

Feministic Undertones and Overtones in Anand's Novels

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Abstract: Mulk Raj Anand is a ruthless social critic and pioneering humanist rather than a gynocritic. Since women are complementary part of human society therefore, he can not ignore the suppression and oppression of women, sexist remark on them, biased treatment with them, and male's perception of women as a commodity for men's physical pleasure. Feministic undertones of Anand begin with his very first novel *Untouchable* and continue in all his early novels. His undertones turn into overtones in his later novels. Physical exploitation of Sohini in *Untouchable*, Leila in *Two Leaves and a Bud* and Lakshmi in *Private Life of an Indian Prince* are evidence of his feministic concerns. Suppression and distortion of Parvati into Paro, oppression and physical exploitation of Mumtaz in *Morning Face* raise feminist issues. Biased treatment of Maya in *The Village* and of Gauri in *The Old Woman and the Cow* and their transformation into revolutionary 'new women' is an evidence of his feministic overtones that paves the path for a 'newly born woman' Ganga Dasi in *Private Life of an Indian Prince*.

Keywords: gynocritic, Feministic undertones and overtones, oppression, suppression, new woman, distortion, exploitation.

Mulk Raj Anand is a paramount social critic and a humanist rather than a feminist. But suppression of women is one of the uncountable evils in the society. Therefore, a social critic cannot ignore incorporating the miserable condition of women. Only one novel *The Old Woman and the Cow* is gynocentric and all his novels are andocentric. Feminism studies suppression and oppression of women, their physical exploitation, their mental betrayal, their position in the society, stereo-typed roles given to them, and marginalization from the main stream of confidence and development. Mary Wollstonecraft is first woman to realize the plight of women and expressed her wish in her ground breaking work 'A Vindication of Rights of Woman'. Says she;

I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and happiness consist, I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength both of mind and body- - - and to show that elegance is inferior to virtue that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being regardless of the distinction of sex....

(Wollstonecraft, 5)

Tentative study of Anand's novels reveals that he took the task of propagating Mary Wollstonecraft's wish, for novel after novel from *Untouchable* to *Gauri* we find gradual upliftment and up-gradation of women, resistance against cultural stereotypes and effort for attaining

her own character. *Untouchable* (1935), his first issue primarily deals with the problem of untouchability but at the same time it portrays conspicuously the miserable condition of untouchable women in Indian society. Temple episode discloses Anand's feministic concerns. It draws curtain of the hypocrisy of high caste especially Hindu religion and presents the gap between theory and practice. Pandit Kalinath the priest feels defiled merely on the touch of the untouchables but when he makes physical relationship with them; their purity remains undefiled and unaffected. Pt. Kalinath calls Sohini, the young vivacious sister of Bakha to clean the temple. When Sohini was cleaning the temple he comes from behind and holds her by her breasts and makes effort to molest her. Sohini, an innocent girl resists the priest's effort and starts shouting. For fear of being revealed in the public, Kalinath started shouting, "polluted", "polluted". It shows that in theory high caste people would be defiled on mere touch of the low castes like untouchables but in practice they wish to sleep with the untouchable girls without being defiled.

In *Coolie* (1936) also Anand's major focus is on the problem of working class or laborer and coolies in India but he lays bare the position of women. The women are brought into the profession of prostitution which is an object of sexual pleasure and an instrument of enjoyment and recreation. Piari Jan earns her living by singing, dancing and becoming an item girl for customers' physical luxury. Ratan, the wrestler often comes to her and enjoys physical relationship with her.

Though the novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) is an attack on British Raj and its tea plantation but at the same time it discloses torture and tyranny imposed by the English upon the Indian coolie women. Sedition is an open game for Assistant tea planter Reggie Hunt. At the very arrival of Gangu with his daughter Leila aged fourteen and wife Sajani, Narayan's warning to Gangu, "here nobody's wife and daughter are safe because assistant planter Reggie Hunt lives openly with the wives of coolies", proves to betokening for Leila's future. The coolie women suffered like hens at the arrival of much dreaded cock (Hunt). One day Reggie Hunt reaches directly where the girl was plucking 'two leaves and a bud'. Fearlessly with malicious intent he gathers his arms to her waist and pretends to ask her name. The virgin bloom of Leila's face got paled by fear and shame. She fluttered like a bird in the hands of a shikari'. Any how she manages to glide out of his grasp.

Anand's characters emerge from real condition of women in British regime. Women have no escape but to surrender their virginity or to be raped by these British officials. Reggie offers Leila nose rings and bangles in exchange of her flesh but she was not a flesh trader. She terrifies him to report her father. She shrieks: Go away or I will call my father, I don't care who you are whether you or a sahib or Go away and let me do my work. My father will be angry, if I don't get back home before the sun sets. (*Two Leaves and a Bud*. 255) But Reggie's overpowering lust and obsession had gathered him up in all its madness and sees Leila in her definite shape, soon he reaches, Leila's cottage and calls her. When her

brother Buddhu started weeping, Gangu came out. This enraged Reggie. In fit of his anger he shot his gun aiming Gangu-the hurdle in finding Leila. Anand presents the clear picture of coolie women in British Raj. They had no escape even after the risk of the lives of their loved ones. Leila is not an individual but a typical character. Tragedy of Leila is the tragedy of almost all girls in India that raises feminist issues. Leila's condition truly explains why women surrendered their body in front of hunters like Reggie Hunt. Their defiance doomed their life. Neogi's wife therefore, surrenders her body to Reggie Hunt. In exchange of her body, she not only gets nose rings and bangles but also land for farming. Chambeli sarcastically comments Neogi "Yes, some there be who give their wives away to the Sahibs for money and then preen themselves on that power before us" (*Two Leaves and a Bud*. 176).

The first novel of Lalu Trilogy, *The Village* (1939) is thesis of tradition and modernity. It is not only Anand's finest achievement but a work that best exemplifies what A.V Krishna Rao calls 'Anand's Mechanistic determinism' - the shaping of men's destiny by the society against which he struggles. It is novel of "Lalu's protest" (Rao and Raghvan. *The Indo-Anglian Novel and the Changing Tradition*. p-28). Lalu's beloved Maya is victim of tradition of female confinement and gender bias assessment where boys are supposed to be assets and girls to be a liability. In this conservative world women have been placed at most degraded position which no social critic can ignore from his notice. The process of girling begins with the childhood of the girls and by the stage of budding youth they attain the 'touch-me not-feature' of youth. While at play with young boys of the village, Maya in her fourteen is chided by her mother;

Maya, ni Maya, eater of your husband. May you wither away? Have you no shame that you go sitting among men? . . . you are not a child now. You must learn to be ashamed and modest. (*The Village*. 75)

More painful situation occurs when Maya's father infuriated with Lalu's flirtations, gives her away in marriage to an elderly man who soon dies and leaves Maya widow. Man uses woman as an altar. For his own pompous social prestige he sacrifices the life of woman. Mulk Raj Anand criticizes such social prestige where if a girl, before her marriage, can't touch a boy other than her husband. And the same parents, once they give away her in marriage, no matter whether she is well matched or entirely unmatched; they have no sympathy for her even when she is widowed, and turned into a whore-'a fair game' or raped by village vagrants. They discard her and close their eyes for what happens with her. In India a widow is supposed to be an '*inauspicious being*'. Maya learns that many widows are turned into whores by the male dominated society. She has evidently seen that a widow is considered 'a fair game'. In theory a widow is prescribed by rigid rules while in practice all the vagrants roam around her to share her. Anand solves this problem by transforming Maya into a '*modern woman*', what we call '*a new woman*'. When Maya defies tradition, society and her parents and elopes with Lalu, her spirit of modernity is unquestionable. She breaks through the shackles of the vicious society and joins Lalu on his return to Nandpur

from war front. She shows genuine interest in life. For her to judge life in terms of externals is a fallacy. The novel *Big Heart* actually deals with the unemployment problem due to introduction of excessive use of machines. The protagonist Ananta the coppersmith unites the workers and musters sufficient enthusiasm among the jobless workers. At the same time Anand, through a significant figure Janki, contrasts life of a widow as she wants and as society expects her. After the death of Janki's husband society expects her to be dead to all her impulses and live only to worship the memory of her husband, her lord and master. It is said: "Her life would have remained a series of insults if she had been condemned to mourn the death of an elderly husband to who she had been married by arrangement" (*The Big Heart*. 28).

Fortunately she meets Ananta, who gives a flicker of life in her in spite of her insidious disease tuberculosis. Her spirit of youth and love are enflamed by Ananta's care for her. Anand presents very close picture of inhuman society. In India human relation, love, and emotional attachment have no social sanction. Marriage only by arrangement finds social sanction. Janki's relationship with Ananta is even not liked by Gandhians also. Anand attacks the dual nature of vicious men. Practically they are found different from the theory they themselves propound. They expect Janki to be dead for her spirit and impulse of youth while they themselves conspire to enjoy physical pleasure with her. They wish her to become a whore providing pleasure of her flesh to all the vagrants whether younger or elderly. Anand, through his novels, seems suggesting women to overcome this problem by their transformation into a '*new woman*' who could '*endeavor to acquire strength both of mind and body*'. Janki doesn't care for the society anymore. She listens to none but her spirit and impulse of her youth what G.B. Shaw calls 'life force'. She lives openly with Ananta as his beloved and doesn't care for what society thinks about her. But she cares none except Ananta and devotes her life on him. Consciously or unconsciously, may be because of his humanist zeal Anand sided women. He not only highlights their plights but gives them possible solution too.

In the novel the *Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), Anand's focus is on reason of fall of Indian kings and their empires. The very reason that he observes in them is their obsession for physical pleasure with variety of women. Wilderness of the whores and prostitutes doomed their paramountcy. The novel opens with the scandal that Maharaja Ashok Kumar better known as Vicky has taken Bunti Russell to the khuds (ravines) for the '*obvious purpose*', whereas he already has three queens. The two older Ranis turned religious and ignored Vicky's liaisons for their own well being while the third one Tikyali Rani who has got recently married suffers from Maharaja's indecent behavior. Despite being well educated, sincere and beautiful, she is kept as a commodity under the possession of Vicky; while he enjoys his life with a cartesian Ganga Dasi. Domineering Ganga dwarfs Vicky. He himself accepts: "*I am trapped, I tell you, I am like a rat in a hole*". She captures him in her valley of physical love, in her wilderness of youth and cuddling breasts.

Maharaja loses his princely valour and turns a shameless low man. She overshadows Vicky and conspires against Tikyali Rani, even manages to get her (Rani's) son killed and get her own son announced as the legal Tika of the throne of Vicky.

But unconsciously Anand has highlighted the plight of women, their suppression and oppression in the society. Novel after novel his tone of criticizing men turns sharper. He attacks on Maharaja's perception of women that is merely a commodity for sexual pleasure. He crumbles the emotions of his all the Ranis. Polygamy is a blot on women's position in society. Tikyali Rani's acceptance to be even Vicky's third queen gives no guarantee of her life, her emotions, her sexual desire, even more her personality and social prestige. The novelist attacks on Men's condomed relationship with women. Consciously or unconsciously Anand's focus turns towards the miserable condition of women. The treatment meted out to Tikyali Rani and the two older Ranis raises feminist issues and woman question. His feministic angst is paramount when he brings Vicky to shuffle and flatter in grasp of Ganga Dasi. Features of Ganga Dasi seem less of her own natural gift but creation of the novelist to revenge on men who distort and degrade the position of women and throw them in the abyss of perpetual suffering. Ganga uses her body as a powerful arm to crush the man the same body of a woman for which she has been exploited and weakened for centuries. Ganga breaks the myth of chastity or purity syndrome. Anand creates this character 'tit for tat' rather than lamenting on the suppression of women.

Condition of Lakshmi in the *Private Life of an Indian Prince* makes men's meanness and selfish nature more conspicuous. Lakshmi comes of a rich family and married to a Hindu Vakil of Lahore. Unfortunately she is abducted and raped by Pakistani Musla in Sialkot. Mrs. Sarabhai rescued her and brings back to her husband but he does not accept her for she has been used by a Musla. When she was lying on Delhi station as a helpless wanderer, Rukmani, a go-between of prostitutes finds her a fresh prey to be sold at high rate. She takes Lakshmi to her 'Kotha' and trains her up forcibly to win the hearts of the customers and gift her body in their honour. Condition of Lakshmi is a blot on humanity. She is tortured by males as well as by her own sex. *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960) is only novel of Anand written on gynocentric angle. Gauri, the daughter of Laxmi, is a major female character in the novel. She is married to an orthodox uneducated man Panchi who muses over the prospects of a prize of "a girl whom he could fold in his arms at night, and kick during the day who would adorn his house and help him with the work on the land" (*The Old Woman and the Cow*.5).

However, in the beginning of her married life, she is forced to tolerate all the torture. Her husband Panchi "fights in the day and during the night he is full of thick talks" (*The Old Woman and the Cow*. p-93). He repudiates her at revelation of her pregnancy. More over Kesaro raises a question on her unborn child and Panchi in suspicion drives Gauri out of his house. She is compelled to go back her (parents') home. She could not be welcomed at her own home. Her mother Laxmi and uncle Amru

sell her to Seth Jai Ram Das, a Banker in Hoshiyarpur, and left helpless to be exploited by manager like Jay Ram and Dr Batra in nursing home. In portrayal of Gauri Anand's feministic undertones and overtones turn him a true feminist. Gauri is typical character of uneducated, innocent, male dependent poor woman. Condition of such woman is worse than even animals also. Anand gives solution for the emancipation of women from such miserable condition. The best solutions that he gives are education and self economic dependence. Ultimately she comes in the contact of colonel Mahindra who awakens her how to identify her intrinsic worth. The benign spell of Mahindra, the modern god for Gauri, teaches her how to identify herself as an individual and makes her strong to face crises. He trains her in nursing profession and makes her stand on her own feet.

Like Sarita (Saru) in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* Gauri too appears as the prototype of modern woman. Her education and self-dependence transforms her from a cow to an individual personality. She becomes bold and confident. Gauri's boldness and confidence is obvious when banker Seth Jai Ram Das tries to seduce her. She warns him, "I am guarded by the goddess so do not come near me or you will burn". Further when she comes back to her (husband's) home, stands on equal footings with her husband. When Panchi hits her, she retorts, "if you strike me again, I will hit you back- - - ." (*The Old Woman and the Cow*. 283). Her brief experience as a self reliant nurse gives her the necessary self confidence and courage. Anand, in question to her chastity, has experimented with Sita's fire ordeal but for her the mother, "Earth will not devour Gauri and 'modern version of Sita' will remain a living example of fortitude." (Sinha, K. N. Mulk Raj Anand, 72).

Another character which we meet in the novel *Morning Face* is Parvati distorted as 'Paro' that indicates distortion of his life. She is wife of Devdutt, the Aryasamajist. Dutt's sister Dhanwanti boasts of her greatness to have arranged the marriage of an orphan girl Paro with her brother Dutt whom nobody would have married. But Anand discloses the hypocrisy of social workers like Dutta and Dhanwanti through Krishan. Dhanwanti enslaves her in the form of her marriage with Dutt. She is humiliated by not only elders but by Dhanwanti's children also. Paro's legs were stiff. She could hardly walk but she was forced to do the kitchen work and pull water from the first store of the house. Her life depends on the mercy of Dhanwanti and Dutt. Every family member including children expects fast service from her but she can not expect anything from any of them even from her husband also. She secretly shares her pain with Krishan. In Anand's point of view marriage is a process of women's enslavement. All above examples evidence his feministic undertones and overtones in almost all his novels.

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Translated Poems

- Hemang Desai

Valley and Void

Valleys slip into void
Hills stare at the sky
A spotless mirror of sky
Reflects images of
Valleys, hills and ours.
Like those funny mirrors in kidpark
The sky reflects our skewed images
Tallish, humpty-dumpty, lanky.
After a nervous giggle we fall silent
Plainly refuse to own up
Those quaint images as ours
Whose reflections are those then?
The air between valleys and sky
Is filled with despair.
We turn our pensive eyes to sea
And get engrossed in the sight of
Sea bugs disappearing in wet sand.
Sheer vacuum of snubbed sea
Spreads through mirrors.
Thick layers of vapors in heavy air
Between the sea and sky
Pour down, just like that.
Dense fog stretches all over mirrors.
We are safe and sound
Between fog and our void.

Acorporeal

In front my eyes
Lies a writhing body
Of an animal or a bird
Or my own, I'm not sure.
As I watch that body in torment
I wonder about the idea of an abody,
One that knows not what pain is?
Here in front of my eyes
Lie inflamed muscles, twisted neck
Popped-out eyes and
Broken bones.
Dismembered limbs
Seem to be drained of all pain.
The source of pain,
Some gross body
Writhes in my consciousness
And knocked unconscious by pain
I mutter
In the language of a buzzing bee.
The gross body, the source of pain,
Turns gargantuan gradually.
I look out it's face
Amidst my dear ones.

Poems by Manisha Joshi

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