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A Tinge of Colonialism: *Two Leaves and a Bud*: Cry till Die

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Abstract:

In this paper, I would like to throw light on the colonialist aspects like sufferings of the daily labour, coolies, women working in tea plantation plucking two leaves and a bud in the tea estates of Assam. In this novel, Mulk Raj Anand, doyen of Indo Anglian Literature mainly depicts the insecurity of girl child, the plight of the labours in the tea estates of Assam, who were brutally exploited and killed by British officials. Because of his writings, many learned people came to know the sufferings of the down trodden and deprived people in the Indian Society who cry till they die.

Key Words: Suffering of the downtrodden, Caste and race, Ill-Treatment of Women, Bonded labours, Colonial rule, Exploitation, Injustice.

Mulk Raj Anand's literary focus is on the very people with whom he frolics, played right from his childhood, explicitly, the repressed, the downtrodden, and the untouchables in the society. He himself acknowledges in the preface to *Two Leaves and a Bud*:

“All these heroes as the other men and women, who had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me because they were the reflection of real people I had known during my childhood and youth. They were flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood and obsessed me in the way in which certain beings obsess an artist's soul. And I was doing no more than what a writer does when he sees to interpret the truth from the realities of life”.¹

Anand spent his first twenty years in Punjab, which is partly, or wholly the locale of exploitation in all his novels. The hill town in *Untouchable*, the hills of Simla in *Coolie* and the neighbourhood of Hoshiarpur in *Two Leaves and a Bud* are some of the places where the protagonist in each of these novels suffers at the hands of the rich and powerful.

The verse given below is exactly apt to the condition of coolies in *Two Leaves and a Bud* who left their native places and came to the tea plantation for the sake of livelihood. There is only entrance but no exit for these coolies. Gangu, along with his family, fell into this hell, unknowingly by listening to the words of a selfish barber, Buta Ram. Every one ought to realize that they are in pandemonium after facing the consequences.

I Quote:

“The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day.
I have spent my days in stringing and unstringing my instrument.
The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set; only
There is an agony of wishing in my heart.”²

(Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*)

This is mainly about the plight of the laborers in a tea plantation in Assam. The hero, Gangu, always pessimistic about his fate, and has to undergo daily insults at the hands of his plantation masters and others. Buta Ram, barber, acted as a mediator between the coolies and the colonizers, gave sugar coated pills to the coolies about the attitude of colonizers towards coolies. He highlighted fake approach of the colonizers saying that they look after the coolies like parents, gave money in need with minimal interest, and was very genuine in sending the coolies back after the bond tenure.

The tea gardens in Assam became a symbol of slavery. In the second chapter of the novel, Anand introduces the character of De La Havre, a doctor from Germany, who visited the bungalow of the planter, Mr. Charles Croft-Cooke to remind him about the construction of water plant and requested him

to have an eye on the sanitary conditions and water facilities near the coolies residence which in turn played a key role in spreading cholera, a fatal disease in those days. The attitude of the planter, one of the colonizers, was not to waste that much money on coolies. Many coolies became victims to that lethal disease. Gangu's wife was one of them. The story dramatized the cruelties inherent in the caste system and the suffering induced by poverty too. Even the kind British doctor could do little to alleviate the sufferings.

The words used by the characters like Mrs. Charles Croft Cooke, Reggie Hunt, and others show how the poor Punjabi labourers are ill treated. In this novel, Gangu and Narain hysterically came to share the feelings of their parentage and how they were being exploited by the colonizer in many ways. They felt that they were in gaol, even though they were given iron-roofed houses. After a journey of almost three days and three nights from Hoshiarpur, Gangu reached the huts given to them by taking a lot of trouble. Then Buta Ram called Narain, a neighbour of him to assist Gangu who mutually shared their experiences. While sharing the experiences, they discuss the castes. Gangu was very much particular about caste. He is proud to be a hill man. The following lines reveals the caste of Gangu and his inclination towards caste. "A distance of three days and three nights" said Gangu "We be from the district of Hoshiarpur" "you be Punjabis, then?" "Yes, hillmen," answered Gangu" (p36) Narain offered dinner to them. At that time the thought of caste flashed in the mind of Gangu and he said, "Oh, don't trouble, brother, said Gangu, slightly prejudiced against Narain, because in his mind, the Bikaneris were all associated with low ugly paupers and street beggars, and he still felt the pride of the once well-to-do peasant in his bones" (p39)

Even though both were sailing in the same boat as bonded labours, Gangu still has the feeling of caste in his mind. However, after continuous insistence he accepted to have his dinner in Narain's house. He called his wife and daughter and asked them to assist Narain's wife in cooking.

After talking to Narain, Gangu noticed that Buta gave wrong information about the colonizers. There may not be liberated from this bondage even after three years. Reggie Hunt, an Assistant Planter, who maintains illegal affair with many coolie women, irrespective of age, came to them in order to check the new coolies. He saw Leila, daughter of Gangu, a fourteen-year girl, stood back the door. She was also not an exception to that illegal monster. He forced the women to be his illicit partners.

The coolies were being ill-treated by the English in many ways. For Instance:

"Bacho, Sahib! (Look out, sir!)" Said a coolie, who groped forward beneath a load of undergrowth which the other coolie had cleared, and which he wanted to throw down a ravine twenty yards away from where Reggie stood" (p47)

Reggie Hunt struck a coolie with whip for no fault of that coolie. "Shoop! Reggie struck him on the shins with his whip and shouted: 'why don't you take another way, you fool? Can't you see that I am talking to the Sardar?'" (p47) He pleaded Reggie to forgive him and tried to salute him even after listening to the harsh words and facing the rude behaviour. 'The man fell as he lost the momentum of the weight on his head and groaned: 'I could not see, Huzoor, the creepers covered my face.' And even as he said so, he made an effort to salaam the sahib' (p47). By seeing that situation, "The sweating, black bodies of the coolies came to a standstill. They thought that one of their comrades had struck an axe at his own feet, or cut away his fingers, mistaking them for grass, as often happened. But they saw, 'Raja Sahib,' as they called Reggie, and they knew that he had flogged a coolie, which was a common occurrence. They averted their eyes and were about to bend down after the breather." (p47)

In the hands of the colonizers, the colonized faced many types of physical and emotional problems. They were treated as servants. Mrs. Croft Cooke had an impression on the natives that they were born liars. In her chat with John, she expressed her feelings on natives saying that

"The natives are lazy, and we must not spoil them. They are born liars. And they steal. I caught a coolie woman plucking roses from our garden the other day, and I shooed her off. And they let their cows and buffaloes into the vegetable patch that Charles has planted at the bungalow. We must not spoil them...." (p23)

She paused not because the conversation was completed but because her servant Ilahi Bux had come to that place. She continued her discussion after he left the place. The Colonizers in India felt that the Indians were unable to rule the country on their own without the help of them. The condition of coolie

women was vulnerable in the clutches of the English. The coolie women, irrespective of age group got afraid of the plantation masters or sahibs. “The Coolie women bent to their plucking with fear in their hearts and a queer confusion in their heads” (p 50).

Reggie Hunt behaved like a cock when he came across women. He felt that “The women workers are more efficient, Reggie assured himself, quite insensitive to the under currents of emotion he had let loose in their souls. He favoured them almost involuntarily, hoping to establish a relationship of informal intimacy to facilitate.....” (p50).

Reggie was attracted by the beauty of Neogi’s wife also. Women were ill-treated under the hands of plantation masters. They call Indians as black velvet skins with a snort half of amusement, half of disgust. The babies of them were unable to be taken care of. They carried their babies along with them in the baskets and were caught by the masters. One of them put her baby into the basket, was found out, and after questioning she replied that she had no one to take care of the baby while she was plucking the leaves. The master scolded her without understanding her problem. He scolded her and deducted three annas from her pay. They used abusive language like deceitful bitches, dirty cheats, and crafty bitch, etc...

In this novel, Gangu was killed while trying to protect his daughter from being raped by Reggie Hunt, a British colonial official. The Assistant planter, Reggie Hunt being an arrogant bully and sadist tries to rape his daughter. Every corner of the garden, the two leaves and the bud of the tea plants, the shade shrubs are the silent witnesses of this oppression and agony of the poor Punjabi laborers who stands as the insignia of the oppressed class.

With an apt title, this novel stands as a whisper to the sufferings of the coolie women and the tea laborers. As Bertolt Brecht said Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it. This novel acted as a hammer in the hands of a beautiful sculptor Mulk Raj Anand who highlighted reality about the sufferings of the coolie women, tea labourers and the social conditions prevailed in that era. He projected the life of coolies who cried till their death under the inescapable conditions.

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