

Patriarchal Oppression, Resistance and Self-Transformation in Mulk Raj Anand's Novel the Old Woman and the Cow

Ms. Bhargavee S. Ratnakar

II Year MA English JSS SMI UG/PG Studies, Dharwad, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the central character Gauri in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Old Woman and the Cow*. It is the only novel through which Anand has paid his tribute to woman empowerment by creating such a unique memorable new woman character. Gauri is a young woman navigating the complexities of rural Indian society. The paper portrays the themes of gender conflicts, inequality, societal customs, and the confrontation and challenges faced by women in the patriarchal world. The Paper attempts to portray the authority, inequality between men and women, it focuses on the unfairness and subjugation women suffer in the society. The novel tries to focus on feminist identity, explore female predicament, confrontation, and the search for self and social transformation. Anand intensely represents the unkind realities faced by women.

Keywords: patriarchal, injustice, socio-economic, system, society, social, reality and transformation

INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand is a prominent social novelist and pioneering creative writer in Indian English literature being one among the trios Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan who are considered to be the big threes in the entire gamut of Indian English Literature. Mulk Raj Anand is popularly known as champion of the underdog. He has written on numerous themes consisting of downtrodden, destitutes and the people belonging to the lowest rung in the society. He also aimed at writing on the issue of women's oppression and gender bias and planned for a novel based on the theme of gender discrimination, social and self-transformation. *The Old Woman and the Cow*, also known as *Gauri* (1960), is the first novel among the later phase termed as the Perennial Springs. The novel presents a woman as its central character through whom the woman's point of view is projected. Gauri, the heroine of the novels, is a peasant class woman from Piplan Kalan on the foothills of the Himalayas. She is married off to Panchi of Chota Piplan.

Though she arrives at her husband's home with a hope of settling down to life, her youthful dreams are shattered by continued suffering, grueling toil and pain. She returns to her village of Piplan Kalan after being severely beaten by her own husband on the suspicion of her loyalty to him when he learns that she was with a child. Her misery is compounded when she is sold by her own mother away to Seth Jai Ram Das, a banker of Hoshiarpur. She resists the banker's treacherous advances and finally gets shelter in a nursing home through the kindness of Dr. Mahindra who happens to be a sensitive and upright person. But the doctor's junior partner, an assistant doctor, tries to seduce her. Gauri again protects her honour with a remarkable resoluteness. Later, she is restored to Panchi hoping she would be able to settle down for a peaceful life. But to her utter dismay, she is again rejected by Panchi because of the rumours about her life in Hoshiarpur. Panchi demands the proof of her chastity. She, however, chooses to take the road back to Hoshiarpur never to come back to Panchi again.

Gauri thus actually succeeds in her efforts, and finally emerges as a symbol of the New Woman who rejects the brutality and rigidity of the Hindu social ethos. It is, however, to be noted that her revolt is only an individual's action, showing that Anand does not want to go to the extent of arousing the awareness that may wipe out the entire socio-political system due to his love-hate attitude to tradition and modernity. An outline of the novel bears out the fact that this is a story of the trials and travails of Gauri in the course of her progress from tradition to modernity.

But at the same time the story unfolds duality in Anand's humanist passion for the liberation of woman from their bondage and also in his rather latent adulation for the traditional virtues of Indian womanhood. The narrative tends to reveal, in effect, a tendency to idealize what is sought to be demolished and annihilate what is sought to be established. Apart from Gauri, Panchi, though not a major character of the novel also appears not equipped with intellectual qualities to think over the fundamental questions that determine the social structure. He has been shown as a timid character in the course of his fight against the landlords or the so-called big persons of the society who dominate the oppressed people. His plight in front

of Lala Birbal shows to some extent his inability to react boldly to the injustice perpetrated by the Lala with a view to trapping him in petty case of stealing mangoes :

Iqbal Narain is of the opinion that, “Mulik Raj Anand’s fiction is a graphic portrayal of Indian society, including its unpleasant aspects. Anand shows the courage of conviction in his categorical indictment of hypocritical values, mutilating India’s social harmony and dynamism. All the principle characters in his works defy injustice and repression, fatalism and self-righteousness. They in fact live everyday existence by confronting it, rather than falling for metaphysical or idealistic solutions” (Klaus Steinworth, 72) Panchi’s case testifies that in a corrupt social system only the helpless get punished for their minor offences. However, Anand has shown Gauri developing a new approach to her own problems of life after her encounter with Dr. Mahindra who virtually turned her into a spirited woman. Now she can question many absurdities found in the Hindu culture and tradition, though she is not completely free from eulogizing traditional virtues as a submissive housewife. She uses her spiritedness only for one purpose, that is, to enable her to remain as pure docile wife. Even her final resolve to leave Panchi once for all, as we are bound to feel, derives its sustenance from the intuition that such a break is necessary for her to safeguard her own identity in the turbulent situation.

Though modernity is projected as the ideal that Gauri achieves through an act of repudiation of her old way of life at the end of the novel, the novel shows also the fact that Gauri is able to emerge as a new woman with the awareness for her existence only because she is inherently rooted in the traditional values of Indian womanhood. It means that even after her urban experience and the education she receives from Colonel Mahindra on modernity, her basic values remain the same; and she still entertains the wish of reunion with her husband so that she could live as his faithful wife. This change, as mentioned earlier, is related to Anand’s spiritualist consciousness clearly perceptible in his later phase works. Gauri, who finally emerges victorious in her revolt, initially shows her deep-rooted cultural conditioning within the Hindu religion. Even when Panchi shows his revulsion to her, she remains faithful to him to the last possible extent. Gauri’s behavior also reveals the writer’s intention not to present her as a rebel character:

But Gauri, who believed in the worship of her lord and master and wanted ultimately to conquer him with her devotion, even as she had broken through the walls with which he had surrounded himself during the first days after their marriage and evoked from him bouts of kindness and passionate love, was willing to wait like the Hindu wife and go patiently through everything, to get to the source of that antagonism and distrust and hatred which he showed to her. In this connection D. Riemenschneider remarks: “Gauri is, moreover, a believable character, not a revolutionary woman” (D. Riemenschneider, 1967:47). At the end of the novel, we find that Gauri walks out with renewed hope. As Balaram Gupta observes: “Mulik Raj Anand has re-created the Indian classical myth of Ramayana in a modern context to suit his purpose of the answering the question of human destiny, in this particular case, the destiny of Indian women in a period of transition” (M.K. Naik, 77). Thus, Gauri’s attitude to her husband reveals that she is basically a Hindu woman deeply entrenched into the ritualistic tradition of religion. It is the hostile circumstances that force her to show revolt, not for the sake of all women of the society, but purely on an individual ground. She, however, suffers silently all the hardships and insults imposed on her by her mother-in-law and even her husband till she meets the enlightened city doctor, Colonel Mahindra. Anand writes how she accepted her husband’s cruel treatment before finally leaving his house:

Then she realized her helplessness, accepted his anger silently, hoping it would pass, like all the previous storms. But he stood up, came towards her with upraised arms, shouting: “whose is it? Mine or someone else’s?”

“Whose could it be?...” she shrieked. Then, softening she appealed “Don’t be cruel and doubt me! I ask you with my joined hands!” (Anand, 131)

Gauri’s pathetic plight in front of her husband apparently presents her as a true Hindu woman who suffers in silence without showing courage to act in a bold and rebellious way against patriarchal hegemony. She shows her faith in gods and goddesses terming them as the protectors of human beings even while she was being sold to Seth Jai Ram Das. All these acts of her fall far short of the rebellious traits, seen in the protagonists of Anand’s earlier novels:

Oh mother, why are you letting him drag me into hell! Gauri cried out. The Goddess will punish you!.... and she cried out loudly to the sky, “Oh Holy Mother, Goddess of our heart, come and destroy them!... “The pathos of these tormented cries tore Laxmi’s soul, and she covered her eyes even as she buried her head into her knees for fear of the wrath of the Goddess” (Anand 155)

Though it was Panchi who was responsible for Gauri’s sufferings during her painful stay at Seth Jai Ram Das’s house and also in the nursing home of Dr. Mahindra, she still shows her faith in her husband and hopes that he would come to fetch her

if she sent any message in this regard. Gauri's this sort of attitude towards her husband also exemplifies her less than a revolutionary character:

"Say to Doktor Sahib, Dhani Ram, that I wish to write a post-card to my husband to come and fetch me from here", Gauri said suddenly. "I don't think we should trouble Bhagan, especially as Doktor Batra has no one to look after his home except her". Mahindra stood there; trying to fathom the meaning of what she was saying" (Anand, 202)

Colonel Mahindra, another important character in the novel, also appears less than a revolutionary figure. Though he is a man of sincerity and integrity, and shows his human concern to the root-cause of such misery. He does not blame the entire system as such for the miserable plight of humanity. Instead, he accuses certain individuals and groups as being responsible for human suffering in different forms:

"Dr. Mahindra shouted: "I am talking of something else. I am not blaming you. I am blaming your Dharma—according to Jwala Prasad you are immoral if you do not pay the interest on debt. To be sure, these hypocrites and the priests are together Brahmin dogs! In one village the pure, pure Hindus have turned out all the untouchables. And this happens in our own raj. All those white caps. Gone is Gandhi's Dharma?"(Anand, 214)

Dr. Mahindra here appears as a true representative or mouth-piece of Anand, but does not seem a rebel character. He remains a staunch supporter of human rights and pleads for the fundamental principle of equality of all irrespective of man-created barriers of caste, creed, or sex. He is also critical of the methods of Vinoba Bhave who wanted to bring economic justice to the underprivileged people by the change of heart. Such impulsive altruism has no power to change age-old discriminations and divisions entrenched in a social system based on exploitation as illustrated in the following lines:

"D. Riemenschneider feels that Kesaro represents the society's claim on Panchi.(The conflict between this Kesaro (society) and Gauri, the individual goes on for along with Panchi as the object, when Gauri's efforts to disentangle him from the grip of the conventional society prove futile. She realizes that she cannot change the society or Panchi from within and so she comes out of the cocoon of orthodoxy"(D. Riemenschneider,245) Though Dr. Mahindra is against the present socio-economic system, he cannot see the need of complete revolution to overthrow this system. He shows his faith in the existence of human souls, but cannot pinpoint the root cause of human misery: " We must end the cycle of poverty and death. The dark old ages are ending and new ages are beginning. Our people, long oppressed by Ferungis, are free. Now we have to be like bhaktas. We have to work!

So that everyone can eat. Live Long." And our karma?" asked Adam Singh shocked. "There may or may not be Karma. It is true that at the back of all wretchedness, there is the soul of man"(Anand, 242)

Anand's comprehensive humanism is further revealed when we hear Adam Singh advising Panchi not to get panicked regarding the troubles of life, as they could be solved through the kind acts of people like Dr. Mahindra. Here Anand does not see any need of transformation to wipe out the hurdles created by the society, which is based solely on profit motive. The solution provided by Adam Singh is neither scientific nor rational. It is rather a suggestion given by a spiritualist. The solution is vague and impractical as shown below:

Colonel Mahindra had in mind new things. He is a learned man and loves the poor. And he seemed to feel that the present troubles in our country will go if we help each other. Then there will be revealed the truth of things underneath. All the small life of seeming will go. And then we shall get the Ram Raj of Gandhi Mahatma!... "Han:, answered Adam Singh. "Life is a speck in the eyes of Brahma. And there will yet be good in it and bad. Only, we must go on working, struggling and helping. Mother India is big enough-and if there are Karma Yogis, like Doktor Mahindra in it, and young ones like you, our land will have sunshine"(Anand, 255)

Anand gives an impression that within the present social structure our problem can be solved amicably with the active help of people like Dr. Mahindra. He feels that there is no need of replacing the system, instead people's attitudes and hearts should be changed so as to devote their time in constructive works. It is due to Anand's this liberal philosophy that he has shown Gauri accepting her husband without demanding any apology or repentance from Panchi when she is restored back to him by her mother. It is expected of her to demand that such things should not take place in future. Instead, she joins the house of Panchi as if nothing had happened before.

Though Gauri has been shown as a devout docile wife, she is a transformed new woman after coming from Dr. Mahindra's nursing home. She now knows that God favours the wealthy and rich. The education she received from Dr. Mahindra has made her believe that suffering is not related to fate or 'Karma', as propagated by priests, landlords or moneylenders but it is largely man-made. But the education cannot make her strong enough to defend herself when she is again suspected of her

chastity. Panchi, who, though believes that Gods are dead, is not sufficiently conscious, upright and broad-minded. It is due to his weak character that he prays to God involuntarily when faced with the awkward situation regarding the question of his wife's chastity on the basis of rumours spread over in the village. He questions purity of his wife and asks her to give its proof. Gauri, on her part, does not become bold enough to give him a befitting reply. She, however shows courage to leave his house accusing him as weak, timid and spoilt creature:

She lay there dumb-founded for a prolonged moment. "Acha if I am a curse upon you, I will go away!" Then she lifted her torso and breathed: "I shall go and work in Doktor Mahindra's hospital and have my child there. And I will not come back again!" She was defiant and her face knit together with a terrible strength even though the tears were in her eyes" (Anand, 272)

If the second departure of Gauri from her husband's house shows her as a courageous rebel, she nevertheless fails to emerge as a modern woman with a resolute will to chart out her own independent existence. The novelist seems to be hesitant and ambivalent regarding the final destiny of a character like Gauri who has the potential of growing into a defiant person ready to subvert and destroy the role assigned to her by the patriarchal social system. Her impulse to freedom remains an act of momentary pique. The impulse to freedom remains an act of momentary pique. The impulse fails to crystallize into conviction.

The roles of Gauri and Dr. Mahindra seem to have double directions. Dr. Mahindra, who is the spokesman figure in the novel, expresses his views not only on scientific materialism but also about the spiritual concept of moral wholeness. He appears to be representing Anand's materialistic and religious strains existing simultaneously, marking the sense of uncertainty in his benevolent view. Though it is through Dr. Mahindra that Gauri sees the light of the new world, it is to be noted that Dr. Mahindra's scientific materialism is mixed up with his spiritualistic consciousness which makes him the true spokesman of Anand. It appears that Dr. Mahindra embodies Anand's own view regarding the perennial aesthetic problems. Dr. Mahindra's explicit appeal on behalf of Anand's own ideology comes during presents the spiritual concept of moral wholeness, which, according to Alastair Niven, is the cornerstone of Anand's philosophy:

There are critics who think that Anand has been successful in presenting the ancient Indian tradition in Gauri at its best. They feel that though the transformation which Gauri undergoes through the impact of modernity is the chief theme of the novel, she, principally remains firmly rooted in tradition. For example, M.K. Naik's observation also means that Anand has been guided his comprehensive humanism in the characterization of Gauri and Dr. Mahindra:

Anand's changed perspective of social reality is again reflected when he depicts the case of Panchi as that of a man of self-alienation. Anand views that Panchi is more or less responsible for his ruined life. He blames the irrational behavior of Panchi without showing any criticism of the growing capitalist society. However, one can point to some new dimensions in Anand, which come to the surface with Gauri. Though towards the end of novel, the heroine expresses her defiance born out of her new self, overall character is guided by Anand's own philosophy. Defiance does not remain the single most important motive in Gauri's character. Although her evolution as an independent individual is clearly marked out, the process of this development proceeds along consideration other than mere conscious rebellion against the yoke of patriarchy.

Gauri grows from innocence to experience and learn the value of her husband and the society at large, but this learning takes into account a patient and objective understanding of the nature of society and the need sometimes to compromise and not always to rebel and defy. This is not because the novelist realizes the value of education and employment which alone could give a substance to an individual's urge for freedom. Unless these material conditions improve, revolutionary rhetoric alone will sound hollow and unreal. The novel seems to be addressed to the society, which must become sensitive to be addressed to the society, which must become sensitive to an individual's need to define/herself in terms of harmony with his/her aspirations and not crush their creativity in the name of traditions and taboos.

Though Gauri has been admired for her feminine qualities, very few critics take her as an emancipated woman. Most critics regard this novel in terms of Anand's vision of a fulfilled individual, a human being willing to learn from her experiences and prepared to accommodate points of view not always in consonance with her personal desires and aspirations. She has been compared to a modern-day Sita who takes life in a calm, unruffled manner and by her inner strength remains in full control of her personal dignity, even though she has to suffer a lot. Suffering becomes an occasion for her to test her personal virtues of patience, perseverance, and poise : "Gauri symbolizes the strength the strength and purity of Sita. She prefers to walk out of Panchi's life as calmly as she had come into it and thereby relieves the momentous experience of Sita in her own life. Born under the shadow of an evil star and facing the cruel strokes of destiny, she manages to retain her dignity. She is an epitome of excellence, strength, and virtue" (Cawasjee, Saros 75)

There are strong evidence that Anand's characters in this novel seem breaks parallelism with Sita by finally taking the road to town, another prominent figure. Dr. Mahindra appears more and more compromising to the problems faced by ordinary people like Gauri and Panchi. His words sound as those of propagandist rather than a revolutionary figure. Saros Cowasjee has also similar view: Colonel Mahindra is shown as a man of few words until almost the end of the novel. We early recognize that he is Anand's ideal of man, and we begin to admire his selfless devotion to duty. But when Laxmi, accompanied by a stolid village, Adam Singh, goes to him to reclaim her daughter, he bursts out into the most sustained propagandist harangue yet to be heard from an Anand character" (Cowasjee, Saros, 77)

Though this novel differs from Anand's previous novels as he has experimented here with a new myth, Anand has succeeded in showing one of the tenets of his humanism, i.e., practicing tenderness to make society free from suffering and cruelty. He shows his belief that by observing human values and creating awareness among the illiterate, many of the problems faced today could be solved without unnecessarily undermining the existing social system. It does not mean that Anand is no longer interested in social issues and problems in these novels. It is the first novel in which a woman character is made the pivot of the action. She is made to inhabit a world which is sick at heart and which needs immediate therapeutic attention. And the cause of this sickness is the wretched condition of the woman, the vital half of this world. What strikes the reader of this novel above everything else is Anand's ability to see the world through a woman's eyes and expose its cruel face.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the novel *Old Woman and the Cow* or *Gauri* differs from the previous novels, and Anand's views in this novel appear to have been influenced more and more by his comprehensive humanism. He no more seems interested in presenting characters like Lal Singh and Ananta who set out to take on the very system prevailing in the society with a firm resolve of overturning it and replacing it with a more humane and responsive social order. Thus, social criticism is not given a go by Anand, instead, it is presented in a different perspective. Rebellion on the part of an individual and legislation of the part of society cannot succeed in the absence of a sensitiveness born just out of compassion or condescension but as an urgent social necessity.

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