



MULK RAJ ANAND'S THE BIG HEART: A FRESH REAPPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand is an Indian novelist, a short-story writer, and an art-critic writing in English. He is called the Zola or Balzac of India. Anand, like George Orwell, is a politically conscious artist. He chooses to write about the neglected masses and their crude and ugly conditions of life. He attacks Indian obsolete conventions like caste, religious bigotry, communalism and modern capitalism, highlighting the values of truth, compassion, rationalism and unity among the poor in his novels. Anand's output includes both fiction and non-fiction writings. He has many novels to his credit. The Big Heart (1945) is his seventh novel. It deals with the conflict between the hereditary coppersmiths and the capitalists. It records the events of a single day in the life of Ananta, the coppersmith, a man of big heart. Ananta returns to his home-town of Amritsar after having worked in Bombay and Ahmadabad. He lives with a woman named Janaki who is consumed by tuberculosis. Janaki is with him not only in Bombay but also in Amritsar inspite of all things that people say against them. Ananta sets up his own factory and glorifies that it is a wonderful gift of science. He believes in the unity of labourers in the machine-age. He is confident that he and other proletariat class will one day master machines. Some of the craftsmen like Ralia and Viroo, Who lose their trades because of industries, blame machines for their ills and want to destroy them. Ananta tries to stop this wanton destruction and is killed by the raging Ralia. He bequeaths a message to his beloved Janaki and his fellow craftsmen who carry on the work left unfinished by him. The novelist boldly condemns the sub-division among castes and vehemently pleads for the acceptance of machines and the unity of labourers. His boundless sympathy is with the poor and the exploited.

Key words: Caste, Capitalism, Machines, Coppersmith, Unity.

It is true that literature or art of a country projects its most authentic image. When we talk of the image of India, we really mean its culture, the mode of life of its people, its outlook of life. Its political, religious, social, moral values, customs, needs, aims and aspirations, all are included in it. No committed writer can keep himself detached from the social milieu of the time. The social problems are bound to be seen in their works. Indian English novel was in embryo in the nineteenth century but the frictional genres----- realistic novel, social novel,



autobiographical novel, historical novel and short story gathered momentum in the twentieth century. Anand has clean and well defined views on literature and art. It is his love for the entire mankind, transcending all constricting limitations of caste, creed and economic or social status, and all geographical boundaries of nations, all of which are manmade----- that is at the root of his philosophy which animates all his activities including his prolific writings. The literature, particularly the one born out of felt experiences, in other words reality, has always had tremendous impact on the world as it has shown the world's replica with all its deformities and tried, to purge the unwanted ugliness from it. Such literature naturally is ceaselessly probed into by critical studies, arguments to discover newer meaning and relate it to human condition for a positive change. It is no exaggeration to say that most of Anand's works belong to this type of literature. Apart from being a prolific writer, with immense popularity, he is a widely read novelist and short story writer and abroad. He occupies an important niche in the field of Indian writing in English. He has to his credit a score of novels, hundreds of short stories, a number of books on various themes and a host of essays and articles on different subjects. Anand's religion is humanism. His novel *The Big Heart* (1945) has been acclaimed as a great novel by Margaret Berry, K.N.Sinha and M.K.Naik in their respective books on Anand. It deals with a small community of coppersmiths of Amritsar, who suddenly come to face with machine civilisation. It seems that real motive of writing the novels like *Coolie*, *Untouchable* and *The Big Heart*, was not so much to prop the economical or social questions of the Indian society during a period which was the most crucial in many ways but to unravel the meaning and purpose of creative writing. The basic conflict in *The Big Heart* is between tradition and modernity and this is evident in the setting of the novel. Anand describes the coppersmiths' lane as follows:

*It must be remembered, however, that Billimaran is not a blind alley. Apart from the usual mouth, which even a **cul de sac** keeps open, it has another, which makes it really like a two-headed snake. With one head it looks towards the ancient market, where the beautiful copper, brass, silver and bronze utensils made in the lane are sold by dealers called kaseras, hence called Bazar Kaserian. With the other it wriggles out towards the new Ironmongers' Bazar, where screws and bolts and nails and locks are sold and which merges into the Booksellers' mart, the cigarette shops and the post office replete with the spirit of modern times. [PP 16-17]*

The Big Heart is, in short, Anand's sympathetic depiction in fictional term of the changing social reality of India, his compassion for the sufferings of the poor and the deprived, his passionate zeal for change and his painful realisation of the need for revolution and the unripe material conditions and above all his relentless search for the integral man and for the emergence of a higher consciousness. In the novel, Ananta, the protagonist, is a coppersmith by profession. The introduction of modern machinery has taken away the jobs of many coppersmiths. Two major tasks are before the protagonists. He has to unite his brethren and

secure jobs for them from great factory owners like Lala Murli Dhar and Gokul Chand. Ananta's main aim is to remove the ignorance of his people and prepare them for accepting the modern machines. Seth Gokul Chand, the Chandri of utensil-sellers' community, belonging to Kasera brotherhood establishes a factory in partnership with Lala Murli Dhar, the headman of the "Thathiar" coppersmith brotherhood. Murli Dhar's ambition is to elevate his family of the Thathiar caste to the higher sub caste of Kaseras. Such ambition impels him to ignore the welfare of his own community. Consequently most of the youths of Thathiar caste are not provided with any employment facilities in the new factory. The factory begins to produce most of the essential items required by the villagers. The Thathiars failed to get piece-work for making utensils. Most of them are thrown out of their hereditary profession and are rendered jobless. Machines deprive them of their daily bread. The coppersmiths are Kshatriyas, the second highest caste, but their profession has lowered their social status. With the coming of the machine and the enrichment of the few, a sub-division has appeared among people of the same caste. The rich look down upon the less prosperous of their brethren. Ananta the man with the big heart returns to his home-town of Amritsar after having worked in Bombay and Ahmadabad. He has been to Bombay and Ahmadabad and participated in the Gandhian freedom struggle in those places. He lives in the Billimaran lane of Amritsar. He brings with him Janki, a young widow whom he loves and who is slowly dying of tuberculosis. Janki is consumed by that fatal disease, but is extremely faithful to him. She was with him in Bombay and she is here with him in spite of all things that people say against them. In the novel the action is confined to a single day in the life of the protagonist Ananta, a sinner-saint-martyr all rolled into one. The protagonist represents the modest community of Thathiars pitted against the capitalists-----Murli Dhar and Gokul Chand. Ananta resumes his hereditary trade in Amritsar. With the establishment of factories Ananta has a difficulty in making a living. Merlene Fisher comments on *The Big Heart*:

The novel is embodied in each scene, in each of Ananta's encounters. Because of the self he is, Ananta, somehow ironically, has time----- time for preparing tea for Janki, time for conversing with his poet-friend, time for countless errors, time for laughter and for painful confrontations with other coppersmiths----- in short, time to live and time to die. Each such encounter with in Ananta himself and with others, is organically and naturally related to those that precede and follow. ¹

Ananta, has made up his mind to help those people who are not given employment in the factory of Gokul Chand. He draws an interesting analogy between machines and dowry while talking to Janki:



Like the fashionable Vilayati bride, we have accepted, we ought to accept the dowry of machines she has brought, and make use of them, provided we keep our hearts.
[P.40]

He urges the workers (jobless coppersmiths) into a union so that they can bargain for their rights from the profiteers. He tries to win the support of the poet Puran Bhagat Singh. But Satya Pal, an angry student-leader, Prof.Majid oppose Anant in his efforts. Satya Pal breaches violent methods for the emancipation of the workers of Thatiar community. Ananta is unable to muster sufficient support and solidarity of his friends. His cohabitation with Janki deprives him of the moral hold expected of a leader in a tradition-bound country. Many workers are carried away by the demagoguery of the student leader, Satya Pal. Ananta argues with the poet Puran Singh:

*If you have the **controlling switch** in your hand, you can make the machine a slave rather than your master. It is that switch or destruction.* (P.90)

His life is dedicated to the trade unions. He is not motivated by Marxism but by undisciplined impulses. *The Big Heart* projects casteism not in its rigidity but in its insidiousness since caste-phobia doesn't bedevil human relations. Mechanisation has set in and people face the conflict whether or not to accept it. A factory comes to be established by Lala Murli Dhar, the headman of the coppersmith brotherhood and Kaseras Gokul Chand, the Chaudhri of Utensil sellers' community. The relations between these managing partners expected to be harmonious on account of money considerations seem strained because of caste differences. The orthodox Kaseras have utter contempt for the lower orders and they believe:

"To Ram was given an arrow, to Sita a bow, and from them the truly noble order of Kshatriya Kaseras is descended!" And you must realize, Lala Sadanand, that I am the Chaudhri of my caste brotherhood and there are a hundred eagle eyes looking to see what I do.' And he feigned a short gasp of a laugh in order to disguise the fact that he was rubbing in the superiority of his caste brotherhood at the same time as he was being courteously generous to Sadanand. [P 136]

This deeply ingrained caste-consciousness is revealed by the conflict suffered by Gokul Chand, who, being the headman of the community, is severely exposed to public criticism. He realises the risk of losing his own caste. The plight of Thatiars is seen in the words of Ananta:

'Perhaps one can never get over the fears which mothers put into our minds,' Ananta said. 'Perhaps, also, because we thatiars live in a small world, full of denial and refusal, insults and humiliations, we have begun to feel doomed. With one half of me I



to feel I am doomed, and with the other half I feel could fight, to avert the disaster. But it has certainly been a bad day for me. I have been wondering, for instance, why the Kaseras and Murli have fixed on me as their chief enemy when it is so difficult for me to persuade the thathiars to do one thing or the other? . . . Why, indeed, are the dealers torturing the thathiars at all? I know full well that we suffer from the day we are born till the day we die, but this cruelty is unnecessary. [PP 142-143]

Murli Dhar's attempt at being one with the Kaseras in social ceremonies gets defeated. His long-cherished desire to assimilate his family with Kaseras urges him to insist that Gokul Chand and other prominent Kaseras should visit his home and honour his grandson's marriage. His attitude makes him proud and turns him arrogant towards his old community of coppersmiths. He is able to invite only a few Thathiars for the ceremony. Murli Dhar is made to eat the humble pie by the turn of events. His community boycotts his grandson, Nikha's betrothal ceremony. He pathetically implores them to forgive him. As a symbol of apology, he put his turban at the feet of the elders of his community. Murli says:

He bent forward in a posture of supplication and raised his turban with two hands and said: 'Listen, brothers, I have put my turban at the feet of all of you. Save this ceremony. I have sinned. I have erred. You can beat my old head with your shoes. But let us have this betrothal. Those boys are the brotherhood are my dear ones and near ones. If I did not invite them it was because they felt bitter with me about the factory and the loss of their trade. A crow tried to struck like a peacock, but, seeing his feet, wept and cried. That is my condition. Forgive me and let us go through with the ceremony.' And at this his eyes filled with tears and he began to howl, 'O God, O Guru Nanak, please forgive my sins'--- The wrinkles of his finely chiselled old face gathered into a terrible knot of misery. [P 168]

The novelist presents fewer women than men in his novels. Janki, a widow, then Ananta's mistress is one among them. At the beginning of the novel, Janki is described as a pale, white flower with her emaciating body withering away day by day. She is a lively conversationalist, mischievous even in sick-bed. As Ananta is deeply involved in the trade union activities, he is unable to devote enough time to her. But Janki doesn't bother about it and she never complains. Premila Paul says:

Janki is a similar non-conformist woman ²

Janki teases Ananta for his vanity and egoism. She always encourages him to be practical. Janki's cohabitation with Ananta incurs the wrath of some men. The same men who mock her shamelessly, prowl around her hoping that they could all share her. She finds a guide, philosopher and mentor in him. When Ananta dies, Janki cries pathetically:



'I feel mad, mad, crazy !' she shrieked. 'I shall go crazy like the witch-woman in the streets ! I cannot bear it ! It may be possible for all those who saw him murdered to be consoled, but . . . I can't do nothing but weep.' And she broke down in an hysterical fit of weeping, and moaned : *'He is dead . . . Oh, he was such a noble creature --- so much nobler than all those louts ! He is dead . . . And all my life has ended with his going. Everything has ended for me in his dead. O God, let the earth open up and swallow me ! Otherwise they will destroy me, the vultures who are sitting there !'* [P 227]

Man-Woman relationship is the pivot of the flowering of culture in society. Exploitation of women is a stigma on society. It is a barbarous and uncultured social practice. Ralia, a hot-blooded, thatthiar youth shows his hatred for the machines. He realises that due to this fact he does not get employment in the factory. He is very much influenced by the fiery speeches of Satya Pal, a student-leader and Prof.Mejid. At the same time Ananta makes an impassioned appeal to them to desist from such a course of action and take a sober view of their situation:

'And truth will out like murder!' said Ananta, by way of confirmation. *'Even if murder is suppressed, the reality will out, brothers. Think and ponder calmly. Do not be led astray. Let us sit down in brotherhood and discuss the predicament. The revolution is not yet. And it isn't merely in the shouting. Nor is it in this single battle in Billimaran, brothers. It is only through a great many conflicts between the employers, authorities and the workers, in a whole number of battles which our comrades elsewhere are fighting, that there will come the final over through of the bosses. So we must neither be slaves to circumstances nor accept either fate or unreason, but must rise above them. Now, Babu Satyapal, come down from that platform and let us go and devise some means by which we can win our demands and soar above blinding chance and circumstance to some solid pinnacle of achievement, I beg you with joined hands.'* [PP 208-209]

A reason for Ananta's failure and for his tragic end at the hands of Ralia is his refusal to play the demagogue like the reckless student leader Satyapal, and his attempt to reason with people who are easily and understandably excited because they are continuously suffering, aggrieved and ignored a lot for whom even a hand to mouth existence has become impossible. He is labelled as an immoral man, a drunkard, an atheist and a whoremonger by some people. His unconventional relationship with Janki is also a flaw in his character. These are the reasons for Ananta's failure to be effective in bringing together the coppersmith brethren. C.D.Narasimhaiah observes:



*Mulk Raj Anand has fused the personal issue into the public one of leadership of the coppersmiths and has posed the issue of the suffering in store for a leader whose lead is questioned because of certain social injunctions interfering with the holiness of the heart, sacred to the leader as an individual.*³

Ralia and an angry mob start hammering and destroying the machines, shouting abuses at them with uncontrollable fury and madness. The Police play the role of helpless spectators. They were not in a position to control the furious mob. Some of the people, gathered there, were helplessly watching the wanton destruction of machines. But Ananta appeals them not to revolt such activities. In a fit of anger, Ralia strikes Ananta's head against a broken machine and kills him. Ananta's sacrifice and martyrdom does not go in vain. The novelist has created a symbol in him which triumphs over death. Janki continues Ananta's mission after his death. She is very much impressed by Puran Singh's talk. The poet infuses enthusiasm and courage into her. Her desire is to live even after the death of her husband. She feels that a woman can live only when she breaks away from the cobweb of tradition. The merit of Janki lies in her giving a new dimension to life. Janki's dedicating herself to the project of Ananta after his death brings on her a new scene where she walks with the noble ideal of improving the human race. She accepts the remaining part of her life as a challenge and sets out to Sant Harnam Das to live with and for others and to organise women comrades for a revolutionary life. A.V.Krishna Rao observes:

*On the contrary, she emerges as a new woman holding aloft the torch of a certainly hopeful future*⁴

In the novel one finds that it is hereditary profession that decides one's caste. Anand suggest that it is possible to realise a desirable social order through the impersonal processes of modern scientific and technological development. We have not yet responded to machinery so well as we ought to have through machines, are no doubt impersonal things. The gradual shedding of caste scruples however does not promise a utopia as the pernicious caste system is soon replaced by a no lesser evil, namely class system. One of the major forms the novel takes is the opposition of man to the machine. It is the fanatical opposition of Ralia, one of the unemployed coppersmiths who believes that machine is evil that leads to his furious and blind attack on the factory of Murli Dhar and Gokul, in the process of which he kills his best well-wisher Ananta. It is the advent of machine which symbolises the modern and the new. Caste figures as a significant secondary theme in the novel. This is a far more compactly written novel than the Lalu trilogy. The entire action of the novel is restricted to a single day. The action is confined to a single location, Kucha Billimaran. The narrative moves swiftly towards the catastrophe and the end of Ananta's life. *The Big Heart* is a novel of stream of consciousness like *Untouchable*.



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