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MYTH DEBUNKED : NEW WOMAN IN *THE OLD WOMAN AND THE COW*

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ABSTRACT

Myth is an inseparable part of the Indian consciousness and the Indian writers obsession with myth is a creative imperative. Anand employs the narrative strategy of subversion to drive home his ideology of humanism. Anand's chief contention is "The Old woman and cow" is that women need to be treated as equal to be men. They deserve equal importance and responsibilities.

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Indian English novel came into its own with the 'arrival' of Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao. The 'founding fathers', as William Walsh calls them, gave a tangible identity to the genre of fiction. These three writers dispelled the notion that Indian sensibility cannot be captured in English. Anand's accomplishment as the champion of *daridranarayana* is noteworthy for he set the trend of social realism in Indian English novel. In a letter to Prof. Iyengar, Anand wrote:

*The Old Woman and the Cow and The Road* will confirm the poetic truth that the alleviation of pain and its expiation are the only values given to our intelligentsia in the present time (357)

This observation of Anand stems from his experience with the peasantry and an enhanced awareness of their predicament. He realised the intensity of the devotion of Tolstoy and Gandhi felt through working for, and with the peasantry. This paper seeks to study how Anand debunks the Sita myth and in the process creates a myth for the new age.

Myth is an inseparable part of the Indian consciousness and the Indian writers' obsession with myth is a creative imperative. Girish Karnad turns

time and again to Indian myths for they express 'certain archetypal social relationships' and they have the power to affect us even without our being aware of it (70-71). Narayan too employs the Bhasmasura myth as a structural parallel in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*. P. Lai, while discussing the inevitability of the use of myth by Indian writers points out that myths act as a binding force and nourish the Indian outlook which is essentially 'myth-unified' (15). Though deeply influenced by Western thought and literary trends, Anand turns to the *Spiritus Mundi* of his own culture. M.K. Naik points out:

To his Indian past, however, Anand's attitude is ambivalent. On the one hand, he is indignantly critical of the deadwood of the hoary Indian tradition — its obscurantism and fossilisation; on the other, as his lifelong interest in ancient Indian art and the intuitive understanding of the Indian peasant mind in his writings indicate, he is equally aware of its finer and enduring aspects as well (155).

His stance towards Indian myths and legends is not irreverent; he questions the relevance and validity

of certain Indian myths, which he believes, are outdated.

*The Old Woman and the Cow* is significant in one respect; for the first time, in the fictional world of Anand, a woman appears as the centre of consciousness. Gauri, the protagonist, is the 'cow', gentle and meek, a personification of chastity and obedience. Life after marriage is a veritable hell for her. In an atmosphere of male hegemony, she feels stifled. The joint family system augments her woes. Panchi is a male-chauvinist whose stand on man-woman relationship is quintessentially Victorian. What he expects from Gauri, a rural belle, is abject surrender of self. Incited by his aunt Kesaro, he even resorts to domestic violence. Gauri, on the other hand, is educated well by Laxmi, her mother before marriage. Gauri recoils from Panchi's brutality as he displays signs of 'cave-man'. She longs for warmth and love in marriage but is denied even simple joys. In the view of Panchi, she is

a girl whom he could fold in his arms at night and kick during the day .... (5)

Gauri's presence is construed as inauspicious and she is blamed for every development. She is mercilessly driven out and even her mother lets her down. She sells her daughter to a lecherous Seth in Hoshiarpur 'for a handful of silver'. Gauri resolves to stand up and fight for her survival.

Anand employs the narrative strategy of subversion to drive home his ideology of humanism. He does cast Gauri, at least initially, in the Sita mould. But he rejects the doctrines which deny women freedom. Thus Gauri turns a rebel and fearlessly questions the male-centred value system which makes a woman's existence miserable. It is truly a bold experiment by Anand for in the early sixties the Indian society was still in the clutches of dogmatism.

Dr. Mahindra, a noble soul, guides Gauri in her quest for an identity. Gauri remains loyal to Panchi till he questions her integrity. Here too, Anand employs the mythical situation of Lord Rama questioning the chastity of Sita as a parallel in the narrative\_ Gauri, till then docile and submissive, revolts :

"Atha, if I am a curse on you, I will go away ... And if you strike me again, I will hit you back" (282 — 283).

Thus Gauri's revolt marks the beginning of a new phase — one of hope and fulfilment. Commenting on her predicament, Premila Paul observes :

Gauri's departure reminds us of Nora's similar act in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Unlike Nora, Gauri strives to save her womb, and her hope lies in her child who will not inherit the cowardly father's qualities. She will not retrace her steps home to sulk and moan like Narayan's Savitri of *The Dark Room* either .... When Narayan stops with a realistic painting of an aspect of Indian womanhood, Anand goes one step further and projects a picture of what an Indian woman could be. (119)

In other words, Anand demonstrates the significance of free will and choice. Narayan's Savitri makes a meek come back whereas Anand's Gauri steps out with confidence. Thus Anand overtly debunks the age-old Sita-myth which has been cherished by Indian women in general, and rural women in particular. His rejection is not born of irreverence or antagonism; he firmly believes that paradigms too should change with the changing times. He rejects the outdated and irrelevant aspects of the Indian myths which stand as stumbling blocks in a woman's efforts to have a room of her own.

Anand's chief contention in *The Old Woman and the Cow* is that women need to be treated as equal to men. They deserve equal opportunities and responsibilities. Balarama Gupta points out :

The most important and obvious principle of Anand's humanism that finds amplification in *The Old Woman and the Cow* is his strong plea for the recognition and acceptance of women's rights. Anand's disbelief in the Christian conception of sin, his insistence on the value of tenderness in human relations, his criticism of the cash nexus, and his usual reproof and uncritical belief in superstition, Karma and God —

these are some of the other humanist ideas that form the basis of this novel. (89)

Anand's focus in the narrative is on gender bias which is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. Gauri suffers because she is a woman. In a patriarchal set up women do not enjoy any rights or privileges. They are things to be bartered, sold or discarded. Anand takes up cudgels against the dark forces of superstition, Karma — doctrine and passive acceptance. He points out emphatically in one context :

Man's fate, today, is no longer in the hands of the gods, but is often in conflict with the evil in other men. Man makes himself, or thinks he can. The heart and mind of contemporary man, is therefore, moved by other causalities than salvation (4).

Anand reposes faith in man who is at the centre of things. Man or woman can make or mar himself or herself. The emphasis is on choice making which is truly a painful gesture. Gauri's ultimate step into the wide world as a free being is the outcome of her exercise of free will.

Milan Kundera, the celebrated Czech novelist, makes an interesting observation in *Immortality*:

The basis of the self is not thought but suffering which is the most fundamental of all feelings ... disappears and each of us is alone with his self.

Gauri's anguish and suffering are so intense that she begins her quest for self. Her splintered self is the work of patriarchal forces bent on subduing her. Her tryst with the self is a traumatic experience; it leaves her weary and exhausted. Thus it is a journey inwards, a search for a meaningful alternative to brutality and suffering.

Gauri's strength springs from her intrinsic goodness. She is deeply religious and traditional and worships her husband with devotion. Her transition from tradition to modernity is not smooth; it is a painful process in which she discovers herself. Gauri's self-knowledge marks her new birth as an individual with an identity of her own. From a docile 'cow', she is transformed into a spirited being, out to assert herself.

Sita in *The Ramayana* remains a shining role model even in the age of Information Technology — a symbol of purity and obedience. Even artistes who play Sita — be it Anjali Devi or Deepika — become celebrities. Gauri is Anand's Sita, the New Woman, a being who is willing to shoulder the responsibilities thrust on her by the androcentric system. But when she is denied a right to exist, to have a 'self' of her own, she revolts. Her final gesture in the narrative is not a blunt rejection of traditional Indian value system but an existential necessity. It is the only way out for her. *The Old Woman and the Cow* thus deals with a new myth, a subverted one, in which Gauri rejects the role thrust on her by the ruthless society and acquires an identity of her own. A new Sita is born of the struggle for survival. Thus in this work, Anand pleads for the cause of women.

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