GENDER BIAS: INSTANCES FROM THE MAJOR WORKS OF MULK RAJ ANAND

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ABSTRACT:
This paper highlights the problems faced by women in 20th century by citing the examples from the novels of Mulk Raj Anand. The gender bigotry in the patriarchal society of colonial India, in particular, is deftly portrayed by Anand through his characters. The atrocities of the male characters like Reggie and the suffering of female characters like Sohini, Gauri, Rukmini allow the readers to get a realistic perception of the days of colonial era, particularly in the lower strata of society working in the tea plantation that were governed ruthlessly by the colonial representatives. The novels of Anand are a record of the social conditioning of the working-class women and men of those days.

Keywords: Gender- female characters in Mulk Raj Anand Novels-criticism in society-treatment of women.

“Gender’ is a psychological and cultural term. It denotes socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a particular society considers apt for men and women. It is decided by cultural, social, political and economic forces which influence social behavior of men and women.”¹

Man and woman have seen a structural inequality that was fostered by gender difference. The socio-cultural and psychological paradigms that have become prevalent in society are the main causes for discrimination based on gender. This paper focuses on the problems faced by women in 20th Century and the present societal patterns, by citing the examples from the novels of Mulk Raj Anand.

As the Sanskrit sloka “Yatra NaryantuPujyantatatra ramantedevatah” says, where there is respect for women, there will be prosperity. Mulk Raj Anand is one of the prominent writers in the saga of Indian Writing in English who highlighted this concept in his works meticulously. In many novels of Anand, the current scenario is projected in a more picturesque style. In reality, a person is considered good or bad based on the circumstances, the place of his or her growth and financial status.

In his novels, Anand shows various characters of women who are suppressed and humiliated in the patriarchal society. He portrays the socio-religious hypocrisy rampant in various walks of society. In Anand’s Two Leaves and a Bud, the coolie women faced various problems in the hands of the English. The plantation masters or sahibs molest the coolie women, irrespective of their age. “The Coolie women bent to their plucking with fear in their hearts and a queer confusion in their heads” (p 50)². Reggie felt that “The women workers are more efficient, Reggie assured himself, quite insensitive to the under currents of emotion he had let loose in their souls. He favored them almost involuntarily, hoping to establish a relationship of informal intimacy to facilitate…..”³(p50). Anand depicted various scenes where the sexual assault and material wants were evidently shown.

As mentioned earlier, Reggie was attracted by the beauty of women and in the same way, he maintained illicit relation with Neogi’s wife also. For Coolie women, there was no one to take care of their babies at their residence. So, they carried their children along with them in the basket. If anyone was unexpectedly caught by the master, she had to face the consequences. Beside severe admonition, a fine of three annas was imposed on her. While scolding the coolie women, Reggie used abusive language like deceitful bitches, dirty cheats, and crafty bitch, and so on. Gangu’s daughter

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In this novel, Reggie Hunt, a British colonial official sexually targets Gangu’s daughter and in the process of protecting her, Gangu is killed. Reggie Hunt was the Assistant planter. He was arrogant and was a sadist who took the women working in the plantation for granted. Each and every nook and corner of the tea plants leaves and buds are the silent witnesses of Reggie’s atrocities.

In Two Leaves and a Bud, Narian, a coolie, describes him rightly when he says “He is a very Badmash sahib and he has no consideration for any one’s mother or sister. He is openly living with three coolie women!” (42).4

In The Old Woman and the Cow or Gauri, the character of Gauri symbolizes the suffering of a girl who is harassed by the society. She experienced suffering in various forms. She faced problems as a daughter, wife and a woman in the society. She met Colonel Mahindra who is a doctor and motivator. He encouraged and moulded her which made her the mouth piece of the women who were suffering like her. A lot of transformation is shown in the character of Gauri from a shy and fearful woman to a trend setter. When she was doubted by her husband, she reacts very differently. Anand is successful in aptly projecting her character in the situation. Instead of feeling sorrowful and traumatized, Gauri says to her husband: “If I am a curse on you I will go away...And if you strike me again I will hit you back.”[3]She compared her husband with Ram who sent Sita to forest for the sake of public opinion. Thus, Anand gave voice and language to woman in the society and was successful in highlighting the women who were supposed to be silent sufferers. Anand said, "Most of my women characters are slaves or semi-slaves to customs. Only Irene in the Bubble is a free woman, whom the hero loves for the courage". (Interview of Dr. Anand)6.

Male domination is inevitable in Gauri. Anand portrays a few characters in his novels, who supports women and motivates them during the time of need and emergency. In this novel, particularly the character of Colonel Mahindra encourages Gauri and through this character Anand shows that there are a few men who stood by women and motivated them to resist suppression. In some of his major novels like Untouchable, Coolie and The Road, Anand underscores the travails of women because they are forced to suffer in the predominant and predatory class structure, haves and have nots and caste system. Colonial supremacy along with sexualization of the body play a substantial role in hurling the women down to the lowest strata of the social hierarchy.

In Untouchable, Bakha looks at his sister, Sohini and observes her beauty and thought in the patriarchal perspective. He felt that his sister attracts many people due to her beauty in spite of wearing torn clothes. Pundit Kali Nath tried to seduce her in the temple and she denied. She was abused by Kalinath who highlighted her caste. He did not think of caste when he wanted to seduce her but when she denied, in order to divert the attention of others, he shouted “polluted”. However, Sohini’s sensuous attractiveness was very intense, Bakha throws the blame partially on this aspect of Sohini for her troubles. Moreover, his incestuous feelings for her are also due to his fixation with her body. In fact, Bakha is unable to think of her sexual behavior with his husband, even if she gets married.

In those days, during payment of daily wages of women there was a difference. In The Road, Anand explains about the share of the wages between men and women. However, there is no equal share. The work pay of Hari’s wife is five rupees per month where as a man’s wage which is of twenty rupees. Anand attributes talent, imagination and determination to women even though they are physically subtle in comparison to men.

After a week of travelling to the Bazaar, Gangu realizes that the pay is less than what he used to get by himself by working on the fields at his village. He condemns the white for the exploitation of the poor villagers. Even at the Bazaar the farmers are forced to vend their yield at cheap rates but buy the essential supplies at high rates. Gangu returns home with high fever. His wife Sajani who represents “the fastidious village women whose whole life had been spent cleaning and washing and cooking and cleaning again,” (36)8 looks after him. However, she herself gets infected and dies. The epidemic of malaria spreads.

In The Road, Rukmini’s mother restricts her daughter and she advises her not to utter even the names of the young men in the village. She is not supposed to wear colourful clothes till her marriage. Boys expected that the girls need to be very ‘obedient’, ‘well behaved’, ‘calm’ and ‘quiet’. In Untouchable, Sohini should not show her teeth to men. If any of these norms are violated then that woman’s behavior is deemed to befit only a prostitute. Due to this reason, girls became passive and boys became assertive.
Marriage plays a crucial role in the life of any girl. An Indian girl in the lower classes gets married at a very tender age. In Untouchable, Ram Charan’s sister gets married at the tender age of fourteen. She is trained to be ‘docile’, ‘well-mannered’ and ‘gentle’ since her childhood. She had to abide by her husband’s words at all times. In The Road, Bhagwanti declares to her daughter that she is no longer a permanent member in the family after her marriage. Thakur Singh, Rukmini’s father is disappointed because his daughter cannot serve him during his old age. Anand portrays a few girl characters which is in contrast the aforementioned concept. In a few stances, marriage brings good fortune to the parents of the bride also. Gulabo received two hundred rupees in return to her daughter’s wedding. Gulabo’s daughter became an expensive gift to her mother and an expensive possession to her husband.

In Hindu tradition, a woman has to live up to the expectations of her husband in this patriarchal society. The concept of pativrata ideology is also important. A married woman is expected to serve the husband’s family members and had to bear male children and in return earns respect. If not, she will be ill-treated in the society.

For example, Munoo’s aunt in Coolie could not beget children for her husband and she lost her recognition in the society. Womanhood is prioritized by motherhood in the male dominated society. In The Road, Thakur Singh insists on this gender role of a woman and he is filled with bitterness when he finds “that even his wife should dare to talk to him.” According to the Hindu mythology, an ideal woman had to engage herself with the domestic affairs throughout the day.

In Coolie, Munoo’s mother continuously worked hard for the well being of the family and experienced a lot of pain which slowly led her to death. While Rukmini, in The Road, expressed the real boredom in the life of a woman who is expected to be a slave for her domestic responsibilities. In spite of serving the spouse and her family, she was treated like a slave. Her sacrifices are never and ever recognized.

Unlike Anand, there are various sensuous writers who expressed their feelings on the treatment of women and gender consciousness in their novels. Kamla Das explores the plight of suffering in the day to day life of women. Shashi Deshpande highlights the pathetic condition of women. Bapsi Sidhwa highlights socio-economic condition of Parsi women. R.K. Narayan highlights the life of housewives in middle class families. Anita Desai deals with the suffering of women. Kamala Markandeyam mentions the theme of east-west encounter. Salman Rushdie wrote about sexual abuse of children. Shobha De talks about women who caricatured the traditional life style of women. Indo-Anglian writers portrayed the gender disparity in their own style.

Gender Equality, slowly and strongly emerged as a thematic concern. Several Indian writers held up the new trend by projecting the social evils that prevail in the patriarchal system. R.K Narayan’s The Dark Room is a depiction of this particular situation in the literary realm. It is interesting to note that it is one of the earliest novels by an Indian author which dealt with the theme of equality among gender and the rights pertaining to the same.

Deshpande’s portrays ‘rape’ as one of her central themes which is also featured in Desai’s Fire on the Mountain (1977). In Markandaya’s Two Virgins (1973), the imminence of sexual threat which destroyeth the lives of young girls in India looms large, though poignantly. Markandayan A Handful of Rice (1966), Sahgal in Storm in Chandigarh (1969), Deshpandein That Long Silence (1988) and Desai in Fasting, Feasting (1999) concentrated on the portrayal of domestic violence.

Indian women novelists voiced their opinions which brought a literary renaissance. The third generation of Indian writers in English like Shashi Deshpande, Gita Mehta, Bharathi Mukherjee, Jhumpha Lahiri, Nayantara Sehgal, Anitha Desai, Arundhati Roy brought recognition to this pathetic norm of society in the contemporary literary Scenario. They received national and International acclamations, royalties and awards. The situations created by Anand in his novels regarding the upliftment of women are evident even in 21st century. Every woman feels that she has to be treated properly by getting encouragement. Arundathi Roy, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Kiran Bedi, Saina Nehwal, Hampi, Sania Mirza, Mithali Raj from India and many more proved that women can do justice for personal and professional career. There are many Indian women like Jhansi Lakshmi Bhai, Irom Chanu Sharmila, Chahavi Rajawat, Amrita Devi, Phoolan Devi, Sita Sahu, Chanda Kochhar, Sapper Shanti Tigga, Asha Roy, Arundhati Bhattacharya, Kalpana Chawla, Reena Kaushal Dharmshtaku, Durga Shakti Nagpal, Kunjarani Devi, Indra Nooyi, who clearly deserve a standing ovation.

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Giving credit to Mulk Raj Anand for making his literary world the mirror of contemporary Indian milieu, noted critic Saros Cowasjee observes: “An expositor, a political novelist, Mulk Raj Anand saw his characters and their actions in relation to the social and political upheavals of his time.”

In Anand’s novels, one can see women of the best qualities and the worst qualities. Anand showcases that in certain situations, woman harasses other women for her sadistic pleasure through the characters like Mrs. Todar Mal, Anglo Indian lady, Mrs. Croft Cooke and Neogi’s Wife. Anand highlights the problem faced by women through his characters like Parbati, Sohini, Gangu’s wife, Lakshmi, daughter of Mr. Croft Cooke, Liela, Janaki, Rukmini. There are some women who overcome the challenges like Gauri in The Old Woman and the Cow and others who succumb to the oppression accepting it as a way of life like Neogi’s wife in Two Leaves and a Bud. An interpretation of Anand’s novels from the perspective of gender bigotry in society yields a kaleidoscopic view of the lives of women, their travails and their final defeat or victory.

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