

The Plight of Plantation Laborers: The theme of imperialistic exploitation and human dignity in Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*

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Abstract -This paper offers a critical examination of Mulk Raj Anand's 1937 novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* through the lens of social realism, highlighting the grim socio-economic conditions faced by Indian plantation laborers under British imperial rule. The Macpherson Tea Estate emerges as a microcosm of systemic exploitation sustained by colonial capitalism. At the heart of the narrative lies Gangu, a destitute peasant deceived by the illusion of prosperity, only to be trapped in a cycle of wage slavery and debt bondage. The study explores the multiple dimensions of oppression within the colonial structure—economic deprivation, physical and sexual violence, and a corrupt judicial apparatus—that collectively strip laborers of their basic humanity. Gangu's tragic death and the subsequent denial of justice stand as a searing indictment of imperial exploitation and a poignant affirmation of the laborers' enduring struggle for dignity and selfhood.

Keywords: Imperialism, Exploitation, Wage Slavery, Coolie, Human Dignity

I. INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand's 1937 novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* stands as one of the sharpest indictments of British imperialism in Indian English literature. Through the microcosm of the Macpherson Tea Estate in Assam, Anand exposes the ruthless economic and moral dimensions of colonial capitalism, showing how the British system reduced Indian laborers to commodities. The novel powerfully dramatizes how an apparatus of economic exploitation and racial domination systematically robs workers of both livelihood and dignity. Anand, a socially committed realist and an early pioneer of Indian English fiction, turns the tea plantation into a chilling metaphor for the colonial state—an enterprise where profit is elevated above humanity and ethical responsibility.

At the heart of the narrative is Gangu, a poor peasant from Punjab, who exemplifies the tragedy of colonial subjugation. Duped by Buta, a smooth-talking recruiter for the tea companies, Gangu leaves his village with dreams of financial security and freedom from debt. The promise of a “fresh start” proves illusory; it becomes the bait that lures him into a structure of bondage. The journey from Punjab to Assam, undertaken with his wife Sajani and children, marks Gangu's transformation from an autonomous individual to a “coolie,” a term that encapsulates both his loss of identity and the systemic devaluation of his humanity. Anand's description of this process exposes the deceptive mechanisms by which imperial capitalism ensnares its victims—offering choice only as a veil for coercion. The migration, instead of liberation, becomes the first stage in Gangu's moral and physical degradation.

Economic exploitation forms the bedrock of Anand's critique. On the tea estate, laborers live under a system of wage slavery, earning no more than three annas a day—an amount calibrated not for survival but for perpetual poverty. The scant wages are compounded by the manipulative tactics of the company store, which sells adulterated goods at inflated prices and employs faulty measures. This system ensures that workers are constantly indebted to the plantation economy. Anand portrays this as a form of debt bondage, the invisible chain that binds workers as effectively as physical restraint. Unlike chattel slavery, which announces its cruelty openly, this modern economic slavery hides its violence behind the semblance of legality and contractual obligation. In portraying this, Anand anticipates later Marxist readings of capitalism as a mechanism that transforms

human beings into replaceable components of production. The tea harvested by the Indian laborer feeds the wealth of distant British shareholders, while those who generate that wealth remain trapped in hunger and despair.

This structural exploitation is underpinned by a racial ideology that legitimizes cruelty and normalizes inhumanity. The British planters—particularly Croft-Cooke, the estate manager, and Reggie Hunt, his young assistant—embody the arrogance and racism that animate imperial domination. To them, the Indian laborers are “sub-human,” undeserving of dignity, and fit only to serve. The housing of the coolies—known as the “coolie lines”—stands as a physical manifestation of this hierarchy. Anand’s descriptions evoke an atmosphere of filth, disease, and decay: overcrowded huts, putrid water, and stagnant waste. When cholera breaks out and claims Sajani’s life, Croft-Cooke’s refusal to spend money on basic sanitation, justifying it as an unnecessary expense for “natives,” encapsulates the economic logic of empire. Human life, in this system, has no intrinsic value; it is weighed only in terms of productivity and profit. Through such episodes, Anand makes a sweeping moral indictment of British capitalism’s complicity in human suffering.

Among the most harrowing aspects of colonial oppression Anand represents is the violation of women’s bodies. On the plantation, sexual exploitation serves as both an instrument of domination and a symbol of conquest. The vulnerability of young women becomes another terrain of control, where racial power converges with gendered violence. Reggie Hunt’s attempted rape of Gangu’s adolescent daughter, Leila, constitutes the novel’s emotional climax and moral turning point. It is in this moment that Gangu—who has passively endured injustice throughout—reclaims his humanity through resistance. In defending Leila, he strikes Hunt, asserting, at last, a right to dignity and agency. Yet his act of defiance is punished with immediate and fatal violence: he is shot dead by Croft-Cooke. Anand’s depiction of this tragedy reveals both the brutality and the paradox of colonial authority—it demands obedience but fears the assertion of selfhood. Gangu’s death becomes the inevitable culmination of his journey from hope to despair, mirroring the

destruction of countless Indian laborers whose lives were consumed by empire.

The aftermath of Gangu’s death offers a profound critique of colonial justice as an extension of imperial power. Hunt’s trial, superficially a gesture toward fairness, soon reveals itself as a performance—a travesty of justice orchestrated to absolve the white perpetrator. Presided over by a prejudiced judge and decided by an all-white jury, the proceedings reaffirm that under colonial rule, law functions not as a protector of rights but as an apparatus of legitimized oppression. The verdict of “self-defense” not only acquits Hunt but symbolically erases Gangu’s humanity. In Anand’s portrayal, the courtroom stands as a microcosm of empire itself: a space where truth is dismissed, and the oppressed are silenced in the name of “order.” Justice, like every other institution under British rule, ultimately serves the logic of exploitation.

Yet amidst this unrelenting portrait of oppression, Anand introduces a glimmer of moral resistance through Dr. John de la Harve, a British doctor on the estate. Unlike the planters, de la Harve embodies compassion and socialist conviction. His efforts to improve sanitation, secure fair wages, and humanize the labor conditions mark him as the novel’s ethical conscience. However, his reforms are systematically resisted by the management, illustrating how deeply entrenched the colonial exploitation is. De la Harve’s ultimate marginalization—whether through resignation or dismissal—symbolizes the impossibility of moral reform within a system sustained by greed and racial contempt. Even the well-intentioned colonizer is rendered powerless against the machinery of profit. Anand thus exposes not only the cruelty of individual actors but also the structural immorality of the entire imperial enterprise.

The novel’s closing mood is one of subdued defiance. Although Gangu’s death extinguishes his personal struggle, it awakens a faint, collective consciousness among the laborers. Their silent grief and shared outrage hint at the potential for solidarity born of shared suffering. Anand’s socialist humanism shines through this vision of latent resistance—an insistence that even amidst subjugation, the human spirit retains the capacity for dignity and rebellion. In this, Gangu’s death transcends tragedy and becomes emblematic of

martyrdom. His sacrifice stands as a moral victory against an empire built on dehumanization, reminding readers that imperial domination, however powerful, cannot extinguish the will to justice.

As a work of social realism, *Two Leaves and a Bud* operates on multiple levels—political, economic, and ethical. It is not merely a story of one man's suffering but a comprehensive critique of the socio-economic structures that sustained British colonialism. Anand's realism lies not in detached observation but in impassioned engagement; his prose, though grounded in fact, is charged with moral urgency. The tea plantation thus becomes a symbol of the larger colonial project—a meticulously organized mechanism of exploitation cloaked in paternalistic rhetoric. Every element, from wage policies to housing conditions and legal structures, serves a single purpose: to maintain the economic supremacy of the colonizer and the perpetual subjugation of the colonized.

II. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can say that *Two Leaves and a Bud* emerges as more than an anti-imperialist novel. It is a humanist manifesto that exposes how economic imperatives and racial ideologies intersect to destroy lives. Anand challenges his readers not only to witness injustice but to recognize its enduring presence in systems of inequality that outlive empire. By transforming Gangu's personal tragedy into universal symbolism, he affirms faith in the indestructible resilience of the oppressed. The novel's enduring relevance lies in this moral vision—the insistence that dignity, though denied, remains the ultimate measure of humanity against oppression.

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