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## A TRIBUTE TO MULK RAJ ANAND

Md. Mahmudul Hasan\*

After I had read his books *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (1981) and *Letters on India* (1942) in early 2004, I became very keen on knowing whether Mulk Raj Anand was still alive. I approached some postcolonial experts and found them equally in doubt about his survival or death, or about his exact whereabouts. Finally the news of his death at 8:30 in the morning on Tuesday 28 September 2004 ended all my curiosities, as it also buried my faint hope of meeting this literary colossus some time in the near future. He chose to spend his last days quietly in the remote Indian district of Pune (near Bombay), where he died of pneumonia in Jehangir Hospital. He is survived by his wife Shirin Vajifdar and by his daughter Sushila Anand.

Anand was born in Peshwar on 12 December 1905. Later on, he lived in Britain for more than a decade. But, unlike many reputed Indo-Anglian writers, Anand did not choose to make the West his permanent home. He refused to indulge in the 'luxury of silence',<sup>1</sup> and was not mesmerised by the better amenities and comforts of the metropolitan centre. After the World War II, Anand put an end to his metropolitan credentials and returned to India and settled down in Bombay. He lived among, and wrote and worked for the people of India, as Srinivas Iyengar succinctly puts, 'He wrote of the people, for the people, and as a man of the people.'<sup>2</sup> Anand was deeply involved with Progressive Writers' Movement, a socialist anti-imperialist writers' group. Together with his fellow writer Sajjad Zaheer, Anand set up the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) in London in 1935.

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1 Mulk Raj Anand, *Letters on India* (London 1942), p. 2.

2 K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (3rd Ed.), (Delhi 1983), p. 333.

A prolific thinker and intellectual whose literary range covers novels, short stories, and literary and art criticisms, Anand continued to write over a crowded period of 75 years and produced more than one hundred titles. Iyengar in his phenomenal work *Indian Writing in English* gives credit to Anand especially for his 'stamina and stern consistency of purpose'.<sup>3</sup> One of the triumvirate of the Indo-Anglian novel (the other two being R. K. Narayan [1906-2001] and Raja Rao [1909—]),<sup>4</sup> Anand used his literary flair to register his protests against colonial injustices and against prejudices in the stratified, hierarchical Indian society. His literary talents were spurred by his observations of the deep-seated inequalities and idiosyncrasies in the human situation in the caste-ridden Hindu society. One incident sparked off his creative mind and heralded his literary career: His aunt had dined with a Muslim woman (a grave sin in the rigid Hindu caste system); so she suffered excommunication followed by her suicide.

A Kshatriya<sup>5</sup> by birth, Anand did not suffer from 'the pollution complex' endemic among the upper classes Brahmins and Kshatriyas. His father Lall Chand Anand was a Subedar in the Indian Army.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Anand lived his childhood in an Indian regiment where he contravened the age-old caste convention. He 'mixed freely with the children of the sweepers attached to his father's regiment, and such associations cutting across caste divisions had continued during his boyhood and youth'.<sup>7</sup> This opened a window of opportunity for him to perceive the psychological trauma the caste system inflicted upon the people of lower social strata. This childhood experience helped him 'understand a tragedy which he did not share'.<sup>8</sup> It made a lasting imprint in Anand's literary mind. He then translated this social truth into his creative art, as he puts, 'And I was doing no more than what a writer does when he seeks to interpret the truth from the realities of his life'.<sup>9</sup>

3 *Ibid.*, p. 331.

4 The long life of some of Indo-Anglian writers is quite interesting. Anand lived about 99 years; R. K. Narayan about 95 years; Nirad C. Chaudhuri had the record for being world's oldest writer (1897-1999), active in writing even in his hundredth year when he wrote *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (Oxford 1997; Attia Hosain lived 85 years; and Raja Rao is only 4-year left to score his century.

5 Which is just one rank below the top Brahmins in caste hierarchy.

6 Lall Chand was also a coppersmith.

7 K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (3rd Ed.), p. 334.

8 E. M. Forster, Preface, *Untouchable* (London 1970), p. 11.

9 Quoted in K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (3rd Ed.), p. 334.



Anand culled the crude materials for his literary works from the sufferings of the poor and of the under-privileged in India, who are trapped in an unjust social system. Iyengar details Anand's literary mind in the following way: 'his [Anand's] sense of the ache at the heart of Indian humanity, and his understanding compassion for the waifs, the disinherited, the lowly, the lost—in a word *Daridra-Narayana* (the Lord as incarnate Poverty) . . .'<sup>10</sup> In a word, Anand is best remembered for his realistic and sympathetic representation of the poor in India. As a committed writer, writing for Anand was a conscience-driven political act and a social protest.

Apart from this material context, Anand was greatly influenced by the great poet philosopher Mohammad Iqbal (1873-1938), as he states in his *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, 'Then I felt I must communicate to these [British] intellectuals that I had learnt to love the life of imagination from Iqbal'.<sup>11</sup> Anand's admiration for Iqbal was profound. He wanted his fellow writers to imbibe the literary impetus he received from Iqbal. He brings in the issue of Iqbal in one of his conversations with Attia Hosain (1913—98) in the following way: 'I asked her to read Iqbal. Then the soul would appear like an emanation [*sic*] from the body, 'like a reed torn from the native brook', capable of writing out the various selves because there was a self to recover.'<sup>12</sup> Anand wrote extensively on Iqbal in his *The Golden Breath* (1933).<sup>13</sup>

Unlike Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Anand chose his predominant themes from the lowest class in Indian society, as Talat Ahmed puts, 'He had wanted to write about the ordinary, the mundane, everyday life experiences of Indians who were not kings or gods'.<sup>14</sup> His unforgettable characters are like Munoo the waif in *Coolie*, Bakha the outcaste in *Untouchable*, Gangu the indentured labourer in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, and Chandu the barber in 'The Barber's Trade Union'. Anand sets all these downtrodden humans 'right at the centre of the scheme of cruelty and exploitation that held India in its vicious grip'.<sup>15</sup> Through his novels, Anand critiques the internal dehumanisation in

10 *Ibid.*, p.332.

11 *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, (Delhi 1981), p. 21.

12 Mulk Raj Anand, Profile of Attia Hosain, *Commonwealth Quarterly*, vol. 3(9), New Delhi, 1978, pp. 1-12

13 K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (3rd Ed.), p. 332.

14 'Mulk Raj Anand: novelist and fighter', *International Socialism*, vol. 105 (2005), p.160.

15 K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (3rd Ed.), p. 334.

Indian society. Against the prevalent trend, Anand humanises his apparently dehumanised protagonists by giving them feelings and sense of dignity 'worthy of commemoration in serious literature'.<sup>16</sup>

His first novel *Untouchable* (1935) introduced by his friend E. M. Forster (1879-1970) was an indictment on social prejudices entrenched in the upper tier of the Hindu caste system against the people below. Presenting the book before readers, Forster begins his preface by stating: 'This remarkable novel describes a day in the life of a sweeper in an Indian city with every realistic circumstance. . . . Avoiding rhetoric and circumlocution, it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it'.<sup>17</sup> *Untouchable* tells us the story of toilet-cleaner Bakha who inadvertently collides with a member of upper caste, whose instantaneous reaction against the unlikely incident reads:

Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning.<sup>18</sup>

Born in a socially inferior class, Bakha internalises the social stratification on the basis of hereditary caste divisions. Overpowered by 'fear and humility and servility', he tries to repair the man's supposedly damaged dignity by his ingratiating 'curious smile of humility'; but it comes to no avail. With his 'flaming' eyes and murderous look, the man shouts, 'Swine, dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach! . . . Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!'.<sup>19</sup> Bakha applies all his instinctive implements of humility and musters whatever mettle his lower caste standing allows him to gather, and prepares himself to utter few words of apologies. But nothing works. The man continues, 'Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! Offspring of a pig!' . . . 'I . . . I'll have to go-o-o . . . and get washed-d-d . . . I . . . was going to business and now . . . now, on account of you, I'll be late'.<sup>20</sup>

Such was the depth of Anand's perception of the psychological traumas of the poor and of the underprivileged. He goes to the core of the suffering of his

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>17</sup> E. M. Forster, Preface, *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand (London 1970), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



fellow human beings. In this respect, there is a remarkable parallel between Anand and the English novelist Charles Dickens (1812—70). In many aspects of their literary features, especially in their treatment of the less fortunate, we notice the same loving concerns for the downtrodden. For this reason, Anand is sometimes called the Dickens of India. As Dickens is renowned for his portrayal of the social evils of Victorian England, so is Anand for his dealing in his literary works with the ills and inequalities of Indian society as well as the harshness of industrial life. As does Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838), Anand's *Coolie* (1936) portrays the harrowing experiences of children labourers. In his *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), Anand depicts the suffering of the colonised Indian society under the British colonial rule. A local Punjabi peasant brutally exploited in a tea plantation is killed while trying to rescue his daughter from being raped by a British officer. As a writer, Anand was not without pains. His novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* 'had to be withdrawn from circulation in England on the threat of prosecution as an obscene book'.<sup>21</sup> His *Untouchable* was rejected by 19 publishers. The twentieth publisher accepted the novel 'on the basis that E M Forster had agreed to write the preface'.<sup>22</sup>

For Anand, his aesthetic venture, especially his social novels, worked as an instrumentality to register his protest against the established caste hierarchy, capitalist greed and colonial exploitations. Long before the notion of double colonisation took a formulaic representation in the postcolonial discourse, Anand, though in an inchoate fashion, had voiced an equal disapproval of the British colonial presence in India and of the internal colonialism within the indigenous society.

After graduating from the University of Punjab in 1924, Anand did his further education in Cambridge and London Universities where he received his PhD in 1929. He was also trained at the League of Nations' School of Intellectual Co-operation in Geneva, where he also lectured later on. He worked for T. S. Eliot's (1888-1965) literary magazine *Criterion* and for the Hogarth Press run by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Leonard Woolf (1880-1969).

Before he came to England, Anand had been incarcerated by the Raj for his deep involvement in the struggle for the independence of India from British

21 K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (3rd Ed.), p. 335.

22 'Mulk Raj Anand: novelist and fighter', *International Socialism*, vol. 105 (2005), p. 161.

colonial rule. Finally he had to leave home because his 'pro-white-sahib father had beaten [his] mother for [his] going to jail'.<sup>23</sup> While staying in London, Anand never lost his tie with his homeland. He largely devoted his stay in the metropolis to persuade the literary and intellectual coterie in London to put pressure on British Government to quit India. After he had finished his PhD, Anand prolonged his stay in Europe for another one and half decades. Between 1932 and 1945, he lectured at the Workers' Educational Association in London. In the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), he fought for the Republicans; and during the World War II (1939-1945), Anand worked for the BBC.

His London days brought him closer to many prominent literary figures of the time. He got in touch and exchanged his literary and political views with Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Clive Bell (1881-1964), Lytton Strachey (1880-1932), and E. M. Forster (1879-1970) among others. In his book *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (1981), Anand lists some prominent literary personalities he met in Bloomsbury, London:

... I met some members of the legendary Bloomsbury group, E. M. Forster, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell; as well as those who were friendly neighbours, Bonamy Dobree, T. S. Eliot, Arthur Waley, Beryl de Zoete, John Maynard Keynes and Madame Lopokoval; the more distant Edwardians, like Laurence Binyon; and Georgians, D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, John Middleton Murry, Edith Sitwell and Herbert Read.<sup>24</sup>

Being in touch with the prominent litterateurs and intellectuals of the metropolis, Anand gathered a mixed impression about these literary giants. He found some 'lovable, liberal Englishmen and women' like E. M. Forster, Leonard Woolf and Aldous Leonard Huxley (1894-1963) whose view about eastern people and culture was different from the Anglo-Indian writer Rudyard Kipling's (1865-1936) branding of 'oriental' population as 'lesser breeds beyond the law'.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, Anand was simply astounded by what some intellectuals like T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) and Bonamy Dobree (1891-1974) 'really thought of' the eastern people beyond their 'outer kindness'.<sup>26</sup> He perceived some 'lurking prejudices'<sup>27</sup> about the East in many of

23 Mulk Raj Anand, *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, India: Arnold-Heinemann Publishers, 1981, p. 29.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

25 Rudyard Kipling, *Recessional: A Victorian Ode* (London 1897).

26 *Conversations*, p. 11.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 24.



them. Anand deplores the fact that most of 'the literary coteries'<sup>28</sup> he met suffered from prejudices since their knowledge about India was conjectural and tempered by Kiplingesque 'superficial impressions'<sup>29</sup> about eastern society. However, he attributes a high regard to Leonard Woolf who had made a unique choice of leaving his colonial job in Sri Lanka as he denied being 'a part of Imperialist rule'.<sup>30</sup> But, Anand sadly observes that except few, most of the metropolitan literary giants "seemed to believe, more or less, in the 'Empire on which the sun never sets'".<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Anand's reading of the ordinary British people was different. Travelling 'up and down the country [Britain]', he spoke with people and found 'that there is any amount of goodwill for India among the ordinary men and women of Britain'.<sup>32</sup> But he also noticed 'a hopeless ignorance about'<sup>33</sup> India among them, as the colonisers did not let them gather the actual picture of what they were perpetrating in their colony.

The over all ambience of the Bloomsbury caused 'umbrage' and 'a wound' in his soul for the obvious 'humiliation' of his coming from a supposedly 'inferior' race. Moreover, the alleged 'intellectual snobbery' of Bloomsbury group rendered him 'an outsider'.<sup>34</sup> Anand's interactions with these giant litterateurs strengthened his resolve to 'fight for the freedom of [his] country [India] forever' even though he would 'admire these English writers for their literary skills'.<sup>35</sup> He proudly directs his literary root back to India when he says, 'I learned some European etiquette from the poet Iqbal, who was my teacher and had been to Germany'.<sup>36</sup> Instead of idolising these literary giants he encountered in London, and in opposition to affiliating his artistic gift with the metropolitan writers, Anand upholds the standing of his literary guru Iqbal. He states, 'Iqbal is our teacher. In a sense he is a typical political poet of Asia. He wants to give strength to our wills. His whole concentration upon the individual as the catalyst of action is to renew man and society—!'.<sup>37</sup>

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28 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

32 Mulk Raj Anand, *Letters on India*, p. 147.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Conversations*, p. 85.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 150.



In the course of his stay in London, Anand's association with Marxist intellectuals deepened his socialist conviction. Leonard Woolf, a socialist and Labour Party policy adviser, writes the Introduction to his book *Letters on India* published in London by the Labour Book Service in 1942. This book is actually an exposé of the colonial exploitations in India in the epistolary form he wrote to a fellow British socialist named Tom Brown. Anand blatantly rejects the routine, customary excuses that colonisers put to justify their imperialist rule. He puts, 'And they [colonial apologists] go on to say that we are there to give India, "the richest gift we can offer, the gift of the democratic principle, with an opportunity for training India in the practical work of democracy to the end of fitting her for the ultimate realization of responsible government within the Empire."' <sup>38</sup> Anand critiques this colonial ploy, and uncovers the underhand manoeuvrings to rob India of its riches with an excuse of giving her colonial democracy.

Anand critiques the artificial East-West divide that the orientalist and imperialists draw to capitalise on their economic exploitations. Contrary to the racial polarisation of 'Asia and Europe . . . with two different histories and geographies' propounded by the imperial propagandists, Anand advocates for and puts forward the idea of "one world civilization, including Asia and Europe, inhabited by various parts of the same human family, struggling for food, clothing and shelter, with one history, which has been a continuous, though uneven, development from times immemorial to the machine age and the present day." <sup>39</sup>

Colonisers were trying to cover up the disorder and human suffering they wrought in India by exaggerating the internal relationships subsisting between Hindus and Muslims, and between different castes among the Hindus. They spread some 'stock questions: "What about the Hindus and Muhammadans?" "What about the Untouchables?"' <sup>40</sup> But Anand dispels the colonial ploy and uncovers the real picture of human suffering under the Raj. He writes to Tom Brown, 'The main problem of the Indian people is hunger. And hunger, my dear Tom, is neither Hindu nor Muhammadan nor Untouchable—it is just sheer bellyache!' <sup>41</sup>

38 Mulk Raj Anand, *Letters on India*, p. 17.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

A universal colonial policy is to create a make-believe rationale among the 'natives' of being ruled by a superior race. On the plea of the civilising mission and of introducing [colonial] democracy, the colonisers invade a country and dehumanise indigenous peoples by destroying law and order to ultimately render the population administratively and economically dependent on them. And thus they perpetuate the fake need of their presence to control poverty-stricken lawless peoples (?). Anand very succinctly touches upon this heinous colonial policy, 'First you make a people poor, and keep them ignorant, and then say how dirty and stupid they are!'<sup>42</sup> The colonial apologists who wished the Raj a longer presence in India were blowing their own trumpet that they improved the country's transportation system especially the rail, as Anand quotes Bonamy Dobree 'Look at the unity we have given you and the railways'.<sup>43</sup> Anand reveals the reason why colonisers, despite wreaking havoc upon the colonised, gave a special attention towards the improvement of rail and highway. He maintains, 'The village was connected by road and rail to the town and the town to the seaport, and the seaport by steamship to other continents: So that the grain that was grown in my village was sold in London, Berlin, Paris and New York'.<sup>44</sup>

While Anand's India was under the British colonial regime, Britain together with other parts of Europe, especially Hitler's Germany, Franco's Spain and Mussolini's Italy, was beset with the horrors of war and with the rise of fascism and militarism. In the World War II, the Allies were trying to get rid of the fascist menace in Europe. Anand appropriates this material circumstance for the realisation of the independence of India. He argues:

If the present war is being fought to create a new world order based on democracy and freedom, if the Allies aims to liberate the 90 million peoples of Poland and Czechoslovakia, Holland, Belgium, etc., at present writhing under the oppression of Hitler, then let them begin, as a token of their earnestness, by liberating the 400 millions of India held under British rule.<sup>45</sup>

Anand directly involved himself in the political activities of the liberation movement and wrote relentlessly to refute colonial reasoning of ruling distant

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42 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

43 *Conversations*, p. 52.

44 Mulk Raj Anand, *Letters on India*, p. 50.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

lands. Anand's India earned freedom in 1947 from direct colonial rule; but the colonial greed is still hideously lurking in the mind-set of the former and neo-colonisers. Anand's rebuttals of imperialist rationale, which he did especially in his book *Letters on India* in 1942, are still relevant, as the same reasoning is being put forward by hegemonist powers while invading and occupying other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.