

THE LOOKING GLASS OF FEMINISM: MULK RAJ ANAND'S 'THE OLD WOMAN AND THE CROW' (GAURI)

Dr. Jyoti Taneja
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Arts and Commerce College,
Indore (M.P.)

Abstract

In India, a woman has always been considered inferior in the society. India is a multilingual country and villages cover much of the land here. Mulk Raj Anand being a humanist depicts the rights of human beings, strives for the eradication of all evils that destroy human happiness and checks the progress of individuals and of mankind at large. He has depicted a large variety of female characters from different stratas of the Indian society and made his readers realise the plight of a woman in India. During the rise of the nationalist movement, there was a trend in Indian literature to reflect social concerns. Of the different forms of literature, the novel is one that has commanded the greatest attention and has dominated the scene in modern literature more than any other literary genre. Anand's novels show stamina and unyielding regularity of purpose with a deeper concern for India, portraying as it was. He began his literary career with books like, *Curries and other Indian Dishes*, *Persian Painting*, *The Hindu View of Art* and *The Golden Breath* (1933). His roots went deeper and the fruits in the form of novels came out as a reflection of his genre in series of his fictions like *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1941), *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960) and many others depicting, Indian social life which was full of poverty stricken masses, brutality to women, belief in superstition and the horrifying caste system as a result of his consciousness for his surroundings. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the character of Gauri from the point of gender bias and considering woman as an objects of desire by men. *The Old Woman and the Crow* is unique among the novels of Mulk Raj Anand presenting a woman as a central character in projecting a woman's point of view, he reveals his ambivalent humanism in the treatment of the woman in question. The question of woman's place in society is a central concern in the novel. The story is derived from the Indian epic 'The Ramayana in which Sita is banished by her husband Lord Rama when common people look at her with doubt. He presents a realistic picture of the struggle of a woman. The novel presents a strong plea for identification and approval of woman's rights.

Keywords: Villages, brutality, women, feminism, gender, liberated.

In India, a woman has always been considered inferior in the society. India is a country of many languages and villages cover much of the land of the nation. The condition of rural Indian woman was always bad. During the rise of the nationalist movement, there was a trend in Indian literature to reflect social concerns. Novels have dominated the scene in modern literature more than any other literary genre. Our hopes and aspiration, our triumphs and failures, our tradition and invention, have helped the novel to establish itself as the principal mode of all the literary expression. It portrays human thought and action, life and experience, reality and imagination in such a manner that which is not present in real life, it “manifests itself in something we may call a comment, a judgement, a gesture, a valuation.” The most significant event in the history of Indian writing in English in 1930’s was the arrival of the ‘major-Trio’ consisting of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. These three have revealed in their own characteristic ways the various possibilities of Indian English fiction for whom Art was for Art’s sake and not a means for fulfilling other purposes.

Of these three, Anand’s novels show stamina and stern consistency of purpose with a deeper concern for India, portraying as it was. Anand depicted a wide variety of female characters from all classes, from the highest to the lowest and from a city lady to a simple village girl. The plight of woman in India is made to understand through the characters of his novels. Though his fiction is rarely discussed in terms of gender for he has primarily been considered a writer of social concern and humanity, yet the women characters do appear to be sufferers of an oppressive system in Anand’s works. He began his literary career with books like, Curries and other Indian Dishes, Persian Painting, The Hindu View of Art and The Golden Breath (1933). He delved deeper and the fruits of his creativity came out in the form of novels as a reflection of his genre in series of his fictions like Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), Two leaves and a Bud (1937), The village (1939), Across the Black Waters (1941), The Old Woman and the Cow (1960) and many others depicting, Indian social life which was full of poverty stricken masses, brutality to women, belief in superstition and the horrifying cast system as a result of his consciousness for his surroundings.

The novel ‘The Old Woman and the Crow’ is an emphasis on the plight of women and who are today in a very sensible way ready to topple the myth of femininity. They have been brought up by women within a feminine world with the aim of getting married and be in subordination to man. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the character of Gauri a peasant woman, from the point of feminism, showing a poverty stricken mother to be a victimizer and how woman are just considered as an object of desire by men.

The novel can be divided into three distinctive parts. The first two chapters, show Gauri as docile woman silently suffering everything at the hands of her mother-in-law and her husband. In the second part one can see a complete alteration in Gauri, she is driven out of her house at Hoshiarpur. The last chapter finally represents the last phase, in which Gauri returns home only to leave her husband. Gauri is caught in the turmoil of patriarchy. She has been a docile female when she was a young girl, as a married woman she remained a devoted wife, then as a mother-to-be and finally tortured by men who lusted after her physical attributes, wanted her yet belittled her. Even her own mother sells her for money. Gauri is a brave woman and the readers can see her as a triumphant female at the end. ‘The Old Woman and the Crow’ is unique among the novels of Mulk Raj Anand presenting a woman as a central character in projecting a woman’s point of view, he reveals his ambivalent humanism in the treatment of the woman in question. The question of woman’s place in society is a central concern in the novel.

The novel begins when Panchi is led through the marriage rituals to his first sight of the young bride, Gauri, who reluctantly lifts her dupatta from her face, and we see a wheatish young innocent bride. Hereafter begins the journey of this village belle struggling for an identity, distinctiveness claiming her right for existence in this world. All the trials and tribulations make Gauri break all the shackles and a liberated woman emerges in the end of the novel. Anand has talked about every little detail, which is considered a taboo, in the society. He depicts a woman in rural India who “has been considered untouchable during her period, isolated, and given food away from the kitchen, and not allowed to contaminate.” (Gauri, 39). She is confined to a “darkroom” upon a small string charpai throughout the day during her menstruation. Anand supports that women are often victimized and have to give in to this senseless belief which treats them as outcasts.

Gauri has to marry a man whom she has never seen and she finds imprisoned in this conventional arranged marriage as she has become slave to Panchi's desires. He is an impatient, narrow-minded man and Gauri has to succumb to his demands without protest. The whole day she works like a slave and satisfies her husband sexually. Gauri has to blindly follow all the traditions of this village. Her mother has asked her to be like Sita and Gauri abides to her parting advise. Kesaro and Panchi on the other hand call her Kali. Her in-laws mistreat her, and like a ruthless mother-in-law Kesaro abuses her and call her by different names like “filthy woman,” “sweeper woman,” “shameless” etc. she blames her for being shameless going out without putting dupatta. Gauri willingly gives away all her jewellery for the payment of the seeds, lentils, and rice. Panchi is at times a loving husband, but his brutal mannerisms repel her and she retreats and shudders like a weak doe. Genuine love, trust and equality the very foundations of a healthy family life are missing in their life. Panchi is self-centered and unpredictable. Gauri's struggles for equal rights of man and woman. In spite of her persistent commitment to Panchi, he drives her out of the house when he comes to know of her pregnancy.

Gauri leaves her husband's home and she comes to live with her own mother only to be victimized again. And gets no solace here either. Laxmi, mother of Gauri, is a terror and does not welcome her and sells her to Sheth Jai Ram Das, a banker of Hoshiarpur, in place of cash to wipe out the loans she has taken on their two houses as well as the cow, Chandari. Ironically her home where she was born and brought up, where her goddess was worshipped and dwelt, fails to shelter her. She shrieks: “Oh mother, why are you letting him to drag me into hell. The goddess will punish you!” (Gauri, 127) This is the height of her pain. The title of the novel ‘The Old Woman and the Cow’ is itself taken from this event of the novel. Mohindra a medical man, says to Laxmi: “you should not have sold your daughter for money... if you were prepared to sell Gauri rather than the cow, I understand that you did it for the cursed money you needed against the scarcity... So there is nothing irreparable in your action. Only you love money more than your daughter” (Gauri, 244). The poor girl shouts “Go away and eat the ashes!... Monster!... Don't torment me! ... and she felt as though now she was inspired by righteousness, by the flame of the Goddess which had come into her.” (Gauri, 127). This is the message Anand gives his readers that even an animal like a cow is better than a girl child in this sickly society. Jai Ram Das, is brutal and tries to entice her, but the girl remains firm like a rock and saves herself. “Gauri pushed him off her by a violent wriggle and, then thrust him away, on the floor.” (Gauri, 145).

Colonel Mahindra, who has taken her to his hospital, makes her realize her self-worth and she serves the sick and we see there is a remarkable improvement in her situation. Now she is an independent woman, no more a timid, nervous woman and brave enough to face the struggle of life fearlessly and courageously. Gauri returns from the hospital as a cultured,

sophisticated individual .Anand clearly depicts the plight of Gauri, as a traditional Indian wife, who is unable to uproot herself from the accusations of Panchi, her husband. She never agreed to the illogical and superstitious beliefs, yet she nearly surrenders to the pressure and force of her mother, in-laws and husband. Gauri like any woman is happy when she comes to know that she is going to be a mother. But Panchi is insane he remains unmoved and just not listens to any of her pleadings and throws her out of his house. Gauri collects her strength braces herself up and goes to never come back. Panchi drives her out of the house once again, his mind poisoned by malicious gossip, just like Sita in The Ramayan. Rama's rejection of Sita because everyone doubted her chastity after her abduction by Ravana parallels the story of Panchi and Gauri. Panchi is certainly no Rama but Gauri certainly emerges as a modern counterpart of Sita. Like Sita she doesn't have to go for any test of chastity but this time she is not like a helpless, forsaken creature, but a woman conscious of her rights and confident of defending herself.

Feminism and gender bias thus gets amply illustrated in the novel. Female liberation is not possible without female assertion and of course, economic independence. Gauri's husband Panchi twice throws her out of the house, suspecting her chastity. Chastity is the most important characteristic for an Indian woman. Anand shows in his novels women are just an object of desire for men but expect her to be shy and controlled. The Old Woman and the Cow, has been one of most revolutionary novel's of Anand. He feels the grief of the these victims of the society and his novels reflect his humanist concerns.

References

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Gauri*, Mayfair Paperbacks Ser. Ind-U.S., 1981.

George, C.J. *Mulk Raj Anand, His Art and Concerns: A Study of His Non- autobiographical Novels*. Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 1994

Krishna Bhatnagar, Manmohan, Mittapalli Rajeshwar. *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2000. *Google Books*. Web. 28. October 2014.