

Peasant Consciousness in the Select Novels of Mulk Raj Anand

Dr. Anupam Soni
Associate Professor
Deptt. of English
Bundelkhand College
Jhansi

India is known as the country of agriculture. Agriculture has an important place in the economy of any country. In India, three fourth of the total population live in villages, in which most of the people are farmers whose main occupation is agriculture. Peasants play an important role to maintain the economy of India. Even in the ancient scriptures, peasants have been considered the food givers. In reality, peasants are the backbone of our nation and the strength of Indian economy. Peasants work hard but their hard work is always ignored. They have always been the victims of exploitations by the hands of colonizers, landlords, and bourgeoisie and politicians. Literature is the mirror of society and it has also not been untouched by the misfortune of peasants. Indian writers noticed the miserable condition of peasants and presented it in their compositions. Novelists of Indian writing in English have also portrayed the poignant cry of Indian peasants in their novels. Among these novelists, Mulk Raj Anand is prominent because he is known as the 'Messiah' of downtrodden, helpless, untouchables and subaltern class. The aim of the present paper is to portray the miserable condition of Indian peasants in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*.

Keywords: Scriptures, Peasants, Poignant, Subaltern.

Agriculture is an indispensable part of any country's economy and farmers are known as the backbone to maintain its economy. Irfan Habib remarks:

The peasant is a person who undertakes agriculture on his own, owning land and cultivates on his or other's land with his own tools / implements using his own family labor. (Nishant, 2)

Though peasants are food providers, their condition has always been worse. For centuries they have been victims of the exploitation of the bourgeoisie, landlords, colonizers and politicians. After the advent of the British, the condition of peasants became very pathetic. Debal K. Singharoy writes:

Peasants have always been the burnt of extreme forces of subordination and oppression in the society, first by the member of lower strata of the social and economic hierarchy, then by occupying an underdog position in the political arrangement of society. (Singharoy, 15)

Before British rule, the main source of the livelihood of the Indian people was agriculture. But to destroy the Indian economy, the British changed the agricultural system and implemented the Zamindari system. In this type of system, peasants were duly exploited. Peasants had to pay a large part of their crop to the landlords and the peasants who could not pay the tax, landlords used to grab their land and make them bonded laborers. The condition of peasants became worse during famine and natural calamities.

Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* highlight the problems of peasants. In these two novels, Anand portrays the real picture of exploited peasants by the hands of colonizers and landlords. It was the time of freedom movement when Anand wrote these novels. After the implementation of the feudal system, the British implemented Mahalwari and Malguzari Systems. These systems made the landlords more powerful and they got more benefits than before. In order to show their loyalty to the British, they started to exploit the poor peasants. They tortured the peasants to collect revenue. Due to their tyrannies, they were known as blood-suckers. In collaboration with the elites and landlords the British used to exploit the poor peasants and destroyed the old agriculture system, Jonathan Highfield remarks:

Imperialism destroyed the basis of the old village life and mechanically implored a superstructure from the top. It sapped the whole foundation of the self-sufficient feudal village, but left another feudalism in its place. It destroyed the ancient farms, but left the festering sores of an age-long decay beneath the surface without making any serious attempt to heal the sick body, except treating it with patent medicines. It broke up and changed India, but refused to renew it (Highfield, 116).

Indian writers have seen the miserable plight of Indian peasants. Mulk Raj Anand is known as the ‘messiah’ of downtrodden, untouchables, women and peasants. He emerged on the literary horizon of India when India was under the slavery of the British. His novels *The Sword and the Sickle* and *The Two Leaves and a Bud* portray the miserable plight of Indian peasants who are exploited and suppressed by the British colonizers and Indian landlords.

The novel, *Two Leaves and a Bud* deals with the life of a poor farmer, Gangu who lives a difficult life with his wife, daughter, and son. Famous actor and director, Dev Anand chose this novel for his film *Rahi*. The title of this novel is taken from the song sung by the workers of tea plantation. The lyrics of the song are:

I will make a good sheaf
Plucking, plucking plucking

Two Leaves and a Bud

Two Leaves and a Bud (Two Leaves and a Bud, 110)

Gangu is the protagonist of the novel. He lives in a village named Hoshiarpur. He becomes the victim of feudal system and British oppression. He takes a loan for farming and when he fails to repay it, the landlord evicts him from his land. It is a very unbearable incident for Gangu because he loves his land like his own mother. The feeling of Gangu can be expressed through the words of Anand, “Peasants loved nothing more than their land but they were uprooted from the land by inexorable pressure of their three oppressors the sarkar, the landlord, and the moneylender” (Anand, *Letters on India*, 65).

After losing the land, Gangu and his family move to Assam. There he gets a job in a tea-plantation as a laborer. In the tea plantation, the laborers are known as coolies. In tea-plantation, Gangu has to live a hellish life. He has to live in a tiny tin hut. Reggie is the owner of tea-plantation, is a symbol of evil and lust. He not only exploits the coolies but also has a lustful eye on the daughters and wives of the laborers. Narain, a laborer of tea plantation comments, “He is a very Badmash Sahib and he has no consideration for any one’s mother or sister. He is openly living with three coolie women” (*Two Leaves and a Bud* 42). Through the speech of Narain, Anand clearly exhibits that during colonial period not only peasants suffer the atrocities of landlords and the British but also their wives, sisters and daughters also became victims of the lust of

landlords and the British. Reggie exploits and seduces the women laborers of the tea plantation. He does not pay the proper wages to the laborers. The income of Gangu is so less that he is unable to buy medicines for his sick wife. It is why his wife dies and now he realizes that he has not so much money that he can organize the funeral of his wife. He goes to the owner of the tea-plantation to borrow money but he does not give him a single penny and besides it, he insults Gangu. Now he borrows money from a Baniya on a high interest and organizes his wife's funeral. Depressed Gangu wants to return to his village but it was impossible for the coolies of the tea-plantation to go outside because the owner of the tea-plantation has strictly bounded them.

Gangu's painful life becomes more painful when Reggie keeps a lustful eye on his daughter, Laila. He tries to seduce Laila and when Gangu comes to save her, accidentally he becomes the victim of the gunshot of Reggie. The poor and innocent Gangu is shot without any fault. J.F. Brown writes about this novel, "I conceived *Two Leaves and a Bud* a poem in suffering. I admit that it is the most bitter of my novels, but it is poetic. Were it is a literary reportage, it would be hundred times bitterer (qtd. in Singha 36) Gangu is a victim of both feudal and colonial exploitation. He is representative of all poor and helpless subalterns who have voices but they have no rights to raise against the powerful authority.

Like Gangu, Lal Sing (Lalu) in *The Sword and the Sickle* also becomes the victim of feudal and colonial exploitation but unlike Gangu, he protest against the landlord but his revolt is suppressed by the powerful authority. The novel *The Sword and the Sickle* is a part of a trilogy that was written by Mulk Raj Anand after the First World War. It exhibits the real state of suppressed and exploited peasantry class by native elites and foreign rulers. The trilogy is divided into three parts. The first part of the trilogy is *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Water* (1941) is its second part and its last part is *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942). The trilogy tells the story of a suppressed and exploited peasant, Lal Singh, who is actually the representative of all tortured and exploited peasants. K.R.S. Iyengar appreciates the trilogy:

The Lalu Trilogy, although it lacks the concentrated power of untouchables, the vast comprehension of coolie, or the propagandist edge of *Two Leaves and a Bud*, is an impressive work nevertheless, taking within its purview the poles of an Indian village and a French farm

comprising local and national politics, and embracing by implication a global war.” (Iyengar, 350)

The first title of the novel, *The Sword and the Sickle* was *All Men are Brothers* but Anand changed it on the suggestion of George Orwell. The title of the novel is taken from William Blake’s poem ‘*Gnomic Verses Marlyn’s Prophecy*’. The stanza of the poem is:

The Sword sung an the barren heath,
The Sickle in the fruitful field,
The Sword he sung a song of death,
But could not make the sickle yield. (qtd. in *The Sword and the Sickle*, 6)

The title is quite appropriate for this novel because sword is symbol of power and represents the powerful class of society who born to exploit and suppress the weak of society. The sickle represents the oppressive class of society, who face the atrocities and exploitation given by the elite group of society.

Lal Singh is the protagonist of the novel. He participates in the Second World War and returns to India from Germany after completing five years as a war prisoner. Returning to India, he finds various changes in his locality as well as the behavior of native people. When he reaches to his village, he finds that agriculture system has completely destroyed by the feudal system. Because of feudal system, peasants have become tenants of their own lands. Lal Singh’s uncle, Harnam Singh expresses the miserable plight of peasants and cruelty of landlords and colonizers during colonial era:

The country is like a lean bullock that has been reduced to the bone by the Angrezi lion, son. Each day the lion awoke and gnawed a chunk of flesh off the bullock’s body and left it weaker but still standing. And then the other beasts of the jungle came, and the local jackals and the foxes took their toll! ... There have been bad times before in this country, but surely no time so bad as the present. (*Sword and Sickel*54)

Lal Singh’s father and brother borrow money from landlords and when they do not pay their debt, their land is snatched from them. His mother does not bear the shock and dies and his uncle becomes a Sadhu. Seeing the destruction of his family, Lul Singh becomes a revolutionary. For taking revenge to landlords and British

colonizers, he unites the poor peasants whose lives have also been destroyed by the landlords and colonizers. The poor and exploited peasants join the group of Lal Singh with a hope that they will get rid of the atrocities of landlords and colonizers by the revolutionary movement of Lal Singh:

.... they had become different from the broken demoralized, back-boneless creatures who would abjectly catch hold of the feet of a policeman and grovel in the dust with joined hands, completely unlike the gentle, kindly man with bottomless souls who were forever sunk in the misery to which they always resigned themselves. The new movement seemed to have given them a new faith. (Sword and Sickle 247)

In the leadership of Lal Singh, peasants attack on the landlord but their revolt is suppressed by the British. Lal Singh is arrested and sends to prison and many peasants are killed. Peasants accept their defeat and realize that they can't face the power of the native elites and the British colonizers. They feel themselves helpless and accept subjugation. In this regard, P.K. Rajan writes, "Peasants know only to suppress their resentment and despair; they can only be silent sufferers. (Rajan, 44)

Through *The Sword and Sickle* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand has tried to present the peasant saga, who are suppressed and exploited not only by the foreign agencies but also native elites. Lal Singh and Gangu are presented as the representatives of all suppressed and exploited peasants. Anand presents suppressed and exploited peasants as subalterns in his novels and he tries to give voice to these subalterns.

Work Cited

Anand, Mulk Raj. *The Sword and the Sickle*. Bombay: Kutub Publishers, Ltd., 1955.

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Two Leaves and a Bud*. New Delhi: Arnold publishers, 1988.

Agnihotri, G.N. *Indian Life and Problems in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan*. Meerut: Shalabh Book House, 1984.

Nishant, Vaidhyanth. "Peasant in Fiction: A study of Select Indian Novels of 1930s and 40s". (Web) <http://dspace.cus.ac.in/JSPUI/handle/1/4724> Accessed 8 Dec..2021

Highfield, Jonathan. "Finding the Voice of the Peasant: Agriculture, Neocolonialism and Mulk Raj Anand's Punjab Trilogy". (Web) *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn, 2009. Accessed 10 Dec.2021.

Rajan, P.K. *Studies in Mulk Raj Anand*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1986.

Singharoy, Debal K. *Peasant Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilization and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage publications, 2004.

Singh, Krishna Nandan. *Mulk Raj Anand*. Kalyani Publishers, 2011.

Spivak, Gayatri: 'Theory of Subalternity.' (Web) [http://Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/22597/10/10-chapter 3.pdf](http://Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/22597/10/10-chapter%203.pdf).

