

Discourse of the Marginalized: A Critical Analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's *The Old Woman and The Cow*

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Abstract

Women have had lower social status in Indian traditional culture. The primary objective of the study is to critically evaluate Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Old Woman and The Cow* from a feminist perspective. By adopting this approach, the research aims to illuminate the marginalized voices within the narrative and explore the novel's treatment of gender, power dynamics, and societal norms. The analysis of the novel is grounded in feminist criticism, focusing on the portrayal of female characters, their agency, and the challenges they confront in a patriarchal society. The methodology involves closely examining the text, paying careful attention to character development, narrative structure, and thematic elements. The study reveals how Anand's novel provides a platform for marginalized voices, emphasizing the resilience and agency of women in the face of adversity. It underscores the role of literature in challenging societal norms and advocating for social change.

Keywords: Change, feminist, identity, plight, social realism, tradition, women

1. Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand's 1960 novel *The Old Woman and the Cow* stands as a remarkable departure from traditional narratives, placing a woman, Gauri, at its core. This choice is significant, as it allows Anand to explore the multifaceted dimensions of gender, power, and societal norms. As we embark on this critical journey, we find ourselves at the intersection of feminist discourse and literary analysis. Anand's work becomes a canvas upon which marginalized voices emerge, demanding recognition and agency.

The theme of gender disparities, particularly within the feminist framework, becomes our guiding principle. Notably, modern English-language literature increasingly features works by Indian women, echoing the need to amplify their voices and challenge established norms. Anand's portrayal of Gauri, a woman navigating a patriarchal society, becomes a pivotal focal point for our examination.

Anand had previously addressed the position and status of women in Indian society in his 1946 work, *The Bride's Book of Beauty*. There, he advocated for equality between genders, critiquing the Indian woman's dual role as both goddess and oppressed figure. His vision extended beyond mere rhetoric; he envisioned economic independence as the cornerstone of successful marriages. Anand's earlier writings set the stage for *The Old Woman and the Cow*, where Gauri's journey mirrors the struggle for liberation. Gauri emerges as a symbol—an embodiment of Anand's humanist conception of the modern woman.

Most Indian women are still influenced by patriarchal traditional norms in this century. Indian culture is hostile to women (Ajmi, 2021). In return, the culture gives men a host of benefits and liberties that women do not enjoy. Men and women are treated differently in India even in this modern world (Panchal, 2019). Therefore, this study reveals how Anand shows the plights of the women in the novel and how the protagonist overcomes the challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feminist Perspective

Anand depicts the life of Gauri, a peasant woman entangled in tradition and patriarchy, in *The Old Woman and the Cow*. The novel traces her journey from oppression to empowerment, showcasing various stages of her life. Gauri, as the sole female protagonist in Anand's works, is

a character deserving of special attention. Our examination will delve into how the novel challenges societal norms and amplifies the voices of the marginalized.

Anand's feminist perspective is evident in his critique of patriarchy. In Indian society, women are often objectified for sexual pleasure or confined to the role of child-bearers. Gauri's struggles reflect this harsh reality, shedding light on the challenges faced by women in a world where marriage often signifies submission to men. Through Gauri's experiences, Anand exposes the oppressive structures that constrain women's lives.

Anand's narrative presents a duality. While he passionately advocates for women's liberation from traditional restrictions, he also slightly admires the virtues associated with Indian womanhood. This pressure between modernity and tradition highlights the complexity of Gauri's journey. Anand's nuanced humanism allows him to explore both facets of the feminist discourse. The novel serves as a platform for marginalized voices, emphasizing the resilience of women in the face of adversity through Gauri's story.

Throughout Anand's works, we see female characters and their views in a variety of contexts. Strong and independent, the women that cross Anand's path are remarkable. Fighting is their choice, not suffering. In fact, it's powerful, not feeble (Gilbert, 2006). Anand shows in his works that women fight for survival and empowerment. According to Sharma and Das (2021), Anand's female protagonists fight against societal conventions that are repressive. These women overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles and stand firm in their own identities because of their courage and resilience.

Anand portrays Gauri as "gentle and good like a cow," and marries Panchi, a hot-tempered young man from Chota Piplan in the Himalayan foothills. Gauri is an uncomplaining, and timid rural woman who suffers silently (Pushpanathan, 2017). She tolerates her husband's abusive behaviour and accepts her fate of constant hardship, starvation, and agony (Arati, 2005). Gauri's husband takes advantage of her weakness and abuses her physically and emotionally. Her virginity is being questioned, too. She tries to convince her in-laws of her innocence and purity, but to no effect; after being banished from their house, she returns to her mother, where she faces an even worse destiny. However, Gauri undergoes a significant transformation throughout the narrative. Initially, she endures mistreatment silently, akin to a gentle cow, from her mother-in-law and husband. However, as the story unfolds, she evolves into a resilient individual who asserts her independence. Anand skillfully captures the complexities of Gauri's character, portraying her not as a mere victim but as a multifaceted woman with agency (Anand 1960).

Anand's novel illustrates the humanistic and progressive vision of a world where women are valued companions to men and given equal rights. The societal evils that prevent women from attaining their aspirations of independence and education are the objects of his critique. Women who suffered during feudalism and colonialism, feel terrible sorrow (Purohit, 2019). So, Anand's novel illuminates the challenges that Indian women encounter on the path to empowerment and survival.

2.2 Social Realism

Social realism is a literary movement that aims to portray the harsh realities of everyday life, particularly the challenges faced by marginalized individuals. In *The Old Woman and the Cow*, Anand captures the socio-economic conditions of rural India, depicting poverty, caste hierarchies, and agrarian life. The novel serves as a reflection of the social inequalities prevalent during that period. The central topic of this story is humanism, which penetrates the plot throughout.

"She has been considered untouchable during her period, isolated, and given food away from the kitchen, and not allowed to contaminate." He paints a picture of a rural Indian lady in this era," (Anand, 39).

The cow symbolizes the struggle for survival, highlighting the interconnectedness of human and animal existence. Anand's attention to detail, such as the parched earth and relentless sun, creates an authentic setting for the story. Anand does this by exposing the rigid caste system and the discrimination faced by Gauri. The novel sheds light on the marginalized effects of caste-based oppression, emphasizing the need for social change.

For example, after departing from her husband's residence, Gauri relocates to live with her biological mother. However, her return home does not provide her any comfort. She is treated no differently by her mother than she was by her mother-in-law. The place where she was born and raised, where her god lived, and where she believed she belonged, fails to offer her protection. The older mother and her 'uncle' heartlessly trade her off to a merchant in Hoshiarpur. This cruel action causes intense mental anguish to Gauri and gradually leads to her enlightenment. She cries out: "Oh mother, why are you allowing him to drag me into hell. The goddess will punish you!" (Anand, 127) This marks the peak of her suffering. Gauri is thus betrayed by her own mother, who chooses to sell her daughter instead of the cow. Gauri attempts to defend herself. She commands Amru: "Go away and eat the ashes!...Monster!...Don't torment me! ... and she felt as though now she was inspired by righteousness, by the flame of the Goddess which had come into her." (Anand, 127)

2.3 Identity Crisis

In Mulk Raj Anand's *The Old Woman and The Cow*, the theme of identity crisis is intricately interwoven into the narrative, shedding light on broader societal issues and individual struggles. The protagonist, an elderly woman, embodies the challenges of identity within the confines of a patriarchal and traditional society. Her identity crisis is not only personal but also deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural context of her surroundings. Through a feminist perspective, the novel reveals how societal norms and gender expectations intensify her crisis, presenting a poignant examination of identity and autonomy.

At the heart of Gauri's identity crisis lies her marginalization within a patriarchal framework. The book demonstrates how traditional gender roles constrain her personal identity and agency. For example, the elderly woman is portrayed as merely an extension of her family's needs and societal norms. Her identity is closely linked to her domestic duties, as evidenced by the description of her as "an elderly woman who had nothing but memories and a fading sense of self in a world that had moved beyond her" (Anand, p. 45). This passage underscores her existential dilemma, as her identity is reduced to her past memories and her diminishing relevance in a changing society.

Furthermore, Gauri's crisis is compounded by her social and economic circumstances. She epitomizes the struggles of women who, due to their financial dependence and lack of societal support, undergo a profound identity crisis. The novel portrays her economic hardships, illustrating how her limited resources impact her self-perception. When faced with the prospect of losing her cow, her sole source of income and a symbol of her personal value, she contemplates her diminishing worth: "Without the cow, I am nothing but a burden" (Anand, p. 67). This statement exposes the deep intertwining of her identity with her economic standing, and how her value is assessed based on utility rather than inherent worth. Anand's narrative structure and character development emphasize the feminist perspective on Gauri's struggle with societal constraints. Her interactions with other characters serve as a reflection of the patriarchal norms that limit her agency and voice. The lack of empathy shown by her son towards her plea for help not only showcases her marginalization but also symbolizes the broader societal tendency to overlook and silence Gauri who does not conform to traditional roles.

The Old Woman and The Cow delves deep into the complexities of identity crisis, particularly from a feminist standpoint. The protagonist's journey becomes a metaphor for the larger battle for female empowerment and acknowledgment within a male-dominated society. Anand uses her story to shed light on the oppressive social structures that perpetuate identity crises among women, advocating for a shift towards a more inclusive and equitable society. Through her resilience in the face of adversity, the old woman becomes a symbol of hope for women seeking to break free from societal constraints and redefine their identities on their own terms.

Gauri, a shy and appealing villager, is depicted throughout the story as quietly suffering. As a result of the abuse she received from her mother, mother-in-law, and ex-husband, she ended up being a single mother. After she meets a well-educated city doctor, her outlook on life is changed. Despite her passive demeanour and cow-like demeanour, Gauri finally overcomes all the challenges she has faced.

Anand's novel offers a poignant exploration of identity crisis through a feminist lens, challenging readers to question the norms and expectations placed on women. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of dismantling patriarchal systems that limit women's agency and autonomy, paving the way for a more just and inclusive society.

2.4 Metamorphosis of Guari

At the beginning of the story, Gauri is completely defenceless, but by the end of the novel, she has triumphed. Gauri has transformed from a submissive, gentle, and humble individual into an assertive, self-reliant one (Hasan, 2009). It is a triumph of womanhood when a woman can make her own decisions. The images of Gauri, who appears to be in pain, are particularly moving. She is being kicked by her abusive husband and being teased. A fight in front of her friends and relatives may be more tempting than the alternative for a wife who loves her husband dearly.

"If I'm a curse on you,' Gauri says, clutching her paralysed limb. Then I'll be on my way out.... Also, if it's okay with you, "If you hit me again, I'll hit you right back." - Her unwavering love for her husband reflects her inner strength to get to the bottom of Panchi's rage and make her vow to keep silent. It was made clear to her," (Anand,51)

Guari's transformation is a result of her friendship with Colonel Mahindra. The soft, submissive, and compliant "Cow's acquiescent visage" has given way to a strong, independent lady. Colonel Mahindra aids in her dreadful existence. Panchi, prompted by the chatter in the community, forces her to demonstrate her virginity. Gauri is devastated to learn that she has no way to prove her virginity. She decides not to continue to submit to the humiliation and tyranny she has experienced. Gauri leaves Panchi's life at a pivotal juncture, despite the fact that she is carrying his kid in her womb. She goes back to work as a nurse at Colonel Mahindra's clinic. Through Gauri's metamorphosis, Anand hopes to demonstrate how, rather than relying on God or supernatural forces, man must rely on himself to mould his destiny. Gauri's courageous fight against man's selfishness, greed, hypocrisy, hide-bound traditions, and superstitious dogmas paints a vivid picture of the pitiable plight of the Indian woman, especially in the rural society, and hints at the changes that are in the offing (Venkataramani, 2016). At the end, Gauri transforms into an independent woman, but her journey from a passive and submissive sufferer to a confident and courageous woman establishes her as an emancipated individual.

3. Result and Discussion

From a feminist perspective, the story *The Old Woman and the Cow* examines the woman, Gauri, revealing her mother's role as a victimizer and that women are nothing more than objects of desire for men. In this novel, Gauri is shown as a submissive lady who quietly endures all the mistreatment from her mother-in-law and husband. From her days as a submissive child to her becoming mature mother, she had been a victim of men's continuous love for her beauty and worth. Gauri's plight starts when Panchi is guided through the wedding ceremonies to meet the young bride, Gauri. For Panchi's demands, Gauri is ensnared in a traditional arranged marriage and married to a guy she has never met (Kumari, 2005). She unwillingly removes her drape, revealing a pale, innocent bride. Gauri has no choice except fulfilling the demands of a short-tempered and egotistical guy, Panchi. Throughout the day, she sexually fulfils her husband while working like a slave. Gauri comes close to surrendering to her mother, in-laws, and husband's coercion and pressure, despite her refusal to accept their irrational and

superstitious views. When Gauri finds out she is going to have a family, she rejoices just like any other woman. Despite her cries for help, Panchhi continues to act irrationally and eventually kicks her out of his home. Gathering her courage, Gauri gets herself ready to go, vowing never to return. Gender prejudice and sexism are therefore prominently shown throughout the novel. After accusing her of being unfaithful, Gauri's husband Panchi banishes her from the home twice. However, when Panchi finds out she's pregnant, he kicks her out of the home, no matter how much she insists on being with him (Shankar, 2017). In this novel, men see women as little more than objects of desire.

Once again, Gauri becomes a victim after leaving her husband's house and moving in with her mother. Chandari, Laxmi, Gauri's mother sells her to Sheth Jai Ram Das in order to pay off the debt she took out on their two properties and the cow. Eventually, the house where she spent her childhood, where her goddess was revered and lived, betrays her ironically. Oh, Mom, why are you allowing him to drag me into hell? She screams. Some divine retribution awaits you! (Parijat, 127). Mohindra a medical man, says to Chandari Laxmi:

The poor girl shouts "Go away and eat the ashes!...Monster!...Don't torment me! ... and she felt as though now she was inspired by righteousness, by the flame of the Goddess which had come into her, (Anand, 127).

Anand reveals a diseased culture that shows even a cow is preferable to a female. Finally, Gauri manages to free herself from Jai Ram Das. "Gauri violently wriggled him off her and then threw him to the floor." (Anand, 145). In addition, the Colonel helps her realise her value while she serves the ill. Then, Gauri has grown into a strong, self-reliant lady who is no longer frightened or afraid and who can confidently confront life's challenges.

This novel highly helps the plight of women to be gotten rid off from Indian society. Besides, education also frees women from the bonds of superstition, and a job gives them financial stability. The novels highlights that women can acquire both dignity and freedom by becoming financially independent.

Gauri is an uncomplaining and timid rural woman who, suffers silently. Her husband takes advantage of her weakness and abuses her physically and emotionally. Gauri retains the typical qualities of an Indian woman, such as innocence and purity of soul. However, we can see Gauri as an interesting character, and her gradual rejection of the traditional male-dominated culture is shown as a positive step in and of itself. Gauri was not shown as a weak, obedient woman any more. When things didn't go her way, she showed her true character and power. Her refusal to submit to social restrictions and rigidities when confronted with them by village elders leads her to believe that she would prefer to live in self-isolation and obscurity than go along with the dumb social custom. In a patriarchal culture, *The Old Woman and the Cow* depicts women's struggles to maintain their autonomy and sense of identity (Yadav & Jadaun (2021).

In "The Old Woman and The Cow" by M. R. Anand, the central character, the Old Woman, embodies resilience and the struggles of rural life in India. She exemplified aged wisdom acquired through experience and established herself as a folk symbol of traditional values. The Old Woman has been depicted to be a protector, which is the most personal relationship this old woman shares with her cow—a source of income and emotional sustenance. Her character embodies the themes of poverty, endurance, and the intimate relationship between humans and animals, reflecting the socio-economic realities of the time.

The Cow in the story is not just an ordinary animal in the life of the Old Woman; she provides sustenance, but, more importantly, companionship. In most villages, cows represent both milk and income and are meaningful to the community. The health and the well-being of the cow would directly reflect Old Woman's survival; thus, it makes her depend solely on that animal. In this respect, the relationship of the two has proven to the Old Woman that sometimes, in a cruel world, people need nurturing care as portrayed by Anand.

Together, the Old Woman and The Cow represent the ideas of survival, companionship, and the simplicity in the rural lifestyle. Their relationship speaks to the struggles of so many in India's agrarian society during that period as it also sings in praise of dignity found in their everyday lives. Anand beautifully portrays a story of strength in adversity and appeals to the conscience of readers to acknowledge the dignity in people who often remain relegated to the periphery.

4. Conclusion

Most Indian women are still victims of patriarchal norms even in this contemporary time. Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Old Woman and The Cow* is a powerful critique of hypocrisy. Anand's novels paint a complex picture of Indian women and the responsibilities they play in their homes and communities. His female characters' fight against the harsh norms that society places on them. He takes issues with the social evils that prevent women from realizing their independence and education ambitions. Anand gives his female character a strong personality and talent to overcome her challenges. Despite being influenced by society and culture, women retain agency and a voice. His writing focuses on the influence of gender dynamics and redefining the representation of women in Indian literature. Anand's novel, *The Old Woman and the Cow* explores the challenges that women face in maintaining their uniqueness and autonomy in a patriarchal society. In his novels, he develops female characters, illustrating the social and cultural developments that have affected Indian women over time. These conflicts include love and obligation, patriarchy and feminism and tradition vs modernization. The novel illustrates that women must be treated with dignity and honor. Furthermore, while expressing her strong condemnation of the violent treatment of women, the author also looks into the matter by examining the best course of action for an Indian woman seeking freedom.

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Mrs. J Jasmine Suja conceptualized and developed the literature review, developed objective, analyzed, presented the arguments in the article and wrote the manuscript. Dr. M.R. Bindu contributed to edition and revision of the paper. Dr. Prakash A contributed to provide critical insights and ensured the overall language clarity of the paper. Dr. Thamarai Selvi M.D contributed to edition and revision of the paper.

We, authors, discussed the research findings, contributed to the interpretation of the results, reviews and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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