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**“Modern –yet-Modest”: A survey of the role of Gauri in Mulk Raj Anand’s novel The Old Woman and the Cow**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Dubbed as one of his ‘pastoral novels’, Mulk Raj Anand’s The Old Woman and the Cow contains many ‘types’ one would instantly recognize as those belonging to a folk or rustic setting. The female protagonist Gauri is of course, an exception. Starting as a naïve, submissive and vulnerable village girl, she develops in to something close to a trained health worker, modernized, confident and vocal.*

*The view that Gauri is an allegory for Indian woman in ‘modern’ times or perhaps for India itself is one which has been suggested by prominent critics. As it is notable that Gauri’s destiny is marked by her passing through the hands of various men, I would like to explore Gauri’s status as one reflecting that of India, occupied at different times by various forces. In this light, it might be interesting to analyze Mahindra, the man who ‘reforms’ or ‘transforms’ her, and the man towards whom she drifts at the end.*

*Anand depicts Mahindra as a complex figure in whom the best of the two worlds, European and Eastern, modern and traditional, resides. Therefore, if we are to take Gauri as an allegory for India, it is interesting to note that she is finally entrusted to someone of Mahindra’s caliber, a proverbial ‘healer’ aware of the ailing condition of the post-colonial nation.*

*On this note, I hope to apply what Deniz Kandiyoti claims about women’s position in new post-colonial nationalist agendas in “Identity and its Discontents :Women and the Nation” to this novel. Kandiyoti investigates the role of women involved in nationalist projects and claims that while the modernizing (public) patriarchies might appear to free women from domestic or private patriarchies, they actually Continue to dominate women.*

*Kandiyoti refers to women in this particular predicament as those who are expected to be “modern yet modest” (379). I hope to argue that Mulk Raj Anand’s Gauri has emerged as a woman “sufficiently modernized”, but as a woman who will remain in traditional subordination to the new patriarchal figure in her life.*

When reading Mulk Raj Anand's *The Old Woman and The Cow*, It is impossible not to be taken in by its pastoral scenes and fable-like quality. Probably one of his most picturesque and readable novels, *The Old Woman and The Cow* is memorable for its sheer aesthetic value.

Most of the characters the reader encounters in *Piplan* are instantly recognizable as 'types' one would inevitably meet in a rustic or folk setting. Created out of a few brilliant strokes, the characters such as Mola Ram, Kesaro, the Subedhar, the Bania and even Panchi and Rafique Chacha to an extent are registered in our minds as stock roles most essential for the 'telling' of the story. Atma Ram Sharma's (1977) claim in his paper "Folk Elements in Anand's Novels" ratifies this view:

*The folk element is undoubtedly a significant aspect of Anand's art and in a large measure defines his Indian roots [. . .] the spirit of joy in the love and adoration of nature, the intense attachment to land, the spirit of service and sacrifice embodied in the folk heroes, and the element of dour resistance to tyranny constitutes the focal points of folk tradition (p.200).*

The only exception is, of course Gauri. Starting as a naïve, submissive and vulnerable village girl, she develops in to something close to a trained health worker, confident and vocal. She returns as a woman equipped with the tools of modernization, A woman aware of the real 'germs' and pollution within her rural society, and a woman capable of dealing with the prejudices she encounters. She says of her own transformation, "When I first came in to this house, I worried so much about what the village would say, I had no tongue in my mouth. I only did the house work and lay down to sulk and weep on that little bed. I certainly could not think" (p.258).

P.K Rajan (1991), in his paper "The Two Voices in *The Old Woman and The Cow* prefers to view Gauri in a symbolic light:

*Gauri, no doubt, emerges as a symbol of the new womanhood of Anand's humanist conception, and the novel is a powerful indictment of the brutal rigidity and authority of the Hindu social ethos that reduces women to helpless victims. In presenting a woman who achieves her liberation, the novel, published in 1960, is considered 'an early example of the sexual dialectic rife in the 1960s and 1970s ( p.267).*

Therefore, how do we view Gauri? With the weight of textual and critical evidence before us, it becomes increasingly difficult to treat her in isolation, as a mere heroine in a pastoral romance located in an obscure village.

The view that she is an allegory for Indian woman in 'modern' times or perhaps for India itself is one which has been suggested by prominent critics. S.C Harrex evidently supports this line of thinking when he states "She is the 'Cow' of the novel's title and radiates the cow's holiness, softness, gentleness and submissiveness. She has also innate strength and the heart's virtues - goodness, innocence, devotion, selflessness, charity, sincerity, modesty. She is a modern Mother India." (as cited in Rajan 1991). In this light, then, it becomes clear that certain incidents in Gauri's life become steeped with added significance.

Having lived under the authority of her maternal uncle, Amru, we find her being married to Panchi at the onset of the narrative. With him and his family; she leads a life full of constraints, a victim of the abuse resulting from the petty narrow mindedness of her in-laws and immediate community. Nowhere is her limited and miserable life more evident than in the scene where she retires in to the 'Dark Room' where she cannot do much except sulk. Anand, with an acute sociologist's instinct conveys the pathos of her plight, where she's reduced to the status of an untouchable during her menstruation .

Anand writes, "But she must not be so secretive and spoil the atmosphere of my house! I have had to clean up all the utensils again. And I have had to have the house purified [. . .]" (p.38).

Oppressed both by the orthodox and patriarchal values of her immediate community and the economic hardships and exploitations imposed by the economically stronger members of the village,

It is notable that Gauri's destiny is marked by her "passing through" the hands of various men; Amru, Panchi, Seth Jai Ram Prasad, and finally Mahindra. With scant disregard for her personal feelings, Gauri is 'passed on', sold, bought, and kicked out by the various men in her life. It is perhaps worthwhile to consider Gauri's status as one reflecting that of India, burdened by poverty, hampered by restrictions, harmful traditions, occupied at different times by various forces. This possibility is heightened by these words Mahindra utters about the pitiable condition of contemporary India; "All life in our country

today, everything in it, has been poisoned by the importance given to money, property and possession!..First there were the white sahibs and now there are the brown sahibs. "(p.241)

In the light of this association with India, it might be interesting to inquire in to the man who 'reforms' or 'transforms' her, and the man towards whom she drifts at the end.

Published in 1960's, Anand's *The Old Woman And The Cow* does not feature white men, the days of the empire being long over .However it is quite possible to visualize Dr. Mahindra and Dr. Batra occupying the place that white men usually inhabit in Anand's works .Both of them have had the advantage of a British -style education, have cultivated westernized habits and ways of thinking and are liberal.

When we consider Mahindra against Batra , yet another man who aspires to 'possess' Gauri ,it is important to acknowledge that they are dual figures who have emerged out of the same socio -political milieu. They are both products of an educated, privileged class associated with colonial values. Mahindra is of course the man with goodness and principles. He is always seen to abide by his conscience, is duty -bound, and conscious of the flaws of his community and country. Anand writes of him, "Colonel Mahindra fascinated his junior partner and also frightened him with the streak of priggish addiction to principles which Major Batra himself could not feel. Added to the older man's instinctive rectitude was his freedom from money considerations and the conventions of the hybrid lower middle class officials and businessmen of the small town [ . . .]" (p.165) . Anand depicts Mahindra as a complex figure in whom the best of the two worlds, European and Eastern, resides. While being liberal, and possessing an admirable work ethic, he has also something of the holiness associated with Hindu asceticism. This is especially emphasized against the loud, vocal and pretentious holiness of the Brahmins. At times he actually achieves God-like status, especially in the eyes of the naïve Gauri who is, at the moment of her encounter with Mahindra, is prepared to renounce her former Gods. Mulk Raj Anand effectively captures this dual nature of Mahindra's personality. "For Colonel Mahindra, whose wife had died some years ago, had never deviated from celibacy, and though liberal to other people's desires, and earthy in his outlook because of his readings in advanced thought, he was a strict disciplinarian in the sphere of his medical practice .' (p.164)

Mahindra's persona is also enveloped in an aura of tradition and formality. His dissatisfaction with the modern post-colonial Indian society is marked.

While he devotes himself to the cause of the poor, he seems to find no sympathy for the 'lower middle class' and the nouveau -riche values of those around him.

Dr. Batra represents a frivolous, pretentious aspect of the westernized way of life. Portrayed as a drunk, a womanizer and a man of loose morals, his attempt to violate and possess Gauri is thwarted by the timely intervention of Mahindra. At the point of Gauri's return to Panchi, we hear a hint of regret in Dr. Mahindra's tone at the thought of losing her. We are left with a subtle possibility of an awakening romantic interest between Mahindra and Gauri, which is strengthened by our knowledge that Gauri will be returning to him. The story closes with these lines hanging over Gauri's departure. "She knew Dr. Mahindra would be there, and this reassured her she would go to him and live under the shadow of his protection" (p.284).

Therefore, if we are to take Gauri as an allegory for India, it is interesting to note that she is finally entrusted to someone of Mahindra's caliber. Considering the fact that the story contains a modified version of the Ramayana myth, what Alistair Niven says about Anand's subversion of certain events and roles in the 'new' myth is worth noting; "The strength of the twentieth -century writers who render afresh the ancient myths can partly be gauged by their ability to free themselves from the limitations of the myth when it proves too unwieldy" (p.99).

There is no overlooking of the fact that Mahindra is a strong reformist figure very much the proverbial healer, he is aware of the status of the 'ailing' post - colonial Nation. In his passionate ,didactic speech he states , " We must end the cycle of poverty and death .The world died several times because men would not heed the dangers before them...We have to use the instruments and machines wisely, when the old dark ages are ending and new ages are beginning" (p.243).

It is interesting how Anand, through Mahindra, emphasizes on the necessity of using science and technology for the development of the nation .Thereby he falls in to the category of those reformers who do not shun all things connected with the west .

On this note, it may be worthwhile to look in to what Deniz Kandiyoti (1991) has to say about women's position in new post-colonial nationalist agendas in

"Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation" .Kandiyoti investigates the role of women involved in nationalist projects. She acknowledges the fact that modern ,often 'nationalist' states or institutions in post –colonial countries appear to concern themselves with the emancipation of women from forms of oppression imposed upon them by the various ethnic and religious communities they belong to . She observes, "Since the emergence of women as citizens is also predicated upon the transformation of institutions and customs that keep them bound to the particularistic traditions of their ethnic and religious communities, the modern state is assumed to intervene as a homogenizing agent which acts as a possible resource for more progressive gender politics."(p.376) We could perhaps view Gauri's transformation under Mahindra's patronage in this light. Her former life in Piplan can be viewed as one spent under what B .S Walby calls a "private patriarchy" (as cited in Kandiyoti, p. 377).

The old Gauri is severely reprimanded for not being veiled and her sexuality, her movements and her speech are heavily monitored .The new Gauri, after her contact with Mahindra's hospital is comfortable without the veil, is very much vocal and has at her command a repository of scientific knowledge.

Therefore Walby's definition of a "public patriarchy" and women's position in it rings true for Gauri's new situation .Walby observes; "Private patriarchy is based on the relative exclusion of women from arenas of social life other than the household and the appropriation of their services by individual patriarchies within the confines of the home .Public patriarchy is based on employment and the state: women are no longer excluded from the public arena ,but subordinated within it [ . . .]"(as cited in Kandiyoti : p.377).

P.K Rajan, commenting on her transformed self has noted that her new incarnation is less convincing than her previous self; perhaps for the very reason that she is voicing someone else's views .The new Gauri is modernized and educated but she is emphatically Mahindra's creation, so much so that Rafique Chacha comments on the parrot –like nature of her didactic deliveries on hygiene and scientific –knowledge. "Beti, you have come back a very wise Mian Mithu, parrot" (258).

Gauri as an unveiled, "emancipated" figure can be seen in terms of the new

place “Public Patriarchies” have offered to women .I .C Schick comments; “a photograph of an unveiled woman was not much different from one of a tractor, an industrial complex, or a new rail road; it still merely symbolized yet another one of men’s achievements. Once again reduced to mere objects, women were, in these images, at the service of a political discourse conducted by men for men (as cited in Kandiyoti: 380).

Kandiyoti ,quoting Walby, offers the view that ‘modernizing ‘states may seem to introduce a tug -of -war between “Private and public patriarchies” (p.377).In this context ,Gauri ‘s venture from Panchi to Mahindra, from Piplan to Horshiapur ,from ignorance to knowledge etc. can be seen in the light of the following argument cited in Kandiyoti’s paper; “Walby argues that the twentieth century has witnessed a major shift from private to public patriarchy” (p.377) .This angle of looking at Gauri would perhaps also strengthen the possibility of viewing Gauri from an allegorical perspective .

Gauri’s subordination to Mahindra and the patriarchal world he represents, is accentuated by her subaltern position .The Gauri who lived in Piplan with Panchi was young, was unable to represent herself, and was often reduced to crying and sulking in the face of adversity .Do things improve when she is under Mahindra’s care? This very telling extract from the novel is a classic example when the two urban intellectuals, Mahindra and Batra in Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak’s (p.198) terms “speak” on her behalf;

*“Do not be afraid,” said Colonel Mahindra to calm Gauri. “We only want to ask a simple question .Please answer thoughtfully: Do you or do you not want to go back to the house of Seth Jai Ram Das?”*

*There was no answer for quite a minute, and the girl hung her head down.*

*“Speak,” Batra insisted with a heavy accent. “I only want to go back to my husband”*

*“No no!” burst Colonel Mahindra impatiently, “Answer my question straightforwardly! [ . . .]”*

Gauri was silent again and then waved her head in agitation.

"Speak up, girl!" shouted Batra.

"No-I don't want to go there," Gauri said at last. "I want to go home..."

"I knew she would say that!" Put in Batra triumphantly (p.161).

By examining this episode and many similar to this, it becomes clear that, to use one of Spivak's Phrases; "Representation has not withered away" (p.104), in the case of Gauri .In other words, she is still unable to "speak" for herself. Therefore, considering all these aspects, one has to admit that Gauri's figure is one of contradictions. Although modernized, she will remain in and speak within Mahindra's patronage.

Kandiyoti's summing up of the dilemma of the modern woman of post - colonial nations can be applied to Gauri's case .She comments , "However , for the achievement of progress to proceed without undue dilution of national identity (a key dilemma of cultural nationalism ) ,the central symbols of this identity must be preserved and safeguarded from contaminating foreign influences " (p.379).

At this juncture, it would be useful to take in to regard what Partha Chatterjee (1989) has to say about the stance of the Indian nationalist ideology towards the women's question in India from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. He illustrates how in the face of the advent of the most powerful "claims of western civilization" such as "Science, technology, rational forms of economical organization, modern methods of state craft" it became necessary to separate Indian culture to two spheres, the public in which the "positive" effects of western colonization could be incorporated and the private in which the "spiritual" values of the east could be safeguarded. In Chatterjee's own words "The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world- and woman is its representative" (p.238). He goes on to insist that the nationalist sentiments did not advocate a "total rejection of the west"(p.235).Chatterjee seems to align himself with Kandiyoti's observation that while a degree of modernity was permissible and even desired, the core spiritual characteristics of the indigenous Indian culture (condensed in the figure of the woman) were not to be tampered with. (Chatterjee, 1989 p.233-238)Both critics seem to agree that while women may be allowed a degree of liberation and westernization by the nationalist ideology, their "inner spiritual" qualities were not expected to be transformed.

From the light of these observations, Gauri, when she leaves the hospital, can be viewed as a symbolic figure. She is modernized, unveiled, outspoken, free of the cumbersome cultural inhibitions which used to stifle her. However, as the critic Rajan (1991) points out, she still retains the key elements of traditional Hindu womanhood. He observes, "But all her spiritedness she uses only for one purpose, that is, to enable her to remain a pure Hindu wife" (p.271). He also adds; "But, quite paradoxically, Anand's conscious creation of Gauri as a new woman, parallels an instinctive eulogizing of her traditional virtues as a submissive Hindu wife" (p.270):

Mahindra has, therefore successfully protected her from the "contaminating foreign influences" that Kandiyoti and Chatterjee comments upon. For instance, both Miss Younge who tries to convert Gauri to Catholicism and Batra who tries to seduce her are prevented from 'contaminating' her.

Kandiyoti refers to women in this particular predicament as those who are expected to be "modern yet modest" (p.379). It can be said that Mulk Raj Anand's Gauri has emerged as a woman "sufficiently modernized", but as a woman who has retained her "positive" values. She, in short, falls very well in to this category of women that Kandiyoti claims were popularized by the neo or public patriarchies of modern post-colonial nations.

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