"Get out! Get out!.... you bloody fool, get out! Get out! You have been spreading infection all over the place! Didn't you know that you were under segregation? By whose order did you come here?"*¹¹ Like Hardian hero, Ganju also comments about God to his daughter Liela: "There was no God. There were only men and life and death fulfilling their purpose through cross-purposes, as in a play. It was all a play, Liela"¹²

All these novels light upon the theme of subalternity in bold relief. Later phase novels by M.R. Anand, a Trilogy of *The Village* (1948), *Across Black Waters and The Sword and the Sickie*, also splash the strains of subalternity in all rainbow colours, shades, tints and hues. His later novels, too, like *The big Heart* (1945), *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), *The Road* (1961), have the germs of subalternity. Gouri Changes Anand would like every Indian woman to change:

*"a change from bondage to freedom, from meekness to self-assertion, from weakness to strength.... It is the transformation of a cow into a tigress"*¹³

We have sub-alternity ingrained in Anand's novels at large. The paper examines the novels under discussion in terms of their relation to post colonial theory of subalternity. Mulk Raj Anand puts his sub-alternist creative vision and eternal quest into words, thereby diffusing stately radiance of narrative aesthetics over the objects of his regard which derived from a fusion of spirit and reality from treating history as a collective memory, search for roots and all that.

We get clear perspective when we consider the introspective strains of his thought and introspective mode of coming to grips with the realities of life that form the stuff of his novels.

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