

## **Feminism In Mulk Raj Anand's The Old Woman And The Cow**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Feminism is based on a high evaluation of women as human beings. It locates changes and reshapes cultural practices that are responsible for the suppression of women. By attempting such an endeavour, feminism focuses on analyzing and examining the suppressed status of women in a socio-political milieu. It aims to get equality of rights, and equal status for women. Feminism regards women as being disadvantaged in relation to men politically, emotionally, culturally, economically, socially and domestically. They want to reverse this position. So, feminism is a politics directed at changing the existing power relations between women and men. Mulk Raj Anand was an Indian novelist and short-story writer. Anand's novels present a realistic picture of the poor people in India. The paper analyzes the theme of Feminism in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960). The novel has another title 'Gauri'. This novel expresses Anand's indisputable concern about the sufferings of women. In the author's own words, it is an "Offering to the beauty, dignity, and devotion of Indian Women" (Blurb to the orient Paperback edition).*

**Key words:** *cultural practices, socio-political, culturally, economically, socially.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Feminism is the radical notion that women are equal to men. Feminist literary criticism and literary analysis arise from the viewpoint of feminism. Women's issues are addressed and the rights of women are underscored. Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment in Indian English Literature. The struggle to establish one's identity and to affirm one's individuality has led the women to wage a desperate war against the existing social order of the day. The portrayal of women in literature helps them to do so, as it provides them with role models drawn from the actual sufferings of the women characters, harassed under male- domination.

*The Old Woman and the Cow* is the only one of Anand's novels to have a woman as its central character; it is also his only novel to present women's problems and sufferings. The principal character is Gauri, who during the course of the story is transformed from an obedient, gentle and meek person to one 'with a will of her own'. Anand's great concern for the oppressed sex finds emphatic expression in this novel. Though a woman, Gauri the heroine, falls in line with Anand's suppressed heroes.

The marriage of the sort described in the novel is an emotionless action in which love, the force behind marriage, is drowned in the long negotiation for dowry. In such marriages, parents simply force a wife or husband upon their children, unmindful of his or her personal likes and dislikes. The inhibitory nature of such marriages often leads to male barbarism on the first night. In one of his letters to Saros Cowasjee, Anand has written: "You know that every Aryan rapes the helpless female in the arranged marriages of India on the first night. The cries are drowned in the music outside. And yet many of our modernists recognize Vedic rites at their weddings. This hypocrisy stinks"(So Many Freedoms,8)

The expectation of Panchi about his wife, even before marriage, itself shows the general idea of a husband about his would-be. Even before the marriage, Panchi had the conventional view of a husband that a wife should always be under the rule of her husband "a girl whom he could fold in his arms at night and kick during the day, who would adorn his house and help him with the work on the land..."(*The Old Woman and the Cow*, 5)

The habit of accusing the wife for any loss or suffering is common among husbands. Anand shows this through Panchi. Famine and drought have been existing in Piplar Kalan, but Panchi says "only after I have married, have all my troubles begun...(TOWTC,29)

Panchi wants his wife to lead a conventional life. He forces Gauri to submit to his impatience and pettiness without any protest. He even justifies his attitude to Gauri: "... the husband has to chastise his wife if she goes wrong" (*Premila Paul*.49). Her duties are to cook, to clean, to please her husband's libidinous desires and to submit herself humbly to male chauvinism and physical violence.

One day during their love-making, Gauri taking advantage of the situation pleads to Panchi not to beat her again at Kesaro's bidding. Even at that passionate moment, he does not hesitate to remind her of his conventional right to beat her: "But the husband has to chastise the wife if she goes wrong" (*TOWTC*49).

An understanding and sympathetic mother –in-law is an extremely rare phenomenon and for most Indian women marriage means getting trapped in a horrible den where they get nothing but physical and mental torture. The mother-in-law's ill-treatment of the daughter-in-law is due to fear and jealousy. The mother-in-law's unquestionable position and influence in the house turn the daughter-in-law into an enemy. In such an atmosphere only a responsible and far-sighted husband can boldly come to the support of his wife. As portrayed in this novel, the huge majority of Indian houses are made up of Panchi's and Kesaro who have no scruples about the tears shed by the Gauri's. Panchi's failure to defend Gauri against the evil tongue of Kesaro typifies the immoral and tragic nature of common domestic life.

Gauri's forlornness aggravates her helplessness and emotional starvation. Having lost her mother and father early in life, she remembers them now and then and cries. A girl with such a background of emotional insecurity and frustration is, obviously, badly in need of a husband who can make her forget her past sorrows by showering extra love and affection on her. But Panchi is not up to her expectations.

Kesaro, as a ruthless mother-in-law, continues her hate - campaign against Gauri. She abuses Gauri calling her a whore from Piplan. In the past when Mola Ram was away Kesaro used to dote on Panchi. Kesaro's secret attachment to Panchi causes hatred in her against Gauri. D.Riemenschneider feels that Kesaro represents society's claim on Panchi. (*Premila Paul p.p118 to 119*) She blames Gauri for going about at home without putting on the dupatta. She even speaks to Panchi about his horoscope. "our house would break up with the coming of an inauspicious girl"(TOWTC,96) Kesaro visits Panchi after the arrival of Gauri from Hoshiarpur, but Panchi does not allow her to come in. Kesaro then spreads the news to the people in the lane about the arrival of the 'prostitute' from Hoshiarpur. The accusation of Kesaro about Gauri's life in Hoshiarpur naturally begins to obsess and oppress him. The devil in him starts to work and he bawls "Tell me the truth bitch"... what is the proof of your purity?" (TOWTC 281 to 282). Unable to bear his cruelty, Gauri tells Hoor Banu, "He is a weak spoilt creature! Spoilt by Kersaro. He pretended to be a lion among the men of the village. But really he is a coward" (TOWTC 283).

Gauri had not known much tenderness from her strong limbed husband ever since her marriage. Panchi finds it impossible to rid himself of antiquated customs and social taboos against women active in his society and so he helplessly oscillates between his love for Gauri and the tyrannical influence of Kesaro. When Panchi is in utter need, she voluntarily parts with her ear-rings her only possession on jewelry and even when shut in the house of Seth Jai Ram Das she prays for Panchi and his harvest. This deep affection is a contrast to the shallow love of Panchi who tries to woo her with Hamam soap and stolen mangoes when he is in a passionate mood.

Gauri feels a new lease of life after their parting. She lifts the jhund of her head cloth and reveals her full face to her husband and talks with him freely about the problems of her life. She remembers her suffering in her mother-in-law's house "If I speak; my mother is blamed for something: if I remain silent, my father is called a donkey" (TOWTC 63).

Gauri is not only an affectionate wife but an accepting wife as well. She understands the financial crisis of her husband and lends her ear-rings to him asking him to pawn them, "It will help us pay for the seed and the lentils and the rice till the next harvest" (TOWTC.63)

The villagers are blighted by superstitions and they mistake superstitions for religion. Kesaro telling that from the day Gauri set foot in their house, they have had bad luck, is bound to sound idiotic to sensible people. Though Panchi has never believed in superstition and always laughed at his mother and Kesaro for the religious ceremonies, Kesaro's campaign of hate against Gauri based on her horoscope and bad stars gradually begins to work on him:

The idea of Gauri's bad stars continued to possess him, because the circumstances which were said to have been created by her arrival continued to grow worse: The drought seemed to become permanent, the rains would not come; more birds were found dead with the heat in the fields; the wells were drying up completely; and the cattle was dwindling through the owners taking their cows (sic), buffaloes and bullocks away to villages further down the valley towards Hoshiarpur town to sell them to the slaughter house". (TOWTC,99)

Superstition victimizes Gauri. Panchi who is in the beginning, proud of her comely and innocent appearance and her cow- like meekness, forms a completely different picture of her under the influence of the superstition planted in him by Kesaro: "She has ruined me.... My aunt Kesaro is right when she says that this bride is the incarnation of Kali, the black goddess who destroys all before her who brings famine in her breath and lays bare whole villages. Like Kali Mai in the temple of Dharamsala, who wears a garland of skulls round her neck"... (TOWTC,29)

When Panchi insults and orders her to get out of the house, she returns to her mother's home with the hope of getting affection and happiness. But superstition once again holds its sway tightly over Gauri. Her uncle, Amru, bluntly tells Lakmi about her: "Her husband has turned her out. This unlucky girl must have brought him troubles, as she brought difficulties to us" (TOWTC,10) The accusation that Gauri is inauspicious simply shows how superstition has led women to troubles.

Anand, while condemning the wrong doings of the male chauvinists in India, does not absolve women of their sins against their own race. The ill-treatment of Gauri is mainly prepared by women themselves. If Kesaro and the mid-wife, Rakhi had not aroused suspicion in Panchi by questioning the purity of Gauri she would not have been deserted by him.

Kesaro arouses the sexual jealousy of Panchi. She continually injects suspicion into the mind of Panchi and directly accuses Gauri of having sexual relationship with Rajguru. "Hai, hai, son. Do you want to lend your wife to the subedar's son blind one: (TOWTC,45) Panchi is very much disturbed by these words. He tries to overcome it. But it stays deeply in one part of his heart and occasionally comes out whenever and wherever it finds the chance.

Kesaro complains against Gauri to her husband and tries to poison his mind against her: "control her, if you can... This bride of yours! ... She has begun to answer me now, when she was meek and obstinately silent before!..." (TOWTC,37) The above statement of Kesaro shows the common situation that a mother-in-law never accepts the freedom of speech of her daughter-in-law.

Kesaro even attributes the illness of the bullock and failure of rain to Garui's bad luck, sometimes Gauri's peccadilloes done in ignorance are incorrectly misinterpreted by Kesaro. She even tries to poison Panchi's mind, after they have gone through the partition and live in a different house. Kesaro did the same thing at the time of Gauri's return from Hoshiarpur. Another lady Rakhi also does her part of working against her own race. When Gauri returns to her husband's house from Hoshiapur, Rakhi meets Panchi and says: "She has been to town and has learnt to wear the white clothes of a nurse and she prefers the hands of a male Doktor to your old dia Rakhi. No wonder your aunt Kesaro could not keep her in her house"... (TOWTC,263)

The germs that Rakhi had scattered with her foul breath in the verandah of Panchi's house spread over the household and the village like a plague which travels from the rat to a human being in the shortest possible time. The doubts, which Rakhi had expressed about Gauri's chastity during her stay in Hoshiarpur, began to creep into Panchi head.

Panchi is deeply disturbed about his ill-luck. He as a member of a patriarchal society believes in the ideal of wifely chastity. He has been deeply shaken by Kesaro's words that have sown the seed of suspicion in his mind about Gauri's dalliance with Rajguru. Chastity happens to be one of the supreme virtues valued by Hindu patriarchal society.

Panchi's suspicions begin to grow more and more powerful; he becomes restless like Iago and turns homicidal. "He became a nuisance to himself and walked round and round the village to distract himself, but there was really nowhere to go, because he had to take his tormented soul with him wherever he went. He was in a worse confusion than ever before". (TOWTC,100) Gauri plays the traditional role of an obedient wife by falling at his feet and begging with joined palms. But Panchi acts as a heartless and irrational man in his indifference to his loving wife's feelings. Gauri is thus compelled by her ill fate to leave the husband's home and return to the parental home much against her willingness.

Panchi is a man with an unsteady character. He loves Gauri on some occasions and at others he beats her. Panchi's annoyance at knowing that soon he would be a father is in sharp contrast to the joy, Gauri feels on attaining motherhood. The deep affection shown by Gauri to her husband is a contrast to the superficial love of Panchi who tries to woo her with Haman soap and mangoes. He steals a mango to please Gauri; but when he is caught and humiliated by the villagers, he says, "They have humiliated me and tortured me... And all because of you!... If only I had not gone to steal mangoes to bring to you"( TOWTC,93)

Gauri, like the majority of the women in the country, is also subjected to sexual tortures. Gauri is chased by lustful rascals wherever she goes, SethJai RamDas's attempt to win Gauri's love by courtship ends in failure. The old lecher tries to outrage her modesty; she firmly resists and angrily leaves the house. She finds shelter in the clinic of colonel Mahindra and is employed as a nurse. The Nursing Home provides a turning point in her life. But there also she is subjected to Dr. Batra's lustful advances. Dr. Batra at first appears to be a gentleman; but actually he is a tiger with the appearance of a cow. He argues in favour of Gauri and saves her from Seth Jai Ram Das but he does all that only because of the lustful passion he has for her.

Gauri loves Panchi as no woman can. But Panchi never shows the same love towards her. He does not even take decisions of his own. He knows himself that everything he offers to Gauri is bad. He even repents for his misdeeds. He, at first does not doubt Gauri of having sexual relationship with Rajguru but soon he accuses her of having an illegal relationship.

Gauri returns from Hoshiapur with a heart full of hope and love for Panchi, her husband. She feels that she is going to lead a joyful life, with her husband. But what she faces is a different thing. At first Panchi is very happy to see his wife after such a long time, but soon, he starts suspecting her.

Panchi tries hard to suppress his suspicions about Gauri's purity, but it is awakened once again by the widespread gossip in the village. Being a member of the patriarchal society, he holds the value of feminine

chastity in high regard. He suffers deep anguish when society suspects Gauri. Panchi does not have the courage to defy society's opinion about his wife. His suspicion on Gauri's wifely chastity is easily comparable to the archetypal situation in *The Ramayana* wherein Rama has to meet the washerman's doubt about Sita's chastity by abandoning her. Panchi wants to test his wife and therefore, asks her, "Tell me the truth, bitch.... What is the proof of your purity"? (TOWTC,281-282) Poor Gauri cannot prove her, purity except through an honest declaration of it. She says, "I have been true to you"( TOWTC,282)

Panchi behaves very irrationally." Panchi kicked her and stood with arms akimbo, raving: "you have cut my nose, bitch from Piplan Kalan, what curse upon my fate prospered in my marriage with you, daughter of a whore!" (TOWTC,282) Gauri is so deeply hurt by his ridiculous accusation that she does not want to be cowed down by his threats.

The courage, born out of her inner purity, enables her to defy the irrational husband and has gossip-mongering society. She is no longer a docile and obedient wife but asserts herself, "And if you strike me again, I will hit back..." (TOWTC,283) She is willing to remove the stigma on her husband's reputation. "If he is ashamed, I shall remove the cause of his shame" (283) When Hoor Banu tries to console her about her husband's foolishness, she analyses Panchi's personality and behaviour properly. Gauri says, "Nahin, Chachi... he is not foolish. He is a weak, spoilt creature! Spoilt by Kesaro. He pretended to be among the men of the village. (TOWTC,285)

From the beginning to the end of the novel, Gauri's life has been exploited by many. The exploitation begins with her husband and is carried on by others like Amru and Dr.Batra and ends when her husband drives her out. In the beginning Gauri seems to be a traditional docile wife but changes her role all of a sudden, because of the frequent ill- treatment, and her firm determination to lead a modern life. It is expressed in her final statement."They are telling him that Ram turned out Sita because everyone doubted her chastity during her stay with Ravana!... I am not Sita that the earth will open up and swallow me I shall just go out and be forgotten of him"( TOWTC,283)

## II. CONCLUSION

At the end of the novel, Anand succeeds in eliciting concern for the exploited life of Gauri. Gauri symbolizes the strength and purity of Sita and Gauri is one of the most memorable female characters in the whole range of Indian Fiction. She represents some of the most applauded qualities of Indian womanhood.

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