



Futility of Education System: A study of Anand's Novel *the Lament on the Death of Master of Arts*

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ABSTRACT

A Lament on the Death of Master of Arts (1938) is a short novel by Mulk Raj Anand. Futility of education system is central theme of *Lament*. The novel covers the span of a single day. It is the third such a novel of Anand that covers a single day story, the other two novels being *Untouchable* and *Big Heart*. *Untouchable* offers a solution to the sufferings of Bakha at the end of the novel—the solution of flush system that can help the hero to stop his manual labor of cleaning latrines and thereby save him from recurrent humiliations. Bakha is hopeful about his future. But in case of *Lament*, the hero, rather anti-hero Nur who is fighting with his fate of joblessness and consumption, does not find any solutions nor has he any hopes and aspirations about his future. Despite having masters degree, he is unable to get job. He appears for various interviews but because of his marginalized status of being 'a confectioner's son', he is rejected and thus loses hopes for life. He gets affected by consumption and becomes bed ridden for the rest of the life. With every passing day, he goes closer to death and he dies.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, education, Nur, marginalization, joblessness

Introduction

The novel shows utter frustrations of a youngster Nur who despite having a master's degree is unable to get a job. Like most of the heroes of Mulk Raj Anand in preceding novels, Nur also becomes a victim of socio-economic forces. Bakha in *Untouchable*, Munoo in *Coolie*, Gangu in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Gauri in *Old Woman and the Cow*, Ananta in *The Big Heart* and Bhiku in *The Road* suffer exploitation by evil forces in the society. Unlike them, Nur suffers on mental and psychological level. He faces humiliation and alienation for being jobless. He becomes an easy target of people's sneer and contempt. He often hears people saying "...there goes Nur, the son of the confectioner, who is an M.A. pass, but who sits idle, with one hand on the other and kills flies because he can't get a job" (*Lament* 61). Such sneering inflicts heavy blows on his heart and soul but he suffers more because of the treatment by his father. His father is a hard hearted person who consistently rebukes, scolds him for his inability to get a job. When the novel opens, we find Nur suffering from consumption. He is bed ridden for last five months. Anand describes the pathetic condition of Nur lying on bed in the beginning part of the novel. The body of death lingered on the sick bed, wrapped in a white shroud. Waking in a hot sweat from his half-sleep he could see lying there, on the giant bed in the narrow front room on the first floor of his father's congested two-storied house. It was his own body; it looked like a corpse because he had gathered the shirt tight round him at night, and because he was dying, dying of consumption. (11) He is unable to move from one place to the other. So his mind travels from present to past and vice versa. The novel opens with a rude and formal inquiry by his father about Nur's health: "Ohe, what is your condition? Nur heard the voice of his father through his broken half-sleep as from faraway. His eyes opened, against his will. In the stillness of that hour, the gigantic, padded-faced, wry mouthed presence of the Choudhari, terrifying like Nero, seemed inauspicious. Nur closed his eyes, dipping them into the comfort of sleep and escaping from the fear that his father's form sent through him..." (9). These very opening lines of the novel underline the horrifying features of his father's high handed attitude towards him. He shows disgust and hatred towards Nur for the only reason that Nur despite getting Masters Degree in Arts failed to achieve respectable position and job. For a bed ridden child who is a patient of tuberculosis and having blood hemorrhages, his father instead of sympathizing with tenderness, he rebukes and abuses consistently: 'Why don't you answer properly, swine? Why do you sulk all the time?' the Choudhari said, his green grey eyes flashing. 'You should try and make an effort to get well, as I can't go on breaking myself to pay the Doctors fees every morning!' (10)

The second person visiting Nur's sick room on that day is Gama who had been his class fellow during school days. With the arrival of Gama, his ruminations on past comes to halt. Gama has become a grown up adult and works as a *tonga*-driver for a contractor. Both of them have a common thing. Gama failed in education whereas Nur despite completing post graduation failed to achieve any job. Neither of them received any benefit of education. This is the reason why Gama in a mocking tone comments: 'What is there in education, brother? Waste of time' (32). He feels 'a genuine contempt for learning' for he thinks that this education through which he had become a *tonga* driver, is of no use, a worthless thing. Similar is the case of Nur. Both of them are the victims of educational system. Gama talks about the troublesome days during school education. It recalls Nur of his own days of troubles. He does not wish to talk about them. So he diverts Gama's attention to the present time and shows him his self composed lines of a poem that expresses his frustrations towards life and indignation towards his father: 'Why did you drag me into the dust by making me an M.A.' (36). The failure in life, inability to get job feels Nur's heart and soul with a heavy regret, frustrations and disillusionment. He feels so heartbroken that while talking with Gama, Nur wishes to hold his friend's hand but his regret for failures in life holds him back. Gama thrills him and brings liveliness to Nur though temporarily. They talk about their schooldays, teachers and class fellow Azad. Azad's life was also similar to that of Nur. He was Nur's bosom friend. He failed to become deputy collector and went mad. Nur feels sympathy for him and he remembers those hours of friendliness with him. He was Azad who had initiated Nur 'into the mysteries of poetry and philosophy'. He had impacted Nur's life in school. He understands and acknowledges Azad's sincerity as

a student. All in all, Azad might have worked harder than Nur still he went mad because he could not become a deputy collector. His sufferings are not different from Nur's. Both of them fell prey to the educational system. Nur thinks about the days of his hard work and dedication when he had applied for different jobs. He put his best efforts for facing Imperial Forest Service as well as I.C.S. examination but couldn't succeed. His failure evoked constant rebuking from his father. His disappointment due to failure and his father's recurrent abuses and curses broke his entire spirit of living. The compounding effect of the continuous stress and fear led him to consumption. His difficulties aggravate with his father's abuses: '...You wasted hundred of rupees of my hard-earned money, you son of a bitch, and you couldn't even get a job to feed yourself and wife and child? Why don't you die of shame, you lover of your mother, and rid me of the responsibility you have imposed on me so long? When will you die, you dog? How long will you go on prolonging the agony of you poor old grandmother? You have disgraced me and given a bad name to you family! Go to hell and die and be done with it, you wretch...' (71). The biggest problem was his father's high handedness, his sneer and harsh criticism for his state of joblessness and it was this extremity in the words and attitude which was too hard to bear for Nur. He questions himself: "Oh God, why did he produce me if he had to be so hard to me? Oh, why did he have educated me, why did he not let me sit at the shop and follow his own profession...? Oh why did he, why did he, why did he...? Why did he insist on passing my MA if he had to blame me for it afterwards...? Oh why did he drag me...?" (76)

All these questions in his mind go unanswered. So with a cool and balanced mind, he introspects the whole past owing to his fiasco. He wants to find out as to whose fault it was that led to his ruination. K.D. Verma in introduction to the commemorative volume of *Lament* published in 2012 rightly sums up the thematic concern of the novel vis-à-vis societal structure in thirties and its reflection in the making of characters in Anand's *Lament*.

Ironically, Anand's picture of the British colonial-imperial India of the thirties in *Lament* presents a diseased social order where the function of education, apparently after the Macaulayan system of education, has been constricted to producing *babus*, where family structures are based not on love, compassion and understanding but on false notions of prestige (*izzat*) and selfishness and where community seems to lack the basic sense of human values (*Lament* 6). *The Lament* is an authentic account of a well educated but jobless person who makes effort to get a job but utterly fails to do so. The novel shows his frustrations and agony and most significantly his torn heart and soul due to the abuses and humiliation by his father and sneers and mockery of the neighbors. He finds himself a failure at all levels—as a son, a husband and as a father. He becomes a victim of the educational system. His origin of belonging to marginalized class i.e. the poor for being a confectioner's son becomes a root cause of his failure. Anand being a humanist at heart probes into human life with its variegated colours and forms and since pain is the integral part of human life especially more of the marginalized lot, deals with it at length in *The Lament*. Nur lives a very short life but throughout the life he suffers at every stage. He suffers at home. He suffers in the neighborhood and in society. He undergoes pain and agony in the school. Sufferings become unavoidable and integral part of his life. He belongs to marginalized class. As most of the heroes of Anand who belong to either marginalized castes or marginalized classes undergo sufferings one way or the other, so does Nur. K. N. Sinha comments that Anand's understanding of life has never been in doubt, but here he probes the very nature of pain, central to existence (*Mulk Raj Anand* 39). In case of pain and sufferings, his life goes parallel to that of Munoo in *Coolie*. Munoo's life is a saga of sufferings and so is Nur's. Munoo wanders at various places in search of work. He works with many people but everyone torments and exploits him and he finally succumbs to consumption. Nur gets tormented by his father, school teachers, neighbors, society and finally dies of tuberculosis.

Criticism on Educational System

Anand exposes many evils of socio-economic and political system in various novels. He discusses the problem of caste discrimination in *Untouchable*; labor system in *Coolie*; peasants issues in *Two Leaves and a Bud*; political and psychological issues in *The Private Life*; caste issues in *The Road* and *The Big Heart*. 'Anand's purpose as a novelist is to transform the thinking of readers. Each novel has a message for the readers. While some of his novels lay stress on social aspects, others advocate reforms' (Archana 64). Through *The Lament*, Anand gives a wakeup call to the society about the educational system. What is the use of such education that cannot offer a respectable, healthy and balanced life? Though the prime objective of education is not to provide jobs but at least it should help one to live a respectable and peaceful life. Aristotle said that education is a process of developing sound mind in a sound body. But in case of Nur, he loses both the body and the mind in the pursuit of knowledge and in subsequent search of jobs. Nur works hard. He appears for various examinations in his pursuit of a job. He has merit but he fails to understand the stark reality of employment in the practical world. As Anand says: "...that jobs are given by the Public Service Commission for smartness, general appearance, the possession of a good pedigree and according to number of testimonials and recommendations from influential persons that a man may have more than for anything else" (49). Anand's views about requirement for a job are relevant in the contemporary period also. The merit, knowledge, wisdom, hard work seem subsidiary and unimportant for getting jobs. What is primarily important is 'the number of testimonials and recommendations' Anand criticizes this worst aspect of present educational system which victimizes thousands of Nurus in the practical world. The marginalized and disadvantaged youths like Nur despite having merit and degrees lag behind because of their poverty and lack of recommendations.

The parents nurture high dreams and aspirations for their wards. In Nur's case the people wish to see him successful one day. Seeing Nur's abilities, it was presumed during his childhood that 'he will surely become a *babu* with his pretty speech...he will surely pass his MA and become a deputy collector sahib' (15). As per the expectations, he did well also. He had topped during school education. Later, he also passed his Master's degree. But his education couldn't bring desired fruits for his father.

Anand exposes the corrupt practices in the field of education. For Noor's lateness in the school, his master expects a gift of 'a basket of sweet' from him. On failing to bring the same, Nur receives brutal caning from the master. At another occasion, when Nur slips at spelling in the classroom, his master cruelly punishes him by 'putting pencils between his fingers and pressing them hard, hard, harder and Nur could see himself writhing and shrieking and crying as he rolled on the floor to release his cracking bones from the Master's grasp...' (27). Anand is out rightly against such educational system that believes in merciless punishment. He observes in one of his essay: "suppression, repression and cane driven sense are not education at all" (On Education 35). When Nur was in fifth class, he suffered at the hands of the teacher Kanshi Ram. He compelled him for taking private tuitions. Nur couldn't dare to ask permission from his father and he suffered punishment for it. Apart from it, Kanshi used to give immoral suggestions to children and Nur was also

victimized. When Nur refused to be kissed by Kanshi Ram, the master had beaten him mercilessly. His school life is full of such bitter experiences. Anand is critical about such corrupt practices in the educational system—teachers expecting gifts from children, their callous and merciless punishment, teachers like Kanshi teaching immorality to the naïve and innocent children, biased and discriminating attitude of selectors during employment.

Nur considering his sufferings, pains and failure to achieve job, feels so desperate and dejected that he asks repeatedly “Why do you drag me into the dust making me an MA” (96). It becomes a refrain for him since he does not find any hopes in the future. By passing Master of Arts, he feels completely destroyed. It is true also. Being an MA, he can not apply for nor do lower jobs. ‘The educated man falls between two stools. In short he becomes a miserable misfit’ (Paul, 71). It is invariably the failure of the educational system that a person having good academic record and masters degree remains jobless and suffers throughout the life. Anand shows that merit becomes insignificant for jobs in the present educational system. It becomes evident in the case of Nur. As a result of sneers and mockery of people, he unwillingly accepts clerkship in post office. But here Anand shows that Nur does not get the clerkship on the basis of his own merit. Rather, it was recommendation and influence of Sheikh Pir Baksh, the Minister of Education that brings job for Nur. He is the same Pir Baksh who by using his influence makes his son select for the post of deputy collector. So ultimately it is recommendations and influence rather than merit that brings good results in the educational system.

Unlike Anand’s other novels which cover single span of the day for its action, *The Lament* exhibits stillness. There is no shift in the locale i.e. the sick room, with little action. The people come and go to visit the sick room. Nur lies on the bed like a corpse throughout the story. Action does not go beyond the room. Whatever action that novel shows is in the past life of Nur which Anand brings out through stream of consciousness. There is no action or activity as such in the novel except some informal dialogue between Nur and Gama and some exchange of words between Nur and his father. Major happenings in the life of Nur are part of his past life and are depicted through the flow of thought in Nur’s mind. Hence action shifts from present time to past and again from the past to present. Anand has used the stream of consciousness skillfully and dexterously in depicting Nur’s past life and merging it with the present. The technique of interior monologue and memory digression are successfully employed to develop the plot and to reveal the implications of the momentous theme.

Anand has used very few characters in the novel to unfold the entire story of Nur. Apart from Nur, there are only three characters i.e. his father, his friend Gama and grandmother—who play little active part in the novel. The rest i.e. Dr Pochanwala, Nur’s wife Iqbal, his mother-in-law and the neighboring women who howl at chorus, are minor characters who make least contribution to the story. Nur’s interaction is with only his father, Gama and the grandmother. But still the novel builds and maintains the impact successfully. Though a short novel, it engages the readers up to the last page. In this regard, the novel appears more compact than the *Untouchable* and *The Big Heart* that depict story of single day and it is equally effective and interesting like the latter ones. Most of the novels of Anand have a tinge of reality as a background in the story. Real life persons, events and incidents become a basis of his novels. Sometimes his novels are completely influenced from the story of real people whom Anand is familiar with. The story of a college friend having tuberculosis and suffering extreme pain and agony becomes a backdrop of *The Lament*. Anand shares about this story in a letter to Saros Cowasjee: “It is well known that before death, or the final null and void, sometimes a man of vision can see the important parts of his life come before him. During his prolonged illness as a T.B. patient, my college friend had written to me of the things he remembered about our life together. When the news of his death came to me, I had jotted down a poem about his painful experiences. Bored with the talk of the tea planters on the P & O boat, I had extended this poem into a long Whitman ballad. I was under the influence of Lorca’s *Lament on the Death of a Bull Fighter* which I had just then read....Jawaharlal Nehru read it at a sitting and heard the recital in the company of a few of his secretaries and made the flattering remark that it was the best book produced by the Progressive Writers. I added, “the intensest if not the best” (*Author to Critic* 107).

Like many other novels of Anand, *The Lament* received mixed opinions by the critics. M.K.Naik severely criticizes the novel. Naik pleads: Time and again, his compassion for the underdog bowls him over, his indignation at the injustice of traditional practices, erupts into hysteria; and he can seldom resist the temptation to squeeze the last tear out of a pathetic situation. His long short story ‘Lament on the Death of Master of Arts’ is a glaring example of an unholy alliance of all those weaknesses (*Mulk Raj Anand* 95).

But Naik’s comment is not justified. Since Anand is basically a staunch supporter of humanism, his novels expose the unjust evils and exploitation by the society. Through the novels, he makes sincere efforts to make the readers sensitive about the suffering lot in the society. In *Lament* also he does the same. The novel is not just a story of a Nur; it is rather an authentic portrayal of thousand of youths in society who fall prey to the educational system. Anand’s objectives and perspectives towards art are crystal clear. He does not believe in the dictum ‘Art for Arts sake’ rather he believes that art is for life’s sake. He states that ‘The essential function of art is moral. Not aesthetic, not decorative, not pass-time, and recreation’ (qtd. in Tarinayya 23). Since locale of the story does not shift, C. J. George considers ‘absence of variety’ as defect in the novel. It is true that there is no shift in the locale and entire story happens at the same place i.e. the sick room of Nur. Nevertheless the novelist succeeds in holding attention of readers and the narrative offers a continuous flow of thought which brings impact as a whole. But George praises the novel saying that ‘in spite of these defects, the novel successfully portrays the hero’s great drama of self consciousness through his memories’ (*Art and Concerns* 190). S. A. Khan observes that ‘the novel is sleight in treatment and even the perspectives which it deals with seem to have not been fully developed’ (*The Novel of Commitment* 104). He also remarks that it is ‘a novel with a serious import’ (*ibid* 106). Neena Arora finds the novel as ‘a fine example of the author’s profound psychological insight blended with admirable artistic presentation of reality. In a very limited space and with very few characters, Anand has skillfully dealt with ideas of futility of life and invariability of death’ (*A Study of His Hero* 102). K. Venkat Reddy remarks that it ‘is a very short but significant novel. The rare talent of a brilliant story teller is here combined with that of a writer of deep insight and intense feeling’ (*Major Indian Novels* 25). K. N. Sinha offers comprehensive evaluation of the novel in brief. He observes: *Lament on the Death of Master of Arts* is a powerful novel which surpasses all the novels of Anand in its deep and authentic search for illumination. Its lyricism is withal subtly modulated and exquisitely controlled without an excess of metaphor. The novelists control over experience is indeed superb in as much as everything else is relegated to the background. The medium yields to the pressure of feeling at every point of the narrative. At the same time, an intellectual effort of a high order has gone into the novels artistry, the design, texture, character, and atmosphere taking on the resplendent quality of true and inimitable vision (*Mulk Raj Anand* 45).

Conclusion

The novel brings out the futility of education system through Nur, Gama and Azad who fall prey to education. The novel shows that Gama becomes a tonga driver and Azad goes insane since he could not become deputy collector. But close reading of the novel shows that Nur suffers less because of his joblessness and more due to his father's ruthless and high handed attitude. Nur suffers for his no fault. Shattering of dreams and aspirations due to low caste origin and poverty is symbolic of the today's education system that ruins the lives of many youth. Anand criticizes the education system that does not consider the merit as a parameter of selection and resorts to other irrelevant factors such as recommendations, caste and origin etc.

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