

Poverty and its Representation in Literature and Creative Expressions

Rimpa Khatun

Designation: Research Scholar
Department of English
Assam Down Town University, Assam

Abstract:

The theme of poverty can be seen as one of the common themes in English Literature. But, poverty itself is rarely depicted as the central theme of a literary work. Though poverty was there before Industrial Revolution, it was not a social issue. Many writers use poverty as a minor theme only to construct his story or to develop a major theme. In nineteenth century, just after the industrial revolution poverty was clearly viewed when Charles Dickens was a young boy. He faced the distinction of classes due to urbanization in England. He felt the poverty of England and very realistically portrayed it in many of his novels. As poverty is a biggest challenge towards humanity, there is a vast representation of it in Indian English Literature too. Major themes of Indian writer's are hunger, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, Indian landscape, caste- system, Indian myth etc. Anand is certainly a great novelist who represents the world around him. Mulk Raj Anand chose his protagonists from the lower strata of the society. My paper tries to reflect the extreme sufferings and poverty of an underclass protagonist Gangu who is exploited in the hands of capitalists and the colonizers in Mulk Raj Anand's notable text *Two Leaves and a Bud*.

Keywords: Poverty, exploitation, illiteracy, hunger, colonialism.

“There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread”

-Mahatma Gandhi.

Mulk Raj Anand, a socially committed novelist is well known as “the singer of the sufferings of the underdogs and the dregs of society” in Indian English Literature for focusing his attention on the sufferings, misery and wretchedness of the poor people as a result of the exploitation of the downtrodden class in Indian society. Poverty, hunger, illiteracy, exploitation, racism, caste system are the main issues and concerns in his novels. He has written many novels and short stories. His works are mainly social and autobiographical. His prominent novels are *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), *The Morning Face* (1968).

Mulk Raj Anand's third novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* which was published in 1937 had brought him immense popularity. In this novel, Anand presents a realistic picture of colonial and capitalist society through the sufferings of a poor underclass male protagonist-Gangu. Anand reflects the evil of poverty and cruelty which Gangu faced in a tea state. Gangu represents all the down trodden society in pre-independence of India which was exploited by the Whiteman. Like Dickens, Anand also raised his voice for the under-dogs

and wrote about the social evils and poverty which were prevalent in the colonial India. Mulk Raj Anand chose his protagonists from the lower strata of the society, such as- in his novel *Untouchable* (1935) where the protagonist is a sweeper (Bakha) who hates his untouchable status and poverty. *Coolie* (1936) is the story of Munno an orphan boy who struggles for his livelihood and suffers the communal frame of the Indian society. The original pre-Independence Indian scenario has been portrayed in his novels.

In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand describes the extreme poverty and misery of Gangu, the poor Punjabi peasant who becomes a prey both to the hands of Indian money-lenders and the British tea planters. Gangu loses his paternal land and is compelled to indenture himself along with his family as labourers in The Macpherson Tea Estate in the valley of Assam which is owned by the British colonisers. The misery of Gangu has begun without his knowledge of it when his paternal land is usurped by Seth Badri Das, towards the interest for the land mortgaged by his brothers. Hence, Gangu becomes one of the victims of economic exploitation of the money lenders of India. Under such situation, Gangu is easily trapped by Sardar Buta, the recruiting agent of Macpherson Tea Estate, by false promises that he would get a piece of land without any kind of charges. Thus, Gangu could not resist the offer. It is his desire for a better life that Gangu and his family indenture themselves as laborers in the tea plantation. But their hopes have not lasted long when they physically reach the plantation. In the Tea Estate, after working a whole day, the amount given to Gangu's family is less than eight annas. This earning reminds him that in his village he alone used to earn eight annas. This makes him sad with the thought what a liar Buta has been in all his talk about high wages, about the free gift of land and so on. Poverty is a major social challenge which leads to the suffering of poor people like Gangu. Gangu realizes that he has entered a prison without walls. By referring the tea plantation as a jail, Narain (the neighbor of Gangu) said to Gangu:

This prison has no bars, but it is nevertheless an unbreakable jail.

(Anand: 88)

The workers do not have any kind of liberty in their life at the tea-estate. They are just slaves. The houses in which they live are not comfortable for living. They were trapped and brought here. They came with lots of hope of getting something for their survival. But, they are paid low wages. There are many Indian supervisors to supervise their work and watchmen who always care so that no one laborer can escape from the tea estate. One of the workers tells Gangu that he is working in the tea plantation for last twelve years during which he is not allowed to see his relatives. Like innumerable laborers, Gangu also becomes a victim of capitalism. They live in unhygienic conditions and are undernourished. They drink polluted water. Gangu and his wife Sajani suffer from malaria and the latter dies of it. Disease and poverty are not the only difficulties of the laborers, but also Reggie Hunt's lust for the women is another big challenge for working women and their family. Later, Gangu has lost his life at the hands of lecherous Reggie Hunt while he tries to save his daughter's modesty.

Two Leaves and a Bud is inspired by Anand's personal experience and observation during his stay near a plantation in Assam. Being a social realist, Anand wants to visualize the extreme

poverty and exploitation of indentured laborers by the White planters in India through his protagonist Gangu. Anand's ultimate purpose is to expose social evils and try to uplift the level of working class. Anand's representation of social evil and the helplessness of the tea workers become luminous in the novel by the efforts of Gangu to borrow money for Sajani's funeral. He is isolated because of the cause of Sajani's death. He has to cremate his wife's body alone which adds more misery. He is so poor that he doesn't have any money to dispose the body. Thus, he has to manage the money under any circumstances. He proceeds to Croft Cooke's bungalow with the hope of some help. The gate keeper of the bungalow demands a tip. Gangu promises to pay him later as he has no money at all. Then, Gangu proceeds to Babu Sashi Bushan and pleads before him to show some mercy, but he doesn't and rather reminds Gangu about the commission due from him for having recruited him. It is a very shameful act that an Indian clerk is expecting commission from that person who is already in such a condition. But Gangu says to him:

Babuji, I promise to give you some of the money which the sahib may give me if you talk to him in *angrezi* and get me the loan I want.....My wife died last night. And I have been ill. Take pity on me.

(Anand: 112- 113)

And at this, Mr. Cooke merges and Gangu begs a loan of twenty rupees for the funeral expenses. On recalling the cause of Sajani's death, Cooke orders the chaprasi to throw Gangu out at once. Gangu next approaches Sarder Buta and the latter advises him to borrow money from a bania. The melodrama depicts the utterly depraved state of the tea workers. Here, Anand describes the social and economical conditions of the laborers in Tea Plantation. This is far away place where the Britishers exploit Indian workers without mercy on them. Gangu is the representation of all exploited workers. All kinds of humiliation have been imposed upon the poverty stricken laborers. For them, the Indian labourers are subhuman creatures who will survive even if their barest necessities are not fulfilled.

Superstition is one of the big threats to the uneducated, poor people of India which could be seen in this novel. After receiving such an insult at the hands of the chaprasi, the Babu and the Sahib, Gangu thinks that it is the result of his past misdeeds. During British Raj, the Indian poor people were brutally exploited. They were treated as non-human. They didn't have any fundamental rights. And this was the cause of their suffering. Even they could not raise their voice against their exploitation because they were not aware of it as they were not literate and due to poverty, they had to work hard and hard for their living. As they are illiterate, immature, they don't have any courage to accept new ideals, or protest against them. Therefore, the exploiters easily get the chance to deceive them. Gangu knows that he is earning less in Assam than he used to earn at his village-Hoshiarpur in Punjab but he does not raise his voice towards Buta for those rich promises that the latter had made and like his fellow coolies, he accepts his fate and has contrived his mind to suffer by the hands of their masters. However, another incident of superstition is *seen* when a sudden burst of monsoon showers destroy Gangu's crops that were ready for harvest, Gangu consoles himself by thinking that this natural calamity is caused by God to save him from a major

disaster. However, a worse calamity befalls him soon; he is shot by Reggie Hunt. Superstition would be removed from society only through the medium of education which India lacks mostly in Pre-Independence era.

In the novel, Dr. John de la Harve becomes the mouthpiece of Anand, who shows his sympathies for the exploited laborers. The author's autobiographical elements can be seen in this novel. His sympathy for poor people is depicted through Dr. Harve. Dr. Harve has given up his Imperial Service and has come to Assam tea-plantations with a mission to serve the poor and the needy. Like Anand, he believes that every people have their own rights irrespective of their class, caste and creed. Everyone has equal rights for their living. Though Harve tries his best to remove poverty from the tea plantation but he has failed. The truth of the living condition of the labourers in the plantation is very pathetic. They even don't get proper food, medicine and shelter. The tragic picture of the labourer exploited by the Britishers painted perfectly with real colour. On the other hand, they had the impression that Indian labourers were lazy, liars and sub-human creatures. They don't have any happiness, enjoyment in the green world. The White men use the needy labourers just as machines. They have to work and work and nothing else.

Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* is the result of his first hand knowledge of the living condition of the labourers. His humanitarian protest and his desire to uplift the life of the downtrodden from their degradation was the only goal of Anand. This novel is a record of his concern for the oppressed coolies. This novel presents the pathetic life of the coolies of Assam Tea Estates. The events in the novel are narrated in a well structured manner. Anand inaugurated a new era in the Indo-Anglican literature by choosing to depict the pathetic life of the poor and underdogs. Gangu is the representation of the whole exploited Indian labourers of the tea plantation who become the victim at the hands of the Capitalists as well as the Colonisers. Their life is a tale of continuous suffering and struggle with no end in sight.

References

1. Anand, Mulk Raj. *Two Leaves and a Bud*, New Delhi, Arnold-Heinemann, 1983.
2. Harrex, H.C. *The Fire and the Offering: The English Language Novel of India*.
3. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1977.
4. Paul, Premila. *The Novel of Mulk Raj Anand: A Thematic Study*, Delhi: Sterling Publication, 1978.
5. Iyengar, Srinivasa K.R. *Indian Writing in English*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1973.
6. Abrams, M. H. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, New Delhi, 2009.
7. Barbaruah, Fateha Haque. *Ed Two Leaves and a Bud*, Aditya Book Distributor, Guwahati, 2010
8. Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*, India: Penguin Books, 2001. Print.
9. Drewery, Emmanuel C., and Presy A. Antonio. "Social Functioning Of Impoverished Families In Olongapo City, Philippines: Basis For Localized Poverty Alleviation Intervention." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IJHSS)* 7.5 (2018): 27-38

10. Macwan, Jignesh, et al. "An Empirical Study of Poverty In Gujarat." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IJHSS)* 6.1 (2017):17-24
11. Sharma, Brijesh Kumar. "The Portrayal Of Poverty In The Major Novels Of John Galsworthy." *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)* 8.6 (2018): 97-106
12. Okeugo, Oluchi Chris, NwabuezeEkeneEjike, and Mercy Okoye. "Post-Colonial Gratification And Corruption: A Critical Assessment Of Achebe's 'A Man Of The People.'" *International Journal of Linguistics and Literature (IJLL)* 9.3 (2020): 9-14.