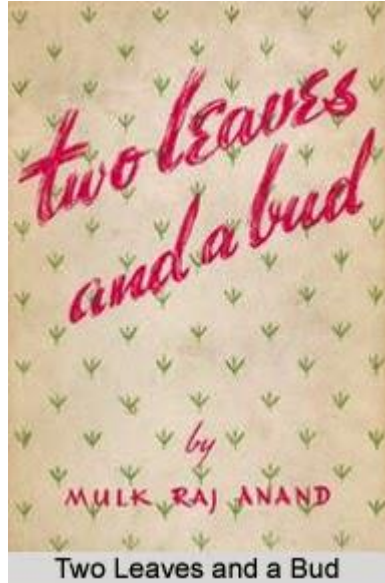


Two Leaves and a Bud Is a Novel on Social Exploitation

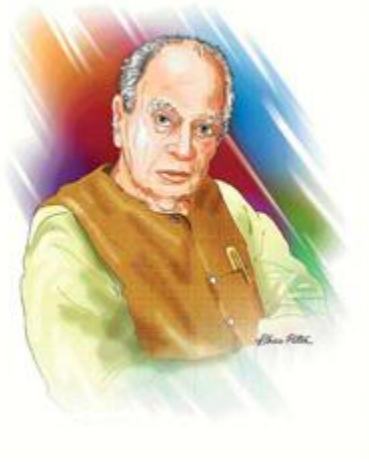
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Abstract

In this paper, I present *Two Leaves and a Bud* as a novel on social exploitation, full of violence and bitterness. It describes the hazardous life of Gangu, an indentured labourer, in an Assam Tea Garden owned by a British man. The theme is bitterness, violence and exploitation which makes our blood boil about the injustice done to the poor coolies. Anand's writing is full of disgust and hate. The angry young man in Anand is more evident than the artist. The gift of Mulk Raj Anand's imagination and his gentle and humane sympathy for his subject adds a new dimension in sensitivity to contemporary literature.

Keywords: Exploitation, indentured, plantation, artist, underdog, humanist, villain, rakshas, complement, pessimistic, cudgles, unsavory, cliché, niche.



Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004)

Courtesy:

<http://archive.deccanherald.com/Deccanherald/dec182005/finearts14274720051216.asp>

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand is a pioneer in the field of Indo-English fiction. He has succeeded in carving for himself a special niche and so he reverentially called one of 'The Big Three'. All his novels and short stories bear him out as a champion of the underdog and his writings reveal his deep understanding of socioeconomic problems. No wonder, of all the Indian novelists in English, Anand is, undoubtedly a writer with a strong commitment to expose the social evils of inequality and exploitation. He takes the cudgels against the cruel forces and unsocial elements which exploit the lives of the poor. Tenderness is the essence of Anand's humanism. He is a humanist.

Special Introduction to the Novel

Anand's first five novels are '*The Untouchable*' (1935), '*Coolie*' (1936), '*Two Leaves and A Bud*' (1937), '*The Village*' (1939) and '*Across the Black Waters*' (1940). The thirties were the seed time of modern independent India. The Gandhian Satyagraha movement, the Organization of Marxist parties, the agonies of World War II in 1939, with the rise of Nazism, all had a definite impact on Mulk Raj Anand's mind.

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Like many Indo-Anglian writers, this political action took the form of writing novels. With a social conscience, Anand wrote for the people and of the people because he is a humanist. One such novel is *Two Leaves and A Bud*. It was published in London in 1937. Later it was published in India by Hind Pocket Books (p) Ltd. It comprises 26 chapters.

Gangu, the Indentured Labourer

The novelist's concern for the oppressed coolies of the Assam Tea Estates which were managed by the British is reflected in this novel. It describes the hazardous life of Gangu, an indentured labourer in an Assam Tea Garden owned by a British man. It was like dynamite as soon as it was published, as it revealed the truth about how a British master exploits the native bonded labourers. It is titled very beautifully and romantically, '*Two Leaves and A Bud*' from the song of coolies picking tea leaves:

“I will make a good sheaf
Plucking, plucking, plucking
Two leaves and a bud
Two leaves and a bud” (p.1)

Bitterness, Violence and Exploitation

The refrain given above suggests the monotonous routine of the work and paradoxically enough, relieves the workers temporality of its drabness. Apart from this romantic title and the beautiful Assam hills against the backdrop of which the whole novel is woven, there is no more romance, love or beauty in the novel. The theme includes bitterness; violence and exploitation which make our blood boil about the injustices done to the poor coolies. Anand's writing is full of disgust and hate. The angry young man in Anand is more evident than the artist. Anand describes this tale of plantation life, and their life in the thirties just as Charles Dickens has said some unsavoury truths about the life of the poor in the Victorian period.

Plot Analysis

The novel starts with the cliché of Indian Philosophy: 'Life is like a Journey' (p.1). Though life is a journey, the poor man's life is the unhappy journey. There are no delightful resorts on the way and the destination of the journey is also not a heaven but a hell. Gangu, a **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:8 August 2014
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middle aged peasant of Hoshiarpur district falls into the hand of the moneylenders and loses his land.

Gangu is lured by Buta, the Sardar of the Macpherson Tea estate to leave his home in Hoshiarpur to come and work as a tea estate laborer in the far off jungles of Assam. He has a son Buddhu and a daughter Leila besides his wife, Sajani. The promise of good wages and huge savings and a free gift of a piece of fertile land are temptations which are too strong to resist for Gangu. So he is forced to go there.

But soon after arriving at Robertson Tea Estate, Gangu starts realizing that he has been cheated by the vile Sardar Buta. A coolie, Narain, from Bikaner discloses that once a coolie comes there, he would neither be able to go back of his own free will nor be allowed to escape. The wages for working from morning till evening are three annas for Gangu, two annas for Sajani and Leila each and half of the anna for Buddhu. In exchange for this, they are abused and beaten and their wives and daughters are sexually exploited. The merchants charge exorbitant prices and high interest on loans. Gangu finds that the total income of his whole family does not suffice to buy even the food items.

The coolies' lanes are so dirty that hookworms breed and thrive in abundance. The danger of cholera always pervades there. But, for the capitalists, coolies are liars, thieves and lazy. They are not even human beings, but sub-human.

John De La Harve, the plantation Doctor is concerned about the insanitary conditions there and the epidemics. When the perilous cholera appears, Havre attacks Croft-Cooke, the boss of the Tea plantation. Cooke gives word that he will do whatever he can do, but nothing is done. He considers the coolies sub-human. Havre suggests mosquito nets and he is ridiculed by Croft-Cooke. Soon malaria breaks out and Gangu's wife Sajani dies of it. Gangu does not have money to perform the last rites on her body and goes to borrow from Croft-Cooke, the Burra Saheb.

On the promise of paying commission to the peon Hamir Singh and Babu Shashi Bhushan, he is allowed to see the Saheb. But he is driven out as a disease carrier.

Mulk Raj Anand succeeds in projecting the corrupted system and the corruption prevailing at all levels from top to bottom even in those days. Later Gangu goes to Buta for help

and is advised, in turn, to seek a loan of twenty rupees from the Bania. Thus, the coolies have no chance of receiving any help from their masters except the abuses and kicks. Gangu turns hard-hearted. He is ready to face any humiliation. No other blow is more devastating than the one inflicted by destiny, the death of his wife.

The Villain

The villain of the novel is Reggie Hunt, the Assistant Manager. The lechery and tyranny of Hunt increase unchecked. He approaches Leila, Gangu's daughter with lust as she plucks tea leaves alone. He follows her to her house. She is chased by him. When Gangu comes to bar his way, Reggie shoots him dead. A trial follows and Mr. Justice Mowberley and a jury consisting of seven Europeans and two Indians find Reggie not guilty of the charges of murder and discharge him.

The irony of fate is such that Gangu, who comes all the way to the tea plantation at Assam to begin a new life, meets his abrupt death in the hands of the lecherous beast who literally haunts him and shoots him dead.

The Plight of Women

Mulk Raj Anand also discusses the plight of women in *Two Leaves and A Bud*. Coolie women have to leave their suckling babies in the grass, dust and road and cannot even offer their breasts to their babies during working time. Those who are beautiful and young are either hoodwinked or forcibly taken away as was done to Neogi's wife. They are rewarded trinkets like ear or nose rings and their husbands given land. Those who resent are wounded, beaten and fired enmasse at gun-point. Reggie Hunt brutally enjoys Neogi's wife and wounds her. He ruins the family of Chameli and takes her along with him to his house. When he gets fed up with her, she is thrown out. He openly lives with three coolie women; Narain, a coolie rightly comments that nobody's mother or sister is safe in the tea plantation. Death is considered as the attainment of release amidst the misery of workers.

The Rich in India

Another incarnation of evil is Bania, the traditional Indian figure of concentrated wealth from whose clutches it is impossible to come out. The pigeon caught by Buddhu, Gangu's son is the symbol of the poor coolie. He cannot adjust himself in the cage and at the same time he

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cannot escape from the bondage. Even the daughter of Croft-Cooke, Barbara, is aware of the dust of the struggling underworld, its mire, its dirt and its squalor. But she cannot raise her voice against the atrocities. She represents the section of people who are aware of the exploitation and feel for the exploited. Dr. La Harve is humiliated showing sympathy with and advocating the cause of coolies. He is dismissed from service and his beloved Barbara, the daughter of Croft-Cooke becomes cold towards him. His romance with Barbara comes abruptly to an end and he leaves the scene for good. The white doctor becomes the mouthpiece of the writer, whose pity is directed at the illiteracy and the ignorance, superstition and stupidity of the peasants or the rural folk.

In Harve's view, the condition of the coolies all over the world is identical. It makes no difference whether their employers are foreigners or natives. It is the system that should be changed. The novel ends on a pessimistic note, leaving the readers with a heavy heart, full of helpless anger, against the white man's authority and the native man's greed. The characterization is angular and sharp - Reggie and Dr. La Harve are two extremes. There are unforgettable scenes. One of them is Leila's lone struggle with the python that circled her in its deadly clasp. Thus, the intellectual framework of the novel, triumphs over human interest.

Relevance of the Title

The title of the novel is loaded with significance. For *Two Leaves and A Bud* put together is three. Life in this novel is seen from the third angle. The triumvirate of the king, the priest and the man of wealth monopolize the stranglehold over human race. The king's authority is sanctified by the priest. He, in turn, holds his sway over the ethereal soul of the masses. The man of wealth spreads his tentacles over the material life of the people. The three connive, cooperate and complement one another in turn.

Critique

Mulk Raj Anand considered literature and art as the instruments of humanism. His purpose of spreading humanism is fulfilled in his novels like *Two Leaves and A Bud*. He has presented social evils in myriad manifestations and has unveiled many different layers of human experience in this novel. The story contrasts the silent tragedy in the lives of the poor coolies with tawdry self-complacency of the British tea plantation owners, as well as the greedy grasping

of the Indian merchants and money lenders. Thus, Anand is a committed writer, concerned with social evils. His novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* is a powerful novel in theme and exposition.

Mulk Raj Anand has been accused of caricaturing the white Sahibs by some of the new brown Sahibs. The new generations or readers will never know that the Assam white planters were often monstrous in their behaviour and along with the Indian merchants and Banias, the money lending demons; they exuded terror which had to be experienced to be believed. At any rate, the people in the gardens call them Rakshas. Humanitarian compassion might have distorted action and character. The one saving grace of the novel is the imaginative description of the plantation scene.

Two Leaves and A Bud is no blood curdling melodrama or a spasmodic declaration of revenge, but one of the most sensitive novels about the age of slavery through bonded labour in India. It may be said to be essentially a dramatic novel and certainly it culminates in a tragic clash of interests and destinies.

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