Abstract:
Mulk Raj Anand is one of the most prolific Indo-Anglian writers. He is widely acclaimed for his major novels in which he has expressed his concerns for the downtrodden people of Indian society – untouchables, coolies, landless labourers and deprived women. In his major novels Anand’s sympathetic attitude towards the lowly and the lost can be perceived well. Through his writings he makes the neglected masses of India aware of their real condition so that they can raise voice against the oppressive forces of their society. My purpose in this paper is to analyze some selected short stories of Anand and to highlight his humanistic fervour in those stories. The selected short stories are – ‘Old Bapu’, ‘A Rumour’, ‘Things Have a Way of Working Out’, ‘Lajwanti’, ‘Lullaby’, and ‘The Parrot in the Cage’. In these short stories Anand has realistically delineated the pathetic and difficult condition of the poor labourers and helpless women of India. The evil faces of poverty, exploitation and oppression have also been exposed in several of Anand’s stories. His short stories also bear witness to his active support for ameliorating the miserable condition of the underprivileged and the deprived people of Indian society.

Key words: Humanist, untouchable, child-labour, oppression, lullaby.
Mulk Raj Anand (1905 – 2004) is a famous Indo-Anglian novelist, short story writer and art critic. He is a committed humanist. He has been greatly influenced by the humanist thinkers like Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky, Jacques Rousseau, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. He emphasizes on the dignity of man irrespective of caste and creed. K.R.S. Iyengar in his book Indian Writing in English has elaborately discussed about Mulk Raj Anand’s family background and some influencing factors upon the writer – especially Anand’s mixing with the children of the sweepers attached to his Subedar-father’s regiment in his childhood. In his major literary works Anand portrays realistic pictures of the condition of the deprived people of Indian society. In some of his major novels he throws light on the evil faces of untouchability, poverty, exploitation and oppression. As a great humanist Anand protests against every inhuman system that hampers the progress of India. Mulk Raj Anand’s concerns for the deprived can be felt well even in his short stories. His short stories like ‘Old Bapu’, ‘A Rumour’, ‘Things Have a Way of Working Out’, ‘Lajwanti’, ‘Lullaby’ and ‘The Parrot in the Cage’ are very rich and highly acclaimed. The first three stories concentrate on the misery and suffering of the poor – the landless workers and small boys of deprived families. The remaining three stories deal with the pathetic condition of the deprived and suffering women.

In his introduction to Selected Short Stories: Mulk Raj Anand, Saros Cowasjee comments: “Though Anand paints a wide section of humanity, perhaps the widest ever for an Indian writer, he is best known for his portrayal of the very poorest in India – be they peasants or city-dwellers” (Cowasjee xii). Anand’s short story ‘Old Bapu’ throws light on the plight of the poor labourers and their humiliation at the hands of the rich. Old Bapu is a landless labourer who has travelled seven miles on foot in sweltering heat and has come to Gurgaon from his village Shikohpur. He wants to get a road-repairing job. He must get a job to avoid starvation and hunger. He reaches the house of Ram Singh, the Sikh contractor and asks a job. Ram Singh abuses and humiliates old Bapu saying: “Ohe ja ja, oldie! You can’t work, with that frame of yours!” (229) The tone of the Sikh contractor’s words sounds like the news of doom to the ears of old Bapu. Ram Singh also adds: “Look at you, two-legged donkey that you are! One of your legs seems to be shrivelled, while the other feeble one seems to be waiting to drag it on” (230). Bapu is frightened and frustrated; he controls the tears in his eyes with much difficulty and slides away from Ram Singh’s
house. While returning home Bapu drinks water from a pan-biri shop. He looks into a mottled mirror of the pan-biri wallah to assure himself that he has not grown old. The pan-biri wallah ridicules Bapu out of annoyance: “Oh ja, ja, ahead ………. Don’t break my glass by showing it your ugly old face!” (231).

In ‘Old Bapu’ Anand shows how a decrepit untouchable’s search for a job has been frustrated. Old Bapu is not old; he is called old Bapu due to his thin and unfed physique. He is poor and is compelled to remain half-fed or unfed day after day. Old Bapu thinks of his own condition: “The boys call me ‘old Bapu” because I am older than them ………… The caste Hindu urchins have no respect for the untouchable elders anyhow. And their fathers want to throw every one of us into the garbage pit to use as manure for better harvests ………… But I do not want to die …………. Hey Ishwar!” (226-227) Old Bapu may be an untouchable but he can think of his own predicament. He, in fact, indicates that the upper caste Hindus are always ready to exploit the poor untouchables. Here old Bapu echoes the revolutionary utterance of Bakha, an untouchable sweeper of Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable (1935). Bakha thinks: “They would ill-treat us even if we shouted. They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt” (70).

In the story ‘A Rumour’, Dhandu, A carpenter by trade, comes to the town of Bariwal after walking three days from his village of Deogarh. He wants to go to a mill at Bariwal for getting a job there. Here Dhandu’s search for a job is identical with that of Bapu of the story ‘Old Bapu’. Dhandu has come to this town being informed by someone that many jobs are available for labourers in the mills of Bariwal: “Bisheshwar, the weaver, said there were plenty of jobs for skilled workmen in the mill, and the pay was as much as a babu earned …………. (46). On his way to the mill Dhandu asks one after another passerby for proper direction of the mill: “Where be the way to the mill, brother?” (47). But everybody remains silent and disinterested. After much difficulty Dhandu finds out the mill and approaches the Pathan sentry. He tells the Pathan: “I only heard the rumour in the village and I had lost my home and implements through the working of fate, so I came here, a three days’ journey from my village, Deogarh; and I be a carpenter by trade”(5). The Pathan becomes furious at Dhandu’s insistence. He firmly states that there is no job in the mill. Dhandu’s desperate request makes the sentry angry and he threatens Dhandu: “Go, son of Basheshwar, the gandu. Go, or I shall hand you over to the police! Go!” (50). Dhandu’s hope of securing a job is not fulfilled. He realizes that he has been misreported – it has been only a
rumour. The prospect of earning money by working in the mill is spoiled. Anand’s description of Dhandu’s condition is very realistic: “He (Dhandu) felt as if he were journeying at an ant’s pace through a sandy desert, breathless and choked with the heat; his life seemed a heavier burden than he had ever carried” (51). Due to extreme frustration Dhandu walks on the road unconsciously and is knocked down by a lorry and dies helplessly. This is the end of a poor man’s life. There is no hope for poor landless workers; they are born to die in their search for jobs. K.R.S. Iyengar in his book *Indian Writing in English* rightly comments:

The qualities of acute observation and vivid delineation that mark Anand as a novelist are seen equally – often mixed with a strain of poetry – in his short stories also ………… Anand can play any note he wants, and he can present human weaknesses with understanding and sympathy. Anand sees life sometimes as a comedy, sometimes as a tragedy, and sometimes the two modes fuse distractingly; and at his best his work challenges comparison with that of the great masters of the art of the short story. (356)

In Anand’s *Coolie* (1936) Munoo is informed by a coolie at the vegetable market of Sham Nagar that one can earn anything from fifteen to thirty rupees a month working in a factory in Bombay. But reaching Bombay Munoo realizes that “the bigger a city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adam” (152). Munoo’s dream is frustrated: “So, after all, there is no money to be picked up in the streets Bombay …………. because there are poor people here, too” (161). Old Bapu and Dhandu struggle to survive; they may be poor and weak but they continue their search to find out means of livelihood. Hence Anand has accepted the influences of the humanist thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, deviated from them, and at the same time has formed his unique humanistic perspective. In his book *Apology for Heroism: A Brief Autobiography of Ideas*, Anand writes:

The humanism which I prefer does not rest on a Divine Sanction, as does the mystical humanism of Gandhi or Tagore, for instance, but puts its faith in the creative imagination of man, in his capacity to transform himself, in the tireless mental and physical energy with which he can, often in the face of great odds, raise himself to tremendous heights of dignity and redeem the world from its misery and pain, taking man towards the universal man. (141)
In ‘Things Have a Way of Working Out’, Mulk Raj Anand presents a realistic picture of the pathetic condition of the poor workers or labourers of Bombay. Gopal, a small boy of fourteen has left his home of Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh, after famine has begun there. Coming to the big city of Bombay he has taken a small job of fetching taxis for gentlemen and ladies and looking after their motor cars. He is very efficient in this profession and earns his livelihood with much difficulty. His only companion in this big city is Krishan who is a Punjabi boy of sixteen years old and who has come to the city leaving his home in Amritsar. The two boys are homeless and shelter-less in this strange city and they endure enormous suffering here. The story-writer narrates the miserable condition of these two boys – Gopal and Krishan who move from one place to another to find a shelter for sleeping and taking rest at night. A night of heavy rainfall has highly aggravated their homeless condition. Gopal tells Krishan with rage: “What is all this big city of Bombay if we cannot get sleeping room? …………. I would like to set fire to it so that we can be warm in the glow ………..” (208). As they are poor, they are compelled to perform menial jobs at very low wages and to spend night either on pavements or on porches of the rich. The struggle of Gopal and Krishan for survival throws light on the evils of child-labour and the predicament of the have-nots.

Alka Saxena comments: “Mulk Raj Anand focuses on the woman’s predicament and struggle to find an identity for herself. Frustrated by the rigid social pattern, gender bias and her own petty human foibles the woman flutters helplessly like a bird in a cage” (Agarwal 104). Anand’s Short story named ‘Lajwanti’ deals with a young married woman’s suffering at her husband’s house. During the absence of her husband Lajwanti is constantly rebuked by her mother-in-law and becomes a target of the lewd advances of her brother-in-law. To save herself from her plight and predicament Lajwanti runs away to her father’s house, but her father refuses to give her protection and shelter. Lajwanti is sent back to her husband’s house again and she is compelled to live like a ‘caged bird’. The story points to her loneliness and isolation.

Lajwanti is taught by her father that a married woman’s proper place is her husband’s house and she should not cause any dishonour to her father leaving that ‘heavenly’ abode of her husband. In fact, the story highlights the married woman’s endurance and patience to suffer perpetual pains, oppression and humiliation. It is her lot; nothing or nobody can change it. Mulk Raj Anad’s concern for the difficult and painful condition of the Indian women is poignantly revealed in this
story. In his introduction to Selected Short Stories: Mulk Raj Anand, Saros Cowasjee rightly holds the view: “In Anand’s sympathies for the poor, women have a special place as their suffering is the greater, owing to Hindu religion and tradition, and the strictures of a hide-bound society” (Cowasjee xiv).

In the beginning of the story it is seen that Lajwanti is trudging along to go to Gurgaon where from she will catch the bus to reach her father’s house in Pataudi. She wants to escape from her husband’s house because during her husband’s absence she has been subject to humiliation at the hands of her brother-in-law and her mother-in-law; she does not want to surrender herself to her lecherous brother-in-law. Lajwanti’s only companion at the time of her husband’s absence is her maina bird. When she is escaping to her father’s house she has taken her maina with her. Her toil on the road and the miserable condition of the maina under the oppression of heat make her feel guilty for her rash deed:

She might have borne the humiliation. She might have given in to Jaswant. She could have closed her eyes. Her husband Balwant was away at college. Her benevolent father-in-law would not have known. And the mother-in-law, who wanted her son’s son, more than anything else, would not have worried even if she had come to know, because she favoured Jaswant, who worked on the land and not Balwant who wanted to be a clerk. (239)

This repentance of Lajwanti clearly shows us how much suffering she endures at her husband’s house. The dying condition of the maina only makes her weep: “Talk to me, Maina. Don’t go away from me ………. If you go, I too will be finished ………..” (239). Jaswant, the monstrous brother-in-law of Lajwanti has already set out to search her. She suddenly hears Jaswant’s shout behind her: “Stop, madwoman, or I shall kill you!” (240) In response to Jaswant’s abusing words and arrogance, she only replies: “Let me go – I want to go to my father’s house” (241). That brute also hits Lajwanti with his right foot and slaps her head with his right hand. Being helpless she surrenders herself to her tormentor and sits dumbly suppressing her sobs. No one among the crowd around her dares to rescue her. Suddenly Shrimati Dayal, the wife of Engineer Din Dayal comes out of their jeep and intervenes, and implores her husband: “I will not allow the girl to die of a heatstroke. Put her in the jeep and let us take her home” (242). Shrimati Dayal even slaps on Jaswant’s face when he attempts to hit Lajwanti in front of her. She firmly states: “Clearly, this
girl is not happy with your family ………. Let her go back to her father’s house till her husband has finished his studies. And then she can come back to your family” (243).

Lajwanti arrives at her father’s house with the cage of the bird in her hands. Her old father dares not to look at her face because she has come there without due ceremony and it is inauspicious. She feels that she is not wanted at her father’s house; she is treated as a guest. Her father seriously tells her: “I will take you back to your parents-in-law’s house. I shall fall at their feet and ask them to forgive you. The disgrace of your widowhood without your becoming a widow is unbearable ……… They will only call you ugly names here” (247). Old Hari, Lajwanti’s father takes her back to her in-law’s house. There he and his daughter are severely humiliated by Jaswant. Old Hari digests all these dishonours submissively. He only tells the parents-in-law of Lajwanti: “And now I leave her in your care. Kill her if you like. But don’t let her come to me without her lap full of a son. I shall not be able to survive the disgrace if she comes again” (251). It clearly indicates to the helpless and miserable condition of a married girl of Indian society. Out of helplessness and depression Lajwanti decides to commit suicide; she wants to drown herself in a well. Before jumping into the well she asks her only companion the maina: “Maina, my Maina, who will talk to you if I go away forever?” (251) Her attempt to die is unsuccessful as it has been seen by her mother-in-law. Lajwanti’s final realization echoes her perpetual suffering: “there is no way for me. I am condemned to live ………” (252).

‘Lullaby’ is the story of phalini, a young working woman who is singing a soothing song to send her dying one-year old son to sleep, and is at the same time feeding a machine in a factory with handfuls of jute. Phalini’s son Suraj Mukhi has been suffering from illness and he cannot shut his eyes; he only sobs and cries. Though her son is seriously ill, Phalini is not exempted from her duty in the factory. As she is poor, it is her lot to continue work. Mulk Raj Anand has finely juxtaposed the lullaby of Phalini (“Sleep / Oh sleep, / My baby, sleep, / Oh, do not weep, / Sleep / Like a fairy………” [86]) with the sounds of the Machine (“The engine chuk-chuked; the leather belt khp-khpped; the bolts jig-jigged; the plugs tik-tikked; …… [86]). A mother’s soothing song is set against the harsh sounds of a machine. Phalini’s big eyes rove away from her dying child to the mouth of the machine. The writer emphasizes on man-machine dichotomy throughout the story.
Phalini is reminded of her lover who has left her after giving her this child. Though she is the wife of Kirodhar, Phalini cannot forget her lover who has come down from the northern hills. She knows well that the father of her dying son is her lover, not her husband Kirodhar. At the moment of unhappiness, she is thinking of her bygone lover:

Where had he gone, she wondered. Had he only come to give her the pang of parting? Where had he gone? It was now summer again and he was here last summer. For days she had scanned the horizon of the sky above the city, towards the north in the direction where he had gone. But he didn’t seem to be anywhere in the large breathless space. Only Suraj Mukhi lay in her arms. (88)

Phalini feels jealous of her lover who wanders in the far-off hills, happy and free. But her condition is like that of a caged bird, confined and unhappy. Phalini’s mental condition deteriorates when she discovers that her only son Suraj dies: “She gave a long, piercing shriek which tore through the ceiling. She slapped her cheeks and beat her palms on her breast, crying in a weird, hollow voice, ‘Hai, hai” (89). At the end of the story, Phalini’s lullaby stops with the death of her son, but the sounds of the monstrous machine continue. In his introduction to Selected Short Stories: Mulk Raj Anand, Saros Cowasjee rightly comments: “The child dies, and with it the human song; only the jazz of the machine goes on unbroken. The story presents us the harsh reality of life as we witness it.” (Cowasjee ix).

In ‘The Parrot in the Cage’ an old woman named Rukmani has lost everything in the partition of India. She has come from Lahore to Amritsar for refuge and safe shelter. Here a caged parrot is her only companion. She sits crouching on the fringe of a road about half a furlong away from the Amritsar Court. The parrot continues to ask Rukmani where she is and what she is doing. But Rukmani’s reply is: “Son, I don’t know where I am ……… Nothing, son, I am doing nothing ……… only waiting ………” (185). Rukmani is waiting for the arrival of the Deputy Commissioner who, she is told, will rehabilitate the refugees. She recollects the terrific incidents from which she somehow has saved herself:

There had been flashes of blazing light; cracking of burning house beams; smoke, smoke, choking smoke. And she had thought that her last days had come, that the earth itself was troubled through the misdeeds of the Kaliyug and that soon the
dharti would open up and swallow everything .......... And then Fato had come and told her she would be murdered if she did not leave. (185)

It shows that the old woman Rukmani has seen the faces of death and destruction closely. She has suffered much and has left everything behind her only to save herself. Rukmani waits for the Deputy Commissioner’s help. She is informed by a gram-seller that she will not get anything from the Deputy Commissioner there; rather she should go to Durbar Sahib temple. Rukmani’s hope is thwarted; she only laments: “Oh, why did you have to turn me out of my room in my old age, God ............ Oh why ........ why didn’t I tie the rupees I had earned in a knot on my dupatta! ........ Hai Rabba! ........” (186). Rukmani becomes a victim of a lathi charge by a posse of policemen. She is wounded. The gram-seller comes and rescues her. Rukmani is in utter confusion and she does not know where to go and how to live.

In his literary works Mulk Raj Anand appears as a leader of the downtrodden and helpless people. Some of his short stories discussed above voice his protest against cruelties meted out to the innocent have-nots. Bapu in ‘Old Bapu’ is a poor worker of a village and he comes to a town in search of a job but his hope is thwarted. Dhandu of ‘A Rumour’ dies in an accident in a town during his search for a job in a mill. Gopal and Krishan of ‘Things Have a Way of Working Out’ go to Bombay leaving their native villages and to earn their livelihood there as child-labours; they do not even get a suitable place to sleep at night. Lajwanti of the story of the same name is a victim of inhuman torture and humiliation at her in-laws’ house. ‘The Parrot in the Cage’ highlights the wretched condition of the helpless woman named Rukmani. ‘Lullaby’ is a pathetic depiction of a working woman’s loss of her only son, love and dream. In fact, many of Mulk Raj Anand’s short stories record his social consciousness and his sympathy for the humiliated and deprived people of Indian society.
References


