

Comparative Overview of the Treatment of Marginalization and Cultural Identity in the Works of Munshi Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand

Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand were the two great writers of pre-independent India. They were ardent supporters of socialism and democracy. As they were contemporaries, they observed the social arrangement of the age very minutely and lashed out at the differences of caste and class. They were mainly novelists of the have-nots, the champions of underdogs and poor almost as great as Charles Dickens. The present article is a comparative and contrastive study of the treatment of marginalization and cultural identity in their novels and short stories.

Keywords: Marginalization, Identity, Downtrodden, Underdogs, Have-Nots Etc

Introduction

Marginalization is a social process of becoming or being marginal. It is a process by which a group, community or individual is denied access to important positions or economic, religious or political power within any society. These marginals include Dalits, untouchables, downtrodden, out-castes, low-castes, Sudras, Harijans, Have-nots, underdogs, poor and women as well.

Identity is closely related to the consciousness. It is an awareness of the self. It is an answer to the question, "Who am I?" or "What are we?" Cultural identity is the feeling of identity of a group or an individual as far as he or she is influenced by his belonging to a culture. It remarks upon place, gender, race, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and ethnicity.

The marginalized individual or communities represent the people who have been denied of even the basic means of survival since ages. Due to this deprivation they have lost all the consciousness of the self determining their identity. They have gone through every sort of persecution, exploitation and social injustice. Therefore in the changing scenario of the contemporary society of twenty first century, these marginals have a greater need of regaining their lost individual and cultural identities so that they may find it convenient to step with the fast moving and advancing world around them.

Mulk Raj Anand, whom we may justifiably describe as the grand old man of Indo-Anglian fiction and Munshi Premchand who is deemed to be the father of Hindi novel, are the two prominent writers of pre-independent India. Their fiction reflects the poverty of rural India and the social evils prevalent in the early decades of the twentieth century. They felt inspired to combat the injustice and oppression to which certain individual and segments of society were subjected. In this respect they have strong affinity with Charles Dickens. What Dickens did in English fiction, Mulk Raj Anand did in Indo-Anglian fiction and Munshi Premchand in Hindi fiction. They were the angry young men of literature who were not satisfied with the social conditions of their times.

Before Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand started writing, novel was romantic in mode and it catered to individual tastes and needs. They were the firm believers in 'Art for Life's Sake'. They introduced the elements of realism and favoured the kind of literature which is capable of doing the welfare of the individual and the society as well. They wrote novels and short stories with a reformatory purpose. In Their novels their main focus has been on the problems of women, farmers, labourers,



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untouchables and the poor people who are termed as marginalized collectively.

Mulk Raj Anand is the champion of marginalized and the underdogs. He, in his novels and short stories, appears to be a revolutionary against all types of injustice, specially against exploitation of the poor and downtrodden section of society. Through his works Anand started instituting a feeling of revolt against the existing norms of society stressing upon the fact that caste-system is an evil incarnate.

*He tried through his novels to restore the dignity of the man by removing all distinctions of caste and the cruelty of hypocrisy of feudalism; the web of castes, creeds, dead habits and customs which enslave nine-tenth of the Indian people.*¹

He created the heroes of his novels and short stories from the weaker section of society - Bakha in *Untouchable* (1935), Munoo in *Coolie* (1936), Gangu in *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) and Bhikhu in *The Road* (1963). About his artistic personae he, himself, writes:

*All these heroes, as the men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me, because they were the reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth. And I was only repaying the debt of gratitude I owned them for much of the inspiration they had given to me to mature into manhood, when I began to interpret their lives in my writings.... They were flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood.*²

Anand is a novelist with an inherent social purpose. He is intolerant of injustice and inequality. He wrote about the people, for the people, and as the one in charge of the common people, the marginalized India. He aims at exposing the follies and affectations of the privileged classes - priests, money-lenders, businessmen, tea-planters and British rulers. He also condemns the superstitions and narrow outlook of the underdogs who have grown apathetic even to their own predicaments due to the docile and humble submission of centuries. Each one of his novels deals with some social problem mostly related with the lives of the marginalized community such as untouchability in *Untouchable* (1935) and *The Road* (1963), poverty, hunger and exploitation in *Coolie* (1936), labour problem in *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) and the problem of village peasantry in *The Village trilogy - The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Water* (1941) and *The Sword and The Sickle* (1942). Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Old Woman and The Cow* (1960) (republished as *Gauri*) takes up the plight of another marginalized and underprivileged section of society i.e. women.

Like his novels, his short stories also deal with the theme of the hunger, poverty, human degradation and social injustice. 'The Barber's Trade Union', 'The Cobbler and the Machine', 'The Rumour', 'Boots', 'The Gold Watch', 'Lullaby', 'Duty' and 'Old Bapu' are some of the stories which prove him to be a humanist, a reformer, a satirist and an artist. Dr G.S. Balaram Gupta says

Anand's profound sympathy for the underdogs as well as his prolonged fight for the rights of the lowly and the lost forms an important element of

*his humanism and this is at work in some of his stories.*³

Munshi Premchand, the *Upanyas Samrat* in *Hindi literature*, invited realism to it. He is a novelist with a social purpose. He never hesitates to hit hard on the social evils like dowry, caste-system, superstition, feudalism, corruption, unmatched marriage, suppression, orthodox way of life, exploitation, subjugation of women, problem of widow and tension of joint families etc which characterized the then society of India. Like Lok Manya Tilak and Gokhale, Gandhi Ji also laid his influence on Munshi Premchand. In order to abolish untouchability He made aggression on the network of the customs and traditions under which this social evil, like leprosy, flourished in society. Such an attitude prevails in most of his novels, stories and other articles and exhibit the form of his ideology on the plight of the Dalits and downtroddens.

Premchand opined that Hindu society had done injustice to the *Sudras*. According to him all the man-made differences of caste and class are worthless. In the eyes of God all human beings are equal. So he never compromised with the false notion of taking the downtrodden to be trifling.

The following speech of Shanti Kumar in *Karmabhumi* (1932) is worth quoting:

How dare you step in their God's temple! Your God is probably in some hut or under a tree.

*This God wears jewel ornaments and eats rich sweets and cream. He does not want to see the faces of those who wear rags or chew dry chick peas.*⁴

Premchand has written approximately one dozen novels and every piece has some features of its own. In some of them he has presented the problem faced by the weaker section of society. The reality of the downtrodden's lives as described in these novels can melt any tender heart. *Rangbhumi* (1925), *Kayakalp* (1939), *Karmabhumi* (1929) and *Godan* (1936) belong to the same category and picturized the problems and sufferings faced by the marginalized community. But the entire narrative of none of these novels centers round the downtrodden only but makes a fierce attack on some other social problems also and attempts to search out remedies for them. Besides these novels the short stories like 'Thakur Ka Kua /The Thakur's Well', 'Ghaswali/The Grass Cutter', 'Sadgati /salvation', 'Mandir/Temple', 'Kaffan/The Shroud', 'Doodh Ka Dam/The Price of Milk', 'Sudra/ The Untouchable', 'Saubhagya Ke Korhe/The Lashes of Fortune', 'Muktimarg/The Road to Salvation' etc also present a pathetic glimpse of the pitiable life of the discarded poor ones.

The characters of both these writers are confronted with the crisis of identity. Anand's first novel, *Untouchable* (1935) describes a day in the life of Bakha, a scavenger. In a single day he is slapped, abused and scolded by upper caste people and his sister is tried to be molested by a priest. In all these incidents he faces a crisis of identity. Munoo, the protagonist of *Coolie* (1936) moves from village to town, from town to city and then to the mountains seeking his identity and in this struggle he finally dies.

Gangu, the hero of *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) becomes a victim of man, God and civilization. His wife dies due to the lack of medicine facilities. Even Gangu himself is killed while trying to save his daughter from being defiled. His entire life is a saga of struggle and every moment he tries to safeguard his identity but fails. Anand's women character also share the equal identity crisis. It is in *Old Woman and The Cow* (1960) that we find Gauri struggling against all odds to secure her identity and finally she succeeds in regaining it. In this novel we find the whole process of the change of a woman from a puppet in man's hands to the state of an independent woman who asserts her equal rights with man and demands recognition and her separate identity.

Similarly in the novels of Premchand too, we find his characters struggling and suffering for identity. In his *Godan* (1936) we find Hori working hard day and night to improve his economic condition and make identity of his own. But due to social leeches which suck his blood continuously, he does not succeed in his efforts and finally dies in his struggle for securing his identity. In *Rangbhumi* (1924) Surdas, a blind and Dalit beggar, fights not only for his individual identity but also to secure the identity of all the villagers. John Sewak takes his land by force and builds a cigarette factory there. For Surdas losing his land and cottage means to lose his identity. He plays his role boldly on the rangbhumi (stage) of life and sacrifices himself for the sake of others. In *Kayakalp* (1939), Burha Chaudhary along with other chamars who are troubled due to the exploitation by the king and the forced labour, wage a struggle against him only because they are conscious of their identity. In *Sevasadan* (1918) Suman, like Anand's Gauri struggles hard against the heavy odds of life to secure her identity. Being tired of her husband's injustice, she struggles in such a mean profession as prostitution. But ultimately this fallen woman succeeds in leading a meaningful life of sacrifice, selfless service and dedication after joining *Sevasadan*.

Thus Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand attacked marginalization and cultural identity in Indian society through their works and tried to eradicate these social evils in the national interest, but their ways differed. Despite so many common grounds, they approached the problems in different ways.

It becomes clear from the biography of Munshi Premchand that he belonged to a peasant family and had drunk the cup of sorrow and suffering which filled his whole life with such bitterness that he could not resist giving expression to it in his works. While Mulk Raj Anand belonged to upper-middle class family whose father was a government employee and a businessman. Premchand was nearer and more familiar with the life of peasants and labourers and

their problems than Mulk Raj Anand. Therefore his novels and short stories seem more real and life-like than those of Anand.

An other very striking dissimilarity between them is that the novels of both Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand are based nearly on their observations and speculations in society. They never faced or experienced the havoc of untouchability in their own lives because the former was a Kshatriya and later a Kayastha (Srivastava) which were considerably higher castes. Even then Premchand seems more realistic regarding untouchability because he was from rural background and lived throughout his life among untouchables.

Premchand explains that *Harijans* must be self realized individuals with courage and power of determination. Most of the Dalit characters of Premchand like Surdas in *Rangbhumi* (1924), Burha Chaudhary in *Kayakalp* (1939), Chamars in *Karmabhumi* (1932), Bhungi in the story 'Vidhuans', Mangal in 'Doodh Ka Dam' etc have this trait. Unlike Anand's Bakha in *Untouchable* (1935) and Munoo in *Coolie* (1936) who suffer humiliation and shame, his characters never lose their self-respect and dignity.

Anand believed that the liberation of the depressed classes depends on their attitude to life. Their salvation is connected with their mental power to emancipate themselves from the cleverly advocated beliefs of Karma and fatalism by the upper caste Hindus. On the other hand Premchand is of the view that apart from external agencies, there is a profound necessity for inner change and it is imperative on the part of the *Harijans* to realize their imperfections and reform themselves through high intellectual education and spiritual development and transformation.

Aim of the Study

The aim of my study is to frame the two writers' in their particular cultures and epistemologies with the hope of providing some useful signposts in understanding their creations.

Conclusion

As a conclusion this article shows how the works of both these writers have paved a smooth way for the contemporary Dalit literature and their contribution in upliftment of social outcasts.

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