Mulka Raj Anand  As A Pioneer And A Trend-Setter In The Field Of Indian Fiction In English.

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Introduction
Mulka Raj Anand, born in Peshawar (now in Pakistan) on December 12, 1905 and died in Mumbai (Pune), India on September 28, 2004, was an Indian writer in English, notable for his depiction of the lives of the poorer castes in the traditional Indian Society.

A pioneer and a trend-setter in the field of Indian fiction in English. He is one of the most important Indian novelists in English. A writer of extraordinary stamina and vitality, apart from about twenty novels and hundreds of short stories in English, he has also written on an astonishingly wide variety of subjects which include art, painting, dance, education, culture, philosophy, culinary arts, aesthetics and literary criticism. Nevertheless, his most ambitious mode of expression has been fiction, and appropriately he has been in the field for nearly six decades. Anand is a novelist of urgent social concerns and preoccupations, and the social impulse is at the heart of the writings. All his novels are concerned with the social reality of India, as perceived by him. In the words of Saros Cowasjee, they are all “sociologically or historically oriented. They are written, as S.C. Harrex points out, “primarily in response to recent Indian history and socio-political problems, with emphasis on the human immediacy of the crises confronting the modern Indian”. Anand writes in a realistic and naturalistic mode, introducing his own modifications into it. In all this, it is obvious, he is very different from the other two major Indian novelists of his generation, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, whose literary career too began more or less about the same time as his. Anand places great weight on the social significance of the novel, and through his novels he has earnestly tried to convey his deepest concern for the predicament of man, in India in particular. Human suffering caused by a combination of social, religious, economic and political factors, engage his attention.

Even in a random reading of Anand’s novels the reader becomes immediately aware of such issues as the tyranny of the caste system, its injustice, and its social, moral and economic consequences, class conflicts, exploitation of various kinds of the poor by the rich, religious bigotry and hypocrisy, the social basis of evil, persistent popular superstitions, confrontation between tradition and modernity, quest for identity, search for freedom, east-west encounter, etc. These and other related themes surface themselves and become conspicuous, because they appear again and again in his novels. Anand as a novelist has always sensitively responded to them rather than to metaphysical and philosophical issues which fascinate a novelist like Raja Rao. For him the impulse to write springs from the very compelling urgency of these issues and their human consequences felt by him. Naturally they become the thematic centres of his novels and provide the premises underlying his fictional structures. Therefore the recurrent themes of Anand have attracted attention for critical analysis and comment, and find a prominent place in every critical study of his novels. There have been special studies of Anand’s themes. For instance, Premila Paul in her The Novels of Mulka Raj Anand : A Thematic Study (New Delhi : Sterling Publishers, 1983) has sensitively examined “caste system, class system, religion, education and the status of women” as “the principal foci of thematic significance” in Anand’s novels. More recently Ambuj Kumar Sharma has devoted attention exclusively to the theme of exploitation in his The Theme of Exploitation in the Novels of Mulka Raj Anand (New Delhi : Deep and Deep Publications, 1990). The present endeavour is also a thematic study. It seeks to examine in some details Anand’s handling of the theme of social discrimination in his novels, which is one of his most recurrent as well as important themes.

Before defining the nature, scope and limits of the present inquiry, it would be in place to draw attention to some of the distinctions of Anand as a novelist. He happens to be the very first Indian novelist in English to choose as the staple raw material of his fiction the lives and experiences of outcastes and Untouchables, coolies, factory workers, landless labourers, artisans, peasants and all such people who have been oppressed, repressed, dispossessed, and downtrodden (some of them for centuries), who have been experiencing degrading and dehumanizing poverty, exposed to the iniquities and indignities of discrimination and exploitation. Most of Anand’s protagonists are drawn from among these social marginals and non-entities of Indian society. Such people had seldom appeared in traditional Indian literature. Anand was perhaps the very first to introduce them self-consciously and deliberately into the Indian novel and represent them realistically, thereby marking a major and a radical departure from established practice and convention. This daring step of his has proved very profitable to the Indian novel as it opened up a vast area of Indian life for fictional treatment.
It is also to be noted that Anand is perhaps the first Indian novelist to attempt to bring out “the beauty, terror, and tenderness in the lives of those neglected people who form the bulk of his characters.

It would be natural if one were to ask how could Anand who was, in his own words, comparatively better off, develop a compassionate interest in and concern for the dispossessed, the weak and the dispossessed. Without going into the details of his biography, it may be noted that the circumstances of his early life, his upbringing, and the environment in which he spent his impressionable years and grew up, made him exceptionally sensitive to human suffering caused by human beings to one another. Some events of his childhood and youth sharpened his consciousness of the humiliating discrimination of people in the name of caste, class, religion and race. His participation in the civil disobedience campaign of the twenties taught him that the alien imperial authority con-stricted our lives. But his hatred of imperialism did not blind him to “the cruelty and hypocrisy of Indian feudal life, with its castes, creeds, dead habits and customs, and its restrictive religious rites and practices”. Along with other young men of his generation he too began “to question everything in our background, to look away from the big houses and to feel the misery of the inert, disease-ridden, underfed, illiterate people about us”.

Anand’s development as a novelist was further influenced by his close contact with the West, which is, according to Harrex, “one of the major influences in his career as a writer”. His theory of fiction was influenced by his exposure to Western ideas. During his long stay in England from 1929 onwards, he came under several influences literary, social and political. His philosophical studies in the older British Universities, his close contact with left-wing writers of the thirties, his chance involvement in the Spanish Civil War, his association with movements and causes popular in Europe which demanded the liberation of the human spirit, all these had their profound impact on the thinking and imagination of Anand. While they certainly broadened his outlook, brought him conceptual clarity, and set him on a quest for universally meaningful values, they all contributed to the sharpness and urgency with which he reacted to the problems of his country and his society, even though he had been generally resident in England.

As mentioned already, the present study aims at examining Anand’s handling of the theme of social discrimination in his novels. In fact it is a cluster of related themes. It is necessary to explain in what sense ‘social discrimination’ is understood and applied here to Anand’s novels. The word ‘social’ implies primarily the relationship between an individual and the group or community to which he belongs and amidst which he lives. The Random House Dictionary of The English Language (Re-print 1975) explains that the word ‘social’ as an adjecti-
In any study of a novelist’s themes, one may be tempted to divorce them from their fictional contents and consider them in the abstract. If that were to happen, the novels would be reduced to the sum of their themes and lose their essential identity as novels, and as works of fiction. Therefore it is necessary to bear in mind that Anand the novelist is concerned with human beings as individuals as much as he is concerned with pressing social issues. His endeavour in his novels is to explore imaginatively the problems which compel his attention rather than view them by themselves in the abstract. He is well aware of the possibility of a social problem in a literary work getting the better of the human individuals in it. Referring to the literary situation in the ‘thirties, when several poets and novelists particularly in the West were exercised over the compelling socio-economic issues of the day, as a result of which there was “a spate of revolutionary and socially critical writing in Europe, America and Asia”. Anand makes the following observation in his Apology for Heroism, his ‘autobiography of ideas’.

In the thirties social problems tended to supersede the problems of the individual in literature. The old ‘Fates’, ‘God’, ‘Evil in Man’ and ‘Nature’, almost gave place to the new ‘Fates’, ‘Economics’ and ‘Politics’ as they affected the ‘Common Man’, though as the quotation marks with all these words show, the intellectual concept tended to dominate imaginative literature and made for abstractions in poetry and fiction.

It is pertinent to recall here Anand’s significant reply to Mahatma Gandhi’s question to him, ‘Why write a novel? Why not a tract on untouchability?’ Anand records: “I answered that a novel was more human and could reproduce contrary emotions and shades of feeling, whereas a tract could become biased, and that I liked the ‘concrete’ as against the ‘general’ statement’. It hardly needs to be pointed out that Anand’s ambition is write novels rather than tracts.

Unlike the writer of tracts the novelist explores his chosen theme or themes in them of the story and plot of his invention, and above all through character, conflict and event. It is by a deft handling of these components together, he makes his themes actual to the reader for his response and imaginative participation, and thus mediate his significant meanings to him. Despite his obvious sociological concern and ideological interests, Anand is basically a novelist of character as it is shaped by the individual will as well as environment. Therefore, any study of his themes, social discrimination in the present instance, involves in the main a close study of his characters, especially his protagonists. It is they who spring to the reader’s mind when he thinks of Anand’s novels: Bakhe in Untouchable, Munoo in Coolie, Gangu in Two Leaves and a Bud, Lalu in the three novels The Village, Across the Black Waters and The Sword and the Sickle which together recreate the vicissitudes of his life, Ananta in The Big Heart, Bhiku in The Road, and Gauri in Gauri. And hence in the present study the bias is towards Anand’s imaginative apprehension and recreation of social discrimination in terms of character, conflict and event, in short in terms of the art of fiction. Its guiding assumption is that Anand’s novels have to be viewed and evaluated finally as novels, as contribution to the art of fiction, in spite of the fact that Anand does intend in novel after novel to sensitise his readers to the different kinds of discriminations persisting in Indian society. However, as this is essentially a study of a particular theme, aspects of Anand’s art and technique will be brought up for brief comment only as and when necessary while considering particular novels.

Anand is a novelist with a serious purpose and has been one consistently. From time to time he has theorized, as perhaps no other Indian novelist in English has done, about the art of fiction, and stated his own intentions as a practicing novelist. Spread over his Apology for Heroism there are accounts of his convictions as a writer. Here are a few samples. Laying stress on a writer’s social responsibility “both as a citizen and an artist”, Anand says that it is “necessary” for a writer.

To link himself with the disinherited, the weak and the dispossessed, as a human being and as an artist with special talents, to help transform society. No betrayal of the artist’s genius is involved in this ---, the old specialist attitude which regarded art, philosophy, morality and religion as ends in themselves, to be pursued for their own sake, only betokened fear of responsibility.

In another essay of his Anand asks rhetorically, “what is a writer if he is not the fiery voice of the people?”17 In yet another place he asserts categorically. “All art is propaganda. The art of Ajanta is propaganda for Buddhism. The art of Ellora is propaganda for Hinduism. The art of the Western novel is propaganda for humanity against the bourgeois---”. To cite just one more statement of Anand’s he concludes his self revelatory essay “Why I Write?”, with the sentence, “I have always considered literature and art as the instruments of humanism”.

From these and other utterances of Anand, the extra-literary nature of his intentions as a novelist is explicit. In his novels, some of the characters, who seem to serve as spokesmen for their creator, express views and uphold ideas dear to him. The Sword and the Sickle provides a good representative example for it. Therefore Anand has been regarded by some of his critics as a propagandist and a committed novelist. In fact much of critical commentary on him has concerned itself with the vexed and vexing question of his commitment, some viewing it favourably and others expressing reservations about him on this score. The nature of his commitment too has been
discussed and debated. Some find in him a consciously committed Marxist, wedded to espousing Marxian ideas, while others have seen in him a committed humanist upholding humanist values. Anand’s interest in Marx dates back to his undergraduate days. But the real and full impact of Marxian ideas on him began only after he chanced to read Marx’s letters on India published in the New York Herald Tribune of 1853. Those ideas strengthened further the already present powerful social impulse in him, and provided him with a method and a point of view from which he could read and interpret human history. But with time Anand appears to have to come to regard “humanism, the view of the whole man, as the more comprehensive ideology”. Cowasjee, however, strikes the golden mean and maintains that there is a “close relationship between Marxism and Humanism in Anand’s mind”.

References


