

FEMALE SUBALTERNS IN THE THREE NOVELS OF MULK RAJ ANAND

Jayanta Rana

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Netaji Satabarshiki Mahavidyalaya,
Ashoknagar, 24 Parganas, (N),
Westbengal

Abstract

The subaltern studies group in 1982 defined ‘subaltern’ as one “of inferior rank” and further used the term as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society...expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.” In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze Mulk Raj Anand’s exploration of this idea of subaltern with particular reference to women characters in his three novels—*Untouchable* (1936), *Coolie* (1937) and *The Road* (1961). In these novels, he, unequivocally, establishes the fact that the marginality of women is the handiwork of the indigenous power structure that thrives on patriarchy, caste-system and class-based privileges.

Keywords: Caste, Class, Patriarchy, Power, Subaltern.

The term ‘subaltern’ is drawn from Antonio Gramsci’s “On the Margins of History: History of the Subaltern social groups.”¹ The term is useful in his explorations of the marginalization of sections of people in societies. On the other hand, in South Asian societies, according to the subaltern studies group, the term also refers to subordination “...in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.”² Aijaz Ahmad, in fact, proposes a ‘critical realism’ to expose the multifaceted aspects of subaltern state in Indian society: “What critical realism demanded was that a critique of others (anti-colonialism) be conducted in the perspective of an even more comprehensive, multifaceted critique of ourselves: our class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of bodies and sexualities, our idealism, our silences.”³

In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze Mulk Raj Anand’s exploration of the subalternity of women in his three novels—*Untouchable* (1936), *Coolie* (1937) and *The Road* (1961). These novels underline the marginality of women as they are made to suffer under the prevalent class structure, thriving on rich-poor divide. Again, in Indian society, caste is a major determinant of a person’s location in the power structure. Along with these markers of power,

gendering and sexualisation of the bodies also play significant role in keeping the women down at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Anand has been hailed as a major critic of the colonial hegemony in its varied aspects. In his fictional output, Anand also pays attention to the marginality of women which is the handiwork of the indigenous power structure thriving on patriarchy, caste-system and class-based privileges.

In *The Bride's Book of Beauty* (1946), written with Krishna Nehru Hutheesing, Mulk Raj Anand has this to say about the status of women in India: "Obviously woman in India has sometimes been exalted as a doll or kept down and oppressed."⁴

Anand's novels chronicle the diverse methods by which the de-sexualisation and unrelenting tyranny over women are perfected. The female identity, in theory, is given great honour, but women, in real life, are humiliated, depersonalised and dominated. What seems to surprise Anand is the silent subjugation of women under patriarchy instead of outrage at such a state of affairs. Moreover, most Hindu men do not find anything wrong with this state of things. Anand's novels go behind the scene and try to explore the ideologies, the traditional Hindu beliefs and male prejudices which sustain the patriarchal Hindu society.

Michael Foucault (1980) suggests that power operates through the construction of particular knowledge. And it is through the constructed knowledge of sexuality that control over an individual is exercised. Male and female bodies have different social values depending on their location in the power structure. The discursive construction of 'male' and 'female' behaviour proceeds from there. Thus, the premeditated fabrication of 'women' by the dominant sex is given careful attention in Anand's novels. The stereotyped image of a man as 'strong' and 'determined' who has made his fortune with his sincere labour is given wide currency in a patriarchal society. In order to emphasise this manliness, deliberate construction of 'women' as 'weak' and 'fallible' becomes necessary. Women, therefore, come to be seen as the weaker version of strong men. Sohini, in Anand's *Untouchable* (1936), fits the role of a 'patient', 'docile' and 'peaceful' woman. She is an untouchable girl who patiently waits for a caste Hindu to draw water for her from a well as she herself is not allowed to 'pollute' the well. Pundit Kali Nath, the priest in the nearby temple, decides to draw water for Sohini as "reward of [Sohini's] patience." A woman, therefore, needs to toe the lines dictated by men of higher caste and should ingrain in themselves the feminine virtues like 'patience', 'docility' in order to appropriate the role of an ideal woman. Most men do not find anything wrong with this standardization of women. In *Coolie* (1937), Hari sympathises with his wife who seems to suffer from the "natural weaknesses of her sex". But his wife despite her 'natural weakness' joins her husband in the factory and works for the same hours. Again, in *The Road* (1961), Anand presents the female marginal who are eager to contribute their share of labour in the construction of road that will connect the village with the city. However, a woman can't expect to be treated on equal terms. Hari's wife thus, gets five rupees against a man's wage of twenty rupees per month. The novelist presents a woman as talented, imaginative and determined although she is biologically different from a man. What condemns women, therefore, is their fabricated 'weaknesses' while the issues of inequality inherent in the social structure hardly receives any attention.

The belief that a woman is impulsive by nature and therefore should be under the supervision of men is reflected in the way the female virginity is given great emphasis in Indian society. This is a clear instance of how female body is objectified and that leads to strict regulations being put on these bodies in patriarchy. Bakha, in *Untouchable*, finds his sister Sohini as beautiful and finds her beauty as the reason behind her undoing as Sohini's youth makes her a temptress. Men are, in the process, relieved of any responsibility in the sexual abuse of women

that they commit in the most brazen way possible. *Pundit* Kali Nath sexually abuses Sohini but Bakha puts the blame somewhat on Sohini's sensuous attractiveness. Moreover, his incestuous feelings for her are also due to his obsession with her body. Infact, the thought of her sexual violation even in the hands of her husband is unbearable to Bakha.

In Patriarchy, a woman is almost always a 'product'-a good possession for her husband's family. Sexualised body is the site on which dominant power hierarchy dictates its rules. Consequently; it becomes impossible to view a body outside the parameters of sex, enforcing the compliance and control of an individual. That power structure, then, ensures 'normal' sexual and gender development. In patriarchal power structure, female virginity is what makes a woman precious. The sexual purity of a woman is made indispensable in Indian society where a woman is condemned to live in shame and imposed guilt once her purity is lost. In *The Road*, Rukmini's mother teaches her daughter to jealously guard her 'precious gift' of virginity "for the man to whom she is given, in religion". To maintain this purity of the female body-fit only for the reproductive purposes, female subjugation is made necessary in the social structure. This deliberate suppression of female self is also to prepare them for the role of a mother as a woman comes to be defined by her series of duties. In the process, what gets lost is her own self as she prepares to play the roles of a daughter, wife and a mother under the supervision of men.

The institution of *purdah* also emphasises the importance of sexual purity of women. *Babu* Nathoo Ram desires to behave like a true *sahib* but his wife is kept under the security of a double veil. He justifies his practice as voluntary adoption by his wife who is, according to him, 'Very shy'. On the other hand in *The Road*, Rukmini's mother is irritated to find her daughter's apron dropping off the head which is a clear violation of the Hindu code of ideal behaviour on the part of a woman. She cannot even dare to unveil herself in her dreams. The centrality of a female body to her identity is emphasised rigorously in the patriarchal society. The institution of *purdah* forcefully stresses that the loss of purity is the worst that can happen to a woman. Infact, in some cases, *purdah* actually inhibits normal healthy relation between the sexes as it happens in the case of Rukmini and her future husband: "...she [Rukmini] felt, as though, by drawing the veil, she tried to build a wall between herself and the man she had been destined to marry."⁵

Moreover, by over- emphasising the female body as solely a sexed body, a woman's creative attributes are ignored. It is, as if, a woman is as good as her body is. Thus, *purdah* proposes a young woman to be "invisible as possible" to avoid friction with the dominant sex.

From the beginning, a concerted attempt is being made to make a woman realize her location in relation to men. She is persuaded to conform, relentlessly, to the preferred male code of behaviour. Right at the birth of a girl child, the spirit of the occasion suddenly becomes very subdued. The realization that she is not a permanent member of the family and a burden on her father put the whole family in a negative frame of mind. Bakha, in *Untouchable*, is no different in this context. His sister's body is a threat to his family 'honour' and the onus is on her to keep the body away from the threatening male attention. He, in his desperation, thinks his sister is born to humiliate and disgrace the whole family: "Why was she born a girl in our house, to bring disgrace upon us?"⁶

Pundit Kali Nath escapes his responsibility in the sexual abuse of Sohini, as Bakha holds his sister responsible for the whole fiasco. Female sexuality, therefore, needs careful supervision in a society where men are not supposed to have any self-control in matters of sexual desire. Foucault in this context refers to an 'inspecting gaze', "through which each individual exercises surveillance over and against himself."⁷ Surveillance has been identified as one of the most

powerful strategies of dominance because it situates a viewer with “an elevated vantage point” from which the dominant gaze can exercise power over what is seen. This leads to the objectification of the subject “within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalternity and powerlessness.”⁸ In *The Road*, Rukmini’s mother places strict restrictions on her daughter. Rukmini is advised not to mention the names of the young men of the village. She can’t even wear colourful clothes and is to wait till her marriage to wear them. Bhiku catches Rukmini’s imagination but as an untouchable boy he has no prospect of a future with her. On the other hand, her brother, Sanju, is happily ignorant of all these restrictions and goes to the limit of burning down the shanties of the untouchables. But, then, boys are believed to be more mischievous than girls while girls need to be very ‘obedient’ ‘well behaved’, ‘calm’ and ‘quite’. Again, in *Untouchable*, Sohini is expected not to show her teeth in the presence of men. This violation of coded feminine behaviour is deemed as an act befitting only a prostitute. Consequently, girls gradually become quieter and passive and boys assertive and surer of themselves.

The most important stage of a woman’s life is deemed to be her marriage with, more often than not, with a total stranger. An Indian girl, belonging to the lower classes, is usually married off in early adolescence. In this context, Jyoti Puri (1999) discusses the hegemonic aspects of marriage in a woman’s life in these lines:

“From a cultural standpoint, marriage and motherhood are considered the primary gender roles for women across social classes...To the extent that these statuses are considered normal and essential aspects of adult womanhood, they also serve to limit and regulate women’s lives.”⁹

In Anand’s *Untouchable*, Ram Charan’s sister is married off at the tender age of fourteen. Sudhir Kakar (1988) offers a few reasons behind this practice:

“The custom of early marriage recognizes and is designed to guard the promiscuous resurgence in adolescence of a girl’s playful childhood sexuality and the threat this would pose to Hindu social organization.”¹⁰

Marriage for a Hindu woman is her destiny around which her whole self revolves. From her childhood, she is trained to become a ‘docile’, ‘well-mannered’ and ‘gentle’ housewife who will fulfil her dreams by following the decrees of her husband. Rukmini, in *The Road*, is no different who thinks her marriage, in near future, is the best thing that could happen in her life. Infact, marriage and motherhood, according to Jyoti Puri, are “social statuses that also entail social responsibilities and rights.” However, as the search for a bridegroom begins, a girl finds out that she is a liability to her parents. In addition to the monetary problems that she causes to her parents, a girl also comes to understand her worthlessness. In *The Road*, Bhagwanti informs her daughter that she is only a ‘guest’ in the house who will be married off as soon as possible. Thakur Singh, Rukmini’s father, knows his daughter cannot ‘serve’ him in his old age and thinks here lies Rukmini’s worthlessness. A girl’s marriage, in a lower-class strata, sometimes bring good fortune for her parents. Gulabo marries her daughter off and gets two hundred rupees in exchange. Thus, Gulabo’s daughter literally becomes a gift to her mother and also a costly possession for her husband.

After her marriage, a Hindu woman tries to live up to the expectations of patriarchy. The *pativrata* ideology now takes the centerstage in her life. A *pativrata* is expected to realize that a man marries to continue his family line by getting sons. This is one important job through which she expects to gain love and respect in her home and society. The role of a wife, in the system, is to perpetuate the social order and enable men to gain immortality through their sons:

“Offspring, the due performance of religious rites, faithful service and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and for oneself depend on the wife alone.”¹¹

Unfortunately, Munoo’s aunt in *Coolie* fails to bear children for her husband and loses her place in the society. This is because, in patriarchy, her womanhood is not what gives identity but motherhood.

The ideology of *pativrata* requires absolute obedience on the part of a wife to her husband’s wishes. Even a little indiscretion on the part of the wife to her husband is a crime and unbecoming of a *pativrata*. Thakur Singh, in *The Road*, agrees to this gender role of a woman and bitterness wells up in him when he finds “that even his wife should dare to talk at him.” An ideal Hindu woman, moreover, should engage herself with the domestic affairs all through the day. In her relentless service to build up a ‘Sweet Home’, a woman is advised to seek justification of her existence. Linda McDowell (1999) refers to this problematic of women’s home-making activities in these lines:

“The home was constructed as the locus of love, emotion and empathy, and the burdens of nurturing and caring for others were placed on the shoulders of women, who were, however, constructed as ‘angels’ rather than ‘workers’.”¹²

In *Coolie*, Munoo’s mother works hard for her family and dies a slow death while Rukmini, in *The Road*, clearly points to the boredom involved in the life of a woman caught in domestic slavery:

“No, not for her was the wild scent of the burnt grass...only the chores of the courtyard of the house, and the fetching and carrying of water from the well, through the selfsame lane where she had lived all those years!...”¹³

A home is where a woman’s spirit is domesticated as her life gets lost in the endless chores of the household. The woman of the household lists up all her activities in one single breath but does not quite evade the emptiness in her life. Patriarchy celebrates this sacrifice and devotion of a woman and decrees in her sacrifice lie her virtuosity. Bakha, in *Untouchable*, remembers his mother with much affection who fits into the role of a ‘generous, giving, always giving’ woman. The stereotyped all-sacrificing portrait of an ideal mother is given wide currency in Hindu society but it hardly leaves any room for an independent woman to live on her own terms.

In his novels, Anand also explores the different aspects of caste prejudices which work against the interests of untouchable women. According to Andre Beteille, the English word ‘caste’ refers “to an ideal model, a plan or design of society whereas *jati* refers to the actual social groups with which people identify themselves and on whose basis they interact with each other.”¹⁴ Moreover, caste “has been closely associated with a variety of ritual practices and with religious beliefs about a person’s station in life.”¹⁵ Gail Omvedt, in the same vein, emphasises the material base of the caste-system in these following lines:

“Caste is a ‘material reality’ with a ‘material base’; it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today.”¹⁶

In a caste-hierarchised society, Brahmins are on top with their ritualised pure selves and the impure untouchables languish at the bottom. The former enjoy social power, with control over material resources through their lineage and by being contact with other influential people of the ruling camp:

“Caste is not merely the opposition between pure and impure but at a fundamental level it incorporates other kinds of oppositions such as domination and subordination, exploitation and oppression, based on unequal access to material resources...”¹⁷

Anand, in his works, deals with the ritual and religious basis of caste in Indian society. Thus, in *The Road*, caste prejudices of the ‘twice-born’ Hindus closes the temple doors for Laxmi. Her inherent sense of inferiority as a *chamar* further leads to her subjugation. In the novel, the crafty Brahmins sexually exploit low-caste women whenever they get an opportunity. The ‘contours of Rukmini’s figure’ receives the attention from the village priest Suraj Mani. This does not disgust him but he becomes irritated whenever he fails to practice the Hindu rituals in a proper manner. In *Coolie*, a fat yogi dons the mantle of God himself to impregnate the wives of the merchant class for the birth of ‘sons of God’ while *Untouchable* records another incident where Pundit Kali Nath makes sexually explicit suggestions to an untouchable girl and then accuse her of defiling the temple premises. The notion of impurity is crucial to the ideology of the caste system because it is required to keep the low-caste in a state of permanent subordination.

In 1994, Edward Said had said that the role of an intellectual is to ‘speak truth to power’. In other words, an intellectual has to take a stand against the dominant power structure in society. Mulk Raj Anand, all through his literary career, used literature as a means to address the societal ills. He stated his belief in socialist realism memorably in his *Apology for Heroism* (1946): “Any writer who said that he was not interested in *la condition humaine* was either posing, or yielding to a fanatical love of isolationism.”¹⁸

Remaining true to his socialist realism, Anand portrays the women characters, in these three novels, as getting steadily cornered in a social system marked by caste, class and patriarchal privileges.

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