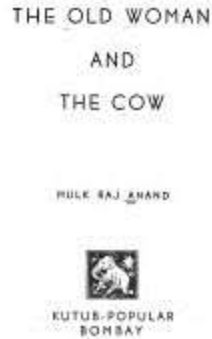


A Feministic Reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Gauri*

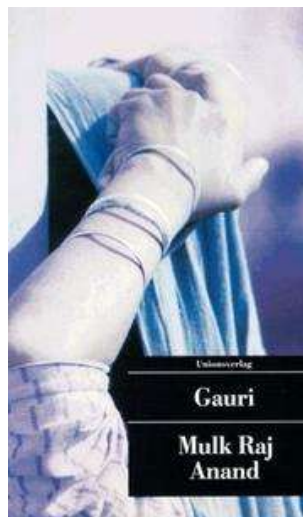
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The Old Woman and the Cow

Gauri, published in 1960 under the title *The Old Woman and the Cow*, is Anand's only novel with a woman protagonist. G.S Balarama Gupta feels "Anand's principal objective in writing *The old Woman and the Cow* is to hint at the emergence of Modern Indian Women, and he achieves it admirably." (Gupta, 95) Being the only Woman protagonist in Anand's fiction, *Gauri* deserves a special mention. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the character of from the point of feminism.



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Female, Feminism and Feminist

The concept of feminism is quite broad and it is really difficult to decide whether it has achieved the aim it had set before itself. Since the past decade, the terms ‘Feminist,’ ‘female’ and ‘feminine’ have been used by feminists in a variety of different ways. In the words of Toril Moi, “The words ‘Feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating support to project the aims of the new women’s movement which emerged in the late 1960. Feminist criticism then is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature.” (Moi, 204)

The feminist movement was spearheaded by those who revolted against the sexist image of woman in patriarchy. “Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as inferior. Male power is exerted directly or indirectly in civil and domestic life to constrain women.” (Seldon, 131-132) In the Indian society, a woman is looked upon either as an object of sexual gratification or a child bearing machine.

Affirming Independence



Courtesy: www.mulkrajanand.bookchums.com

Gauri is Anand’s only attempt in this direction whereas most of his early novels “reveal an aim and a sense of direction much as an avalanche or flood shows a fury of momentum, a surge of force, a heady rush towards the goal.” (Iyneger, 333) In *Gauri* the focus is primarily on “women who are today in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely

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the life of a human being. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundations.” (Beauvoir, 18)

Three Phases of the Novel *Gauri*

The novel can be divided into three phases. The first phase, covering the first two chapters, shows Gauri as gentle as a cow, suffering mutely at the hands of her mother-in-law and her husband. The next four chapters constitute the second phase during which Gauri, driven out of her house, undergoes her metamorphosis as a result of her life at Hoshiarpur. The last chapter, in which Gauri returns home only to leave her husband, finally represents the last phase. Anand illustrates his feminist stance through the fate of a peasant woman, Gauri, caught in the maelstrom of patriarchy. Here is a woman in all her aspects- the young girl, the married woman, the mother-to-be, the devoted wife and the tortured one, but atlast to be a triumphant female at the end. Anand, despite his not being the feminist writer and a male above all, has certainly set the priorities of this ‘other sex’ right.

Characterization of Gauri

Anand takes his time to introduce Gauri, the first chapter serving almost as a prologue, as Panchi is led through the marriage rituals to his first sight of the young bride. As Gauri reluctantly lifts her *dupatta* from her face, we first see “... a light wheat brown face with regular strong peasant features and the bloom of innocence in it.” (*Gauri*, 29)

Henceforth we see the quest of this innocent creature for an identity, individuality, an assertion of the fact that she too exists. “Anand may not be conventionally religious himself, yet he defers to the symbolic gentleness of the sacred animal- but her humility is fortified by an awareness of the world and some sense of its future which the other women in community totally lack.” (Niven, 107) Gauri becomes her true self only towards the end of the novel which shows the emergence of an emancipated woman in her.

Exploding the Taboos

Anand has exploded the menstruation taboo in this novel. He depicts a woman in rural India who “has been considered untouchable during her period, isolated, and given food away from the kitchen, and not allowed to contaminate.” (*Gauri*, 41) He has used the proverbial “dark room” to which Gauri often retires and curls upon a small string *charopai* throughout the day during her menstruation, and after her quarrels with Kesaro and Panchi. Anand wants to suggest that women are often victimized for breach of this stupid convention that forces them during their menstruation into isolation as untouchables.

A Slave to Her Husband

Having been married in a conventional ritual, to a husband she had not seen before, she finds herself condemned to a conventional arranged marriage. She becomes a slave to Panchi’s desires and obliges him by submitting to his impatience and narrow-mindedness without protest. Her duties are to cook, to clean and to satisfy her husband sexually, whenever it seems right to him. “The irony of the situation is that Panchi himself does not greatly venerate tradition, nor do many of his fellow villagers. They are motivated more by a fear of what other people will think, then of how they will appear in the eyes of God.” (Niven, 108)

While at her in-laws’ house Gauri abides by her mother’s parting advise “be like Sita.” (*Gauri*, 30) But Kesaro and Panchi ill-treat her and regard her as the incarnation of the Goddess Kali. Panchi thinks: “my aunt Kesari is right when she says this bride is the incarnation of Kali, the black Goddess who destroys all before her, who brings famine in her beauty and lays bare whole villages.” (*Gauri*, 33) Kesaro, taking the role of a ruthless mother-in-law continues her hate campaign against Gauri. She abuses Gauri calling her “a whore from Piplan,” “filthy woman,” “sweeper woman,” “shameless” etc. She blames her going out without putting dupatta “on her head and maliciously accuses her of being free with the young men like subedar’s son Rajguru while Panchi is away. This frustrates Panchi and he beats Gauri. He justifies his beating thus: “...the husband has to chastise his wife if she goes wrong.” (*Gauri*, 51)

“Feminine Virtues”

Her feminine virtues of steadfastness in love and loving concern for her husband are further vindicated when she willingly parts with her gold earrings- her only asset, her wedding

gift from her husband and therefore all the more precious. She requests him to pawn them to help him pay for seeds, lentils and rice till the next harvest.

Though Gauri is pleased with the occasional conjugal warmth she enjoys at Panchi's hands, she recoils from his brutality. Genuine love lies in the annihilation of ego, but Panchi is egoistic, temperamental and 'heedless'. Mutual trust and equality, the essential requisites of married life are totally absent in their household. But Gauri's struggle is more fundamental. All that she aspires for is to be accepted as an individual and not for the equal rights of man and woman. In spite of her dogged devotion to Panchi, he rejects her at the revelation of her pregnancy and this drives her to despair. Consequently, she is driven out of her home.

Sell the Daughter Not the Cow!

After leaving her husband's home she comes to live with her own mother. But her 'home coming' offers no solace either. She is treated not a whit better by her mother than she was by her mother-in-law. Here, the home where she was born and brought up, where her goddess dwelt and where she thought she belonged, fails to shelter her. The older mother and her 'uncle' mercilessly barter her away to a seth in Hoshiarpur. This mean act gives acute mental agony to Gauri and slowly leads to her awakening. She shrieks: "Oh mother, why are you letting him to drag me into hell. The goddess will punish you!" (*Gauri*, 127) This is the height of her persecution. Gauri is thus betrayed by her own mother who has to sell her daughter rather than the cow. Gauri tries to save herself. She shouts at 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."(*Gauri*, 127)

Self-Protection

Unable to win Gauri's love by courtship, seth Jai Ram Das, tries to outrage her modesty. When he makes sexual advancement towards her, Gauri, firm like a rock, becomes her own protector. "Gauri pushed him off her by a violent wriggle and, then thrust him away, on the floor." (*Gauri*, 145) After a relentless struggle at the hands of the old seth Jai Ram Das, she comes under the benign spell of colonel Mohindra, the champion of modernity.

Awakening

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Colonel Mahindra acts as an 'eye-opener' and she is awakened to her own intrinsic worth. From the monotonous routine of scrubbing, cleaning and pampering a grumpy husband to serving the sick, from the constant wearing of *purdah* to the occasional use of the hospital mask, is certainly a tremendous improvement in her situation. Having led a service minded life at the hospital, she finds her unilateral, selfless devotion and suffering meaningless.

Having suffered considerable setbacks during the period of her separation from Panchi, she manages to come up dry out of deeply troubled waters. It enables her to shed her initial garb of coyness and brave the struggle of life fearlessly and courageously "like Hardy's Tess she has by now abandoned the Gods of her religion and yet she seems predestined by a malevolent fate to attract the attention of those she would most dearly wish to resist." (Niven, 108) Even then she fights bravely and treads safely, be it the immodest inclination of Seth Jai Ram Das to whom her own mother had bartered her for a handful of rupees, or Dr Batra - an assistant doctor in Colonel Mahindra's hospital.

Succumbing to the Pressure of Conventions

Gauri returns from the hospital as an educated individual and straight away discards the *purdah* and its stupid conventions. She quotes colonel Mahindra: "...education will make us masters of our destiny..." (*Gauri*, 240)

As it stands marriage normally subordinates wife to husband, and the problem of their mutual relations is positioned most sharply towards the female who has to live in her husband's house. We see that Gauri, as a traditional Indian wife to the core, is unable to uproot her allegedly stigmatized being from Panchi, her husband. Even though she does not subscribe to the absurd conventions and superstitious beliefs, she nearly succumbs to their pressure. Any other present day woman would never have entertained the thought of going back to her husband, who had so mercilessly and thoughtlessly abandoned her on the road, instead of letting both their destinies ride on together.

Gauri is quite happy when she comes to know that she is going to be a mother. But Panchi is shocked at this news. "His dark soul was overwhelmed by the sudden adolescent fears of fatherhood and the dread of the child coming." (*Gauri*, 101) Foolishly and recklessly, once

again he abuses his wife in the wake of local malice. Poisoned by the unkind remarks of the village people, he once again turns her out of the house. He remains unmoved by her pleading and begging. In his insanity he becomes blind to her physical condition, not to speak of her mental agony.

Metamorphosis

Thus the process of metamorphosis which Gauri undergoes gets accomplished at this juncture. Once again Gauri has to collect the remnants of strength in her, brace herself and step out never to come back: “She wiped her eyes with the *pallav* of her *saree*, lifted her head and walked on, without looking this side or that.” (*Gauri*, 264) The acid test of this transformation in her comes out when Panchi drives her out of the house once again, his mind poisoned by malicious gossip. She does not, as she had done earlier, go out as a helpless, forsaken creature, but as a woman conscious of her rights and confident of fending for herself.

An Epic Background

Anand does not try to hide the fact that the framework of *Gauri* comes from the Ramayana; Rama’s rejection of Sita because everyone doubted her chastity after her abduction by Ravana parallels the story of Panchi and Gauri. But here Panchi is certainly no Rama whereas Gauri without any doubt emerges as a modern counterpart of Sita. No earth opens to swallow her up. Nor does she vindicate her chastity in the mythic manner in which her mythic counterpart Sita had done. Instead, she makes up her mind to face the world and to continue the struggle for her existence with courage and dignity.

Feminism is Celebrated

It is not without significance that Anand belies the oft-repeated propaganda of the western female feminists that male writers are by nature incapable of doing justice to their female characters. No doubt, Anand has dedicated a considerable portion of the novel to delineate the passive and docile nature of Gauri and her long and silent sufferings and sucking up, which may invite cynical remarks from the female feminist critics. Nevertheless, the strength with which he endows Gauri later, to overcome her docility, acquire an independent identity and

openly revolt against her cowardly husband as well as the whole male-dominated society is enough to receive feminist applause.

Feminism thus gets amply illustrated in the novel. While stressing the need for emancipation of women, Anand also suggests that women themselves should break the ties that bind them. Female emancipation is not possible without female assertion and of course, economic independence. In the end Gauri emerges as an independent woman, but her transformation from a passive and docile sufferer to an assertive and bold woman makes her an emancipated woman. Promila Pal Sudhakar rightly points out: "Though a woman, Gauri the heroine falls in line with Anand's suppressed heroes. But when most of his heroes register their protest within the framework of the evil society, Gauri sheds her narrow domestic coils before they could strangle her to death and escapes into the refreshing world of modernity." (Sudhakar, 116) Thus, Anand has successfully achieved the goal of putting forth a really remarkable end to the cycle of exploitation of the 'so-called' weaker sex. He has presented to the world the picture of a truly liberated Indian woman, who in the midst of all the torture she is made to endure, can assert her freedom and self-respect, and is able to lodge a protest against her suffering through positive action.

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