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Predicament of the Marginalised in Select Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao are known as the trio of Indo-Anglian fiction writers. Anand, senior among the three and committed to creative writing, is a prolific writer. His popular novels include *Untouchable, Coolie, Two Leaves and a Bud, The Sword and the Sickle,* etc. Besides, he has more than seven collections of short stories to his credit. A committed humanist, he presents the predicament of the deprived people of society not only in his novels but also in his short stories. The paper explores the depiction of the realistic picture of the deprived and the untouchable people in his short stories, who are subjected to perpetual pains and sufferings in our society, and his concerns and sympathy for such people. The short stories discussed in this study include "Old Bapu", "The Barber's Trade Union", and "Lajwanti".

Keywords: Discrimination, Inequality, Humanist, Predicament, Sympathy, Untouchables

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Mulk Raj Anand is a well-known Anglo-Anglian literary figure of India. He is a prolific writer whose novels and short stories have wide range of readers in India and abroad. Besides his acclaimed novels – *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle,* he has published seven collections of short-stories. These are – *The Lost Child and Other Stories* (1934); *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories* (1944); *The Tractor and the Corn Goddess and Other Stories* (1947); *Reflections on the Golden Bed and Other Stories* (1953); *The Power of Darkness and Other Stories* (1959); *Lajwanti and Other Stories* (1966); and *Between Tears and Laughter* (1973). He has also retold traditional Indian tales in his *Indian Fairy Tales* (1946) and *More Indian Fairy Tales* (1961).

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Born in Peshawar (now in Pakistan) in 1905, Anand is a man of wide learning and experience of India and Great Britain. His corpus of creative fiction attracts for deep study. The great scholar, K. R. S. Iyengar comments about Anand that he wrote "of the people, for the people and as a man of the people". (333) M. K Naik remarks on the sensitive inclination of Anand, "The strength of Anand's fiction lies in its vast range, its wealth of living characters, its ruthless realism, its deeply felt indignation at social wrongs, and its strong humanitarian compassion." (160) Anand had close interaction with the people of the lowest strata of the society such as the children of the sweepers and other untouchables. When he was with his father, a Subedar in the regiment of Indian Army, he freely mixed with these children.

Anand explores pains and sufferings of the outcasts, peasants, sepoys, women and the working class, and their place in Indian society. He treads the realms which have not been given due attention by the Indian writers before him. He has undertaken the challenging task of depicting pariahs and boys from the bottom as prominent figures in his novels such as Bakha, an untouchable in *Untouchable*, Munoo, a waif in *Coolie*, and Gangu, an indentured labourer in *Two Leaves and a Bird*. This shows his commitment as a writer to speak for the unvoiced. These characters represent the strata of society where they are subjected to vicious circle of cruelty and exploitations. He depicts the social evils like poverty, untouchability, sati system, exploitations, repressions,etc. in his works. Simultaneously, he lambasts snobbery, hypocrisy, and fabrications of the privileged. He is the true voice of the marginalised, particularly the untouchables and those victimized by undeserved injustice from time immemorial. He believes that a great author highlights the cause of the dumb and the deprived.

Anand presents the realistic picture of the society not only in his novels but also in his short stories. His stories mirror the pathetic pictures of people who are treated as no less than animals and non-living things. This paper explores his concern exhibited for the deprived and untouchables in his stories titled "Old Bapu", "The Barber's Trade Union" and "Lajwanti". These stories are highly acclaimed, and portray his social concerns regarding the subalterns. It is Anand's humanitarian zeal for the dalits and the deprived that makes him the champion of the underdogs and crusader against social evils and man-made barriers which divide humanity and dehumanise people in unjust way. He deeply examines the social norms, traditions and practices that make the outcasts and women vulnerable creatures. He raises social and moral questions before the readers through his characters.

In his story "Old Bapu"Anand delineates the inhuman treatment meted out to an untouchable poor labourer at the hands of the privileged man. The story is set in the mid of 1930s. The protagonist of the story is a man called Old Bapu. He is about fifty, but looks seventy years old due to his malnutrition. Being orphaned at early age, he lives with his uncle Dandu Ram who later drives him out of his house. Dandu Ram considers him unfit for working in the field, so he disowns Old Bapu of his half bigha land and tortures him. The protagonist is called Old Bapu because of

his lean and thin body. He reveals that the boys call him 'Old Bapu' because "I am older than them…" (69). He discloses his anguish, too, "The caste Hindu urchins have no respect for the untouchables elders anyhow. And their fathers want to throw everyone of us into the garbage pit to use as manure for better harvest." (69) These words shed light on the humiliating attitude of the so called high caste people towards the low caste people.

Helpless and dejected in the society, Old Bapu makes a journey from his village named Shikopur to Gurgaon in search of a job. He hopes to find a job in road repairing works under a contractor named Sardar Ram Singh as he has worked under him earlier. After travelling seven miles, he reaches the destination and finds the contractor sitting in front of his house. But the unfortunate labourer has torturous experience. He cannot muster courage to speak to the contractor. Somehow with humility and folded hands he requests him for a job. Instead of any work or help, he receives reproach from the contractor. Ram Singh reacts, "Ohejaja Oldie! You can't work with that frame of yours! Doing half work for full pay…." (72). He uses derogatory term for Old Bapu and calls him, "a two legged donkey." (72) The contractor throws a coin before Old Bapu which he accepts with deep gratitude. Old Bapu is treated as if he were a beggar. Broken and despaired, he decides to return to his village. While returning home he stands before a shop and views his image in the mirror hung there. The shopkeeper shouts at Old Bapu, "Don't break my glass by showing it your ugly old face." (74) Again he experiences rebuke and humiliation.

In this caste ridden Indian society an untouchable is no less than a worm of a gutter. He is treated as dirt. Even older untouchable is humiliated by the younger born in high caste. Written after Independence, "Old Bapu" is a sincere social criticism. It also criticises the Indian government for its failure to provide employment to the poor and the unemployed. The casteist society unleashes atrocities on the poor and the low caste people without any practical reason.

Another story titled "The Barber's Trade Union" deals with the problem of caste system which has sacrificed innumerable people since ages at the altar of this biggest evil of Indian society. This story is about Chandu, the son of a barber, who is trained to follow the traditional profession of a barber in the village. He is dynamic, energetic and good at studies, but he has to discontinue his school and follow the traditional work after his father's death.

The narrator of the story, Chandu's fast friend, belongs to a high caste. So his mother dissuades him from keeping company with Chandu, Barber by caste, a low caste in the hierarchy of caste system. After accomplishing his professional work moving door to door in the village as a routine work, Chandu visits the town where he meets people of progressive ideas, and involves in healthy interactions with them. He believes in the equality of human beings. He is attracted to doctor Kalam Khan's attire and procures this type of dress with his hard earned money. One day he sets out for his daily routine work in the village wearing his new dress, a coat and

trousers and holding a leather bag in his hand. This new attire upsets the elder upper caste people of the village, and he is humiliated every step due to this new gesture.

First, he visits Bijay Chand, the landlord of the village where he becomes the target of reproach and humiliation. Chandu's new dress infuriates the landlord. As Chandu enters his house, he rudely shouts at Chandu, "…The son of pig! He is bringing a leather bag of cow hide into our house and a coat of marrow of, I don't know, I don't, I don't know some other animal, and those evil black Angrezi shoes. Get out! You will defile my religion…" (9) He orders Chandu, "Go away and wear cloths be fitting your low status as a barber… else I will have you flogged." (9) He uses abusive language for him. Although Chandu clarifies that it is an apparel of a doctor, the arrogant landlord has no patience to listen to his words. Chandu hears this and leaves the landlord's house without doing his work.

Secondly, he confronts with the village Sahukar who also exhibits the same prejudice. Sahukar comments, "You little swine, you go distinguishing yourself as a clown when you ought to be bearing your responsibilities and looking after your old mother…. Go and come back in your own cloths! Then I shall let you cut my hair" (10). Chandu cannot wear the cloths in the village due to the opposition of the upper caste people. Being born in a low caste, he is not supposed to wear such cloths. Discrimination based on caste is seen in the behaviour of Pandit Parmanand, too. He tells the narrator, an upper caste boy,

> You boys have been spoiled by the school education which you have got. It may be all right for you to wear those things because you are going to be a leaned man, but what right has that low caste boy to such apparel? He has got touch our beard, our heads and our hands. He is defiled enough by God. You are a high a caste boy. And he is a low caste devil. He is a rouge! (10)

Chandu hears this, but does not yield. He revolts against the humiliation accorded to him. Instead of following the beaten path he stops rendering services to them in the village and opens a saloon in the town. Consequently, the upper caste men are forced to come to the saloon for shaving and hair cutting.

Chandu's rebellious activities take a large dimension. He undertakes a Herculean task to organise the other barbers of the district. Saving time from his work he moves across the district for organising the barbers, and after discussion and persuasion he unites them in his favour. Ultimately, the upper caste people of his village reconcile with Chandu. Thus he emerges as a union leader. He advocates for equality and identity of the downtrodden section of our society. The rigid pattern of the caste system in our society is revealed in this story.

In his famous short story "Lajwanti", Anand depicts the plight of another subaltern group- the poor women of our society. He is very particular about the women's problems of Indian society. In the Introduction to *Selected Short Stories*: *Mulk Raj Anand*, Saros Cowasjee aptly comments, "In Anand's works sympathies for

women have a special place as their suffering is the greater, owing to Hindu religion and tradition, and the strictures of a hide bound society" (Cowasjee xiv). Women are treated as commodity and they have no separate identity and existence.

This story is about a helpless rustic girl, Lajwanti born to a poor peasant. She is married to Balwant, the younger son of Chaudhary Ganga Ram, the village Sarpanch. Balwant is pursuing B. A. in a college in the city and wishes to get a job of a clerk. Jaswant, the elder brother of Balwant, is a married man who stays at home and works in agriculture. So his mother favours him. In absence of her husband, Lajwanti is reproached by her mother-in-law as well as brother-in-law. She suffers perpetual pains and humiliations in her husband's house. Infatuated by Lajwanti's beauty, Jaswant casts lustful eyes on her instead of safeguarding her chastity as she is his younger brother's wife, a sister though not a genetically sister. He does not have any moral hesitation and cherishes licentious longings to satiate his lust. On the other hand, Lajwanti is a typical Indian woman who can never think of violating marriage vows. So she frustrates his lustful desires.

Lajwanti, named after a sensitive plant, is a woman of rebel who does not succumb to the lecherous demands of Jaswant. In order to free herself from the clutch of Jaswant, she escapes from her mother-in-law's house and decides to go to her parents' house. The journey is difficult. Walking bare foot in the scorching heat and covering ten miles, she some how reaches Gurgaon and by catching a bus bound for Pataudi, she will reach her father's house. Feeling thirsty she stops at a confectioner's shop and drinks water. But unfortunately she is caught by Jaswant who is chasing her on a bicycle for ten miles. He asks her to come back to her husband's home, but she declines.

A crowd gathers and simply watches it as a fun. Finding her arrogant, Jaswant kicks her with his right leg and slaps her in anger. Moreover, he crosses the limits of decency, abuses her and addresses her as a prostitute and a bad woman. He shouts, "Prostitute! Bad woman! Running away! The brother-in-law hit her with right foot. He slapped her on the head with loose right hand. And now a crowd of passers-by gathered to see the fun but no one intervened." (93) Many people gather there but she sees no rays of hope as nobody comes forward to help her. Shrimati Sushila Devi, the engineer Dayal's wife, while crossing by that way in their jeep, sees her in the crowd. Sensing something wrong, she asks her husband to stop the jeep. She brings both Jaswant and Lajwanti to her home, and listens to the things patiently. She asks Jaswant let Lajwanti go to her father's home since she is not willing to go back to her in-laws' house. She even becomes tough towards Jaswant when he tries to kick Lajwanti in her presence. Instantly, Sushila Devi slaps Jaswant and threatens him to hand over to the police if he tries to stop Lajwanti from going to her father's house. Jaswant returns home without Lajwanti, filled with anger and humiliation that he has experienced in Dayal's house. Ultimately, Shushila Devi rescues Lajwanti from Jaswant's clutches and arranges a seat in a bus for her father's home.

Lajwanti reaches her father's house. Unfortunately, Old Hari, her father, refuses to give her shelter. Instead, he reckons her coming to his house as an omen of disgrace. Champa, the midwife suggests Lajwanti to return to her husband's house at least for the sake of her mother's soul. She says, "If only for the sake of the soul of your dear mother, go hurry back. And come soon with your lap full of a child." (97)

Next day Hari Ram accompanies Lajwanti back to her husband's house. He makes apologies before her in-laws for the behaviour of his daughter. However, he is insulted and humiliated there. Jaswant takes revenge of the humiliation received at the hand of Shrimati Dayal. He kicks and abuses Lajwanti in presence of her father. Jaswant accuses her, "She has looked at more than one before her marriage…. She is a bad girl!....The way she insulted me when I went to fetch her back… She sat there answering back! And allowed that Afsar's wife to slap me on the face!.... Prostitute!" and "Jaswant kicked Lajwanti on her behind" (100). Even her mother-in-law accuses Lajwanti of looking at other men who pass on the road. Thus, she accuses her of moral turpitude. Bur Hari Ram constantly requests them to be merciful towards them and accept Lajwanti. He tells her in-laws, "I knew you would be merciful. And I now leave her in your care. Kill her if you like. But don't let her come to me without her lap full of son. I shall not be able to survive disgrace if she comes again" (100).

Hari Ram tries to pacify the situation with utmost humility and requests. He has brought a ring for Balwant. He submits, "I …what shall I say, Choudhary, answered Hari Ram humbly, "I wish fate had made her not so good looking … But now, I have brought her back. And you can kill her if she looks at another … Here is a ring for my son Balwant. I could not give much dowry. Now I will make up a little for what boy did not get…" (102).

Lajwanti is angry at her father's cowardice action because he apologises before the people who are the culprits of her oppression and he leaves her in hell. He should have supported her cause. The writer presents her feelings in the following words, "And she was mad at her father for effacing himself and bowing before her in-laws. But tremors in her entails ended in chocking her throat. And the lofty flight anger only befogged her brain" (99). She wishes to revolt the repression but finds herself helpless.

Hari Ram teaches Lajwanti that a married woman's proper place is her husband's home and she should not bring any dishonour to him by leaving her husband's home again. She should come to father's house with a son in her lap. Thus she is again put in a cage subjected to perpetual persecutions. Hari Ram leaves Lajwanti to the mercy of her in-laws and Jaswant. Anand has poignantly portrayed the difficult and painful condition of Indian women prevalent in those days.

To end the vicious circle of tortures in her husband's house, one day at dusk she decides to commit suicide by jumping into a well. But she does not die as she knows

how to swim. The attempt to free from this hellish condition is abortive as she is seen by her mother-in-law, and is saved. Ultimately, she realises that she has doomed this life which she does not like. She tells herself, "There is no way for me …. I am condemned to live!" (102) In this story, Anand highlights how the Hindu traditions and customs are responsible for putting women in this situation.

Anand lambastes the rigid pattern of society where a woman becomes an agent of oppression of another woman because of some social taboos and beliefs. Jaswant dares cast lustful eyes on Lajwanti because of moral support from his mother who believes that Lajwanti should be mother of a child. She does not consider the fact that unless Balwant and Lajwantit live together she cannot achieve motherhood. As she is like her mother she should have borne in mind the situation of her daughter-in-law and also have listened to her grievances. She should have stopped Jaswant from abusing and physically torturing Lajwanti. Her oppressive behaviour also prompts Lajwanti to take fatal step of committing suicide.

Anand also depicts the humiliation and exploitation borne by dalit women in his famous novel *Untouhabale*. Sohini, Bhakha's sister, an untouchable, is a shy, noble and beautiful young girl. She does the works of cleaning latrines and sweeping floors. Despite her meekness, she is humiliated and exploited because she is poor and dalit. Another woman in the novel Gulaboo scolds her, "Bitch, why don't you speak! Prostitute why don'tyou answer me?" (*Untouchable* 25). But she replies humbly, "Please don't abuse me …..I haven't said anything to you." (*Untouchable* 25). She also becomes a victim of molestation. Pandit Kali Nath calls her to clean lavatories in his courtyard and attempts to violate her chastity. Sohini opposes and screams. In order to save himself, Kali Nath comes out of the temple, blaming that she has defiled him by touching him, and gains sympathy of the crowd. On the other hand, Sohini is shocked at his behaviour. She prohibits her brother from taking revenge because people would not support them. Here Ananad attacks the hypocrisy of the upper caste men who exploit untouchable women for sexual gratification, but the same women become untouchable otherwise.

Anand also focuses on the predicament of the marginalised women who are forced to work for livelihood in industries, and their miseries and agonies are ignored by this male dominated cruel society, and they become victims of male exploitation and neglect. Anand depicts the pathetic condition of Phalini, a working woman in his story "Lullaby", who loses her one year ailing child while working in the jute mill. He lambasts the society which is in different towards the agonies and miseries of poor women.

Lajwanti, Phalini and Sohini are the representatives of the marginalised women who are the victims of perennial oppression and humiliation in male dominated society. These marginalised women are treated mere as objects and are expected only to satiate the whims and desire of men. Similarly, Old Bapu and Chandu represent the under privileged society, subjected to everlasting humiliation and exploitation in the casteist society.

Anand, undoubtedly, is a true, faithful and selfless spokesperson of the unvoiced. He is a powerful critic of contemporary society. As an artist and humanitarian, he advocates for the amelioration of those who have suffered at the hands of their fellow beings for no fault save they are born in the depressed class. M. Berry writes that for Anand literature was "a weapon for attacking social, political and economic institutions injurious to human freedom and equal opportunity." (27) Anand writes to Iyengar: "I am doing some village social work in order to integrate my love for the poor with actual work for them….I never realised, as intensely as I do now, the reasons why both Tolstoy and Gandhi chose the peasantry for their devotion. After writing for many years about pains of these people, I now feel that, for their sake, it may not all have been in vain." (Iyengar 357)

The above discussion of some of his short stories reveals Anand's compassion and concern for the down trodden and helpless people along with women. We also note his voices of protest as in our society poor people like Old Bapu, Dhanu, Lajwanti and Phalini are constantly subjected to pains, sufferings and humiliations. In his another story "Savitri", he depicts how widows are forced to be burnt on the pyre with her dead husband. Savitri, in this story, is the victim of infamous practice of Sati System. The stories discussed above are sharp realistic studies of men and women crushed by overwhelming forces of our society. Anand declares, "I am conscious of the need to raise untouchables, peasants, the serfs, coolies and other suppressed members of society, to human dignity and self-awareness in view of abjectness, apathy and despair to which they have been condemned. (*Apology for Heroism* 137) Thus he establishes himself as a true humanist.

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