CHAPTER – V

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The present research is an attempt to explore the delineation of the themes of poverty, hunger and exploitation in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya. Being the novelists of the transition period in the Indian socio-political history, they, through their writings, clearly prove themselves to be the products of the age.

A macroscopic study of the transition period spanning from 1930 to 1960 creates a proper background to interpret the perception of these writers as reflected in their writings. It was a period of political turbulence with the freedom struggle at its peak, of the influence of Gandhism and of a steady withdrawal of the British leading to the ultimate moment of Independence.

Even after the political independence, India was not truly free from the colonial mentality till the next decade or so. It was not only a political but also a great social upheaval that ushered in the era of Indian renaissance. With the rise of great social reformers, the intelligentsia in India was socially awakened and could produce a good deal of writings to depict the authentic picture of the Indian masses.

It is for the first time that the great Indian novelists broke the spell of the glory of the great Indian past or the praise of the British culture and tradition and started a new era of social realism in literature. As the products of their age the novelist of this period observed the social evils like poverty, hunger and exploitation as the prominent features of Indian social scene. The irrational orthodoxy, the shackles of superstitions and the confusion of faiths also appear to be
some of the undercurrents of the Indian society. No doubt, the subjects of the novels such as the great heroes of the past or the stories of romances and adventures of gods were substituted by the poor and the destitute that included the peasants, the lowcaste, the labourers and the women.

Among a large number of novelists that emerged on the literary scene, Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya shared the same social perspective of highlighting the social evils that led the downtrodden to poverty, hunger and exploitation. While Anand belongs to the first generation, Bhattacharya and Markandaya to the second generation of Indian novelists in English. All the three writers hail from higher social classes but they develop a sense of concern and compassion for the downtrodden due to the influence of their western liberal education and thought in their formative years and the influence of Marx and Gandhi later during their maturity. All the three concentrate on the crises in that period responsible for shaking and shaping the destiny of India.

An exhaustive study of Anand’s social novels reveals that the exploitation of the poor and the hungry by different agencies in the Indian society occupies a central place thematically. The poverty, hunger and exploitation form a vicious circle. The exploitation is at the centre and the poverty and hunger are peripheral to it. While presenting the perennial struggle of the poor against human pettishness Anand expresses his sympathy with and compassion on the poor. By juxtaposing human dignity and innocence with oppression or exploitation he succeeds in evolving a sense of atonement in the polite society. He exposes the rich and the privileged through human situation with his incisive criticism and reveals the miseries of the poor and the downtrodden with a tender and moving pathos and
compassion. By giving artistic analysis of the status of the poor and the exploited in the Indian social system, he focuses his attention on some of the prominent forces responsible for it. There exists, undoubtedly, a potential to grow to the highest human consciousness in the downtrodden but they are made to rest as non entities within the orbit of the society by keeping them ignorant and illiterate all along its long history.

Anand displays compassionate understanding of life in tune with the Buddhist and the Gandhian tradition of ‘Karuna’. We rarely find this compassionate grip on the social realities in any other contemporary Indo-Anglian novelist. Anand could have predicted a radical transformation in the social setup of the Indian society through his novels but he realizes and makes the readers realize that it is virtually impossible on grounds of experience, and thereby proves that he is not a mere romantic dreamer.

There is hardly any of Anand’s novels that does not contain derogatory remarks on God or religion. He strongly objects to the rampant hypocrisy in the practice of religion and the use of it for the exploitation of the poor and the lowcaste downtrodden. For him religion has been a reactionary force, an instrument of oppression and an obstacle to the development.

Anand feels that woman has great inherent abilities for creating and constructing the good but their silly sentimentality and meek acceptance of their own inferior status in the face of the arrogant attitude of the men are responsible for their degradation as is found in The Road and in Two Leaves and a Bud. The woman does not occupy the central position in any of his social novels. They appear only as minor characters symbolising sacrifice, suppression, servility and
slavery. Anand has presented a traditional image of an Indian woman. He has not made any attempt to remove her from the traditional frame and attribute her sense of self realization and self fulfillment.

Anand finds religion at the root of the evil caste system. No other Indo-Anglian novelist has presented the evils of the caste system with universal dimensions like that of Anand. Though the caste system has been ever inseparable from the Indian social system he also paints, in novels like *Untouchable* and *The Road*, some of the most determinant aspects of modernity found universally like the loss of identity and loneliness or alienation in deeper colour than others. Even in case of the class system by describing some of the evil aspects of the class system such as poverty and exploitation as in *Coolie, Two Leaves and a Bud*, and *The Sword and the Sickle*, he enlightens the reader on their adverse effects on the entire human race. Thus he transcends the particular and succeeds in expressing universal outlook.

He passionately rejects the Western industrialization which leads to devastation, deforestation, dirt, pollution, squalor and war. Though he admires the miracles and prosperity brought about by the change in the means of production as in his references of forthcoming flush system in *Untouchable*, he strongly projects his profound dislike for it for its association with capitalistic and colonial exploitation as in *Coolie, Two Leaves and a Bud*, and *The Sword and the Sickle*. The compassionate writer in him turns severe against the English characters associated with colonial exploitation as in *Two Leaves and a Bud*.

Anand writes with the sense of anger against the society, akin to a Marxist’s anger, but his anger has also fringe of the sense of love and compassion similar to that of Gandhi. He, like Gandhi, longs for the change in the hearts of exploiters. Like Gandhi he wants the poor to
awaken the compassion in the minds of the rich towards them not through violence or physical retaliation but through love and sympathy. His protagonists like Bakha, Gangu and Bhikhu dream of a decent social life free of all social evils.

Bhabani Bhattacharya follows Anand by dealing with the significant aspects of poverty with the varieties of different types of hungers. He treats them as fundamental realities in the life of the peasants and the exploitation as an inevitable outcome of the same. He paints horrors of poverty and hunger with pitiless and cumulative details. He concentrates on the human factors responsible for their miseries rather than on the natural disasters as in So Many Hungers!. By confronting ignorance, illiteracy and blind faith of the poor with the hypocrisy of feudalists, the greed of capitalists and inhumanity of colonialists, he produces through his novels So Many Hungers!, Goddess Named Gold and He Who Rides a Tiger a grim picture of Indian society.

If the cry of the poor and hungry goes unheard of, they may lose their faith in the value system and will be provoked to do that which we generally condemn. Poverty and hunger adversely affect not only the body but also the soul. Constant onslaught of exploitation leaves horrific effect on the very psyche of the low caste downtrodden. They turn fatalist. The aspiration for achieving the status of the higher caste or class has always been the trend in the low caste. They do not want to uplift the status of their own caste but want to acquire the position of the higher caste as illustrated by Kalu’s attempt in He Who Rides a Tiger to acquire high caste status through fake identity.

Being a social realist he cannot escape the historical events as the background for his novels, but he does not do it as a historian. He
presents the social problems but not like a sociologist. He gives his own simple philosophy of life but not as a philosopher. He does it as a true artist or a man of literature. He knows that natural catastrophes and manmade disasters both are equally responsible for the poverty and hunger but as an artist he understands that idiosyncrasies and injustice of unscrupulous men are more destructive and fatal than the blows of the natural catastrophes for poverty and hunger, the two curses of the mankind.

His protagonists are the embodiments of certain ideas. They do not live for the personal gain. The social realities they choose are the manifestations of certain deep rooted tendencies of human beings and the characters are symbols of currents and cross currents of these tendencies. On the realistic background of poverty, hunger and exploitation the author portrays the richness of the mind of the poor. On one side he shows the pack of vultures and jackals in the form of greedy rapacious exploiters, on the other, he throws light on the pure innocent hearts through which one can visualize the rays of love and hope.

He is not anti-religious and he accepts the need of religion. He understands that it is the faith that gives strength to the poor to survive but he is against their blind faith. No miracle, as in *Goddess Named Gold*, can happen without efforts. It is one’s faith and effort only that can together change one’s destiny.

Unlike Anand Bhattacharya brings women on the forefront by making them central characters in his novels. He portrays them either on equal footing with his male characters or gives more space to them. Despite their poverty, and their humble status, they are shown brave enough to take active steps to be fulfilled as women. He portrays
women as individuals who are ready to give up the habit of submission and to defy the orthodox, unfair and unjust male superiority. He makes us look at the female as a ray of hope for mankind. By putting her in the whirlpool of miseries, Bhattacharya proves her strong enough to face any crisis she may find herself in.

Bhattacharya follows Gandhi’s moral approach towards life. He conveys the four principles of Gandhi namely, self reliance as in *So Many Hungers!* , self respect as in *He Who Rides a Tiger*, synthesis of the old and the new and the integration of diverse approaches as in *Goddess Named Gold*. Through his novels he reveals how they are essential for shaping the new country. He foresees a vision of the future similar to that of Gandhi.

Kamala Markandaya, continues the similar urge for exposing the true picture of the Indian rural society which lives in poverty and hunger and dies of starvation and exploitation. In her portrayal of poverty she covers all the essential features of poverty, hunger and exploitation. She exhibits the very essence of the concept of poverty as she appears to have comprehended poverty to its core. She covers all the minute details of hunger even. She deals with the psychological aspects of poverty, hunger and exploitation in the different stages of the life of the poor. In order to show the grim reality of poverty she portrays the two parallel worlds of poverty and luxury as in *A Handful of Rice*. Through the tragic image of the life of the poor, she shows her genuine concern for their miserable lot; and through the luxurious and pompous life of the rich she makes her reader perceive the wide gulf between the two. While portraying the causes of the poverty and hunger, she highlights, as in *Nectar in a Sieve*, the natural catastrophes rather than the manmade disasters.
Her fiction is deeply rooted in reality. Being impartial, she plays the role of a neutral observer of the Indian social spectacle. She does not refer to any specific period or a place of action, which makes her themes universal. She gives more importance to the human relations than to the individual characters and situations. She values the inner reality more than the outer one. She probes into the human psyche to perceive the reasons of the human miseries. She does not restrict her characters to a particular class or caste. They are neither stereotype nor archetype, but individuals who grow on their own.

She displays her thorough awareness of the gradual shift in the human attitude towards life that had been taking place during two or three decades before independence. She is not very interested in commenting on the then political movement. Though she expresses her anti capitalist and anti colonialist views through her characters, she does not directly portray the capitalist or colonial exploitation. She does not portray English characters with vengeance but delineates them sympathetically.

She does not blame religion for the miseries and exploitation of the poor. She looks at the peasants’ faith in fate positively. She herself admits her faith in God and asserts in *Nectar in a Sieve* that faith does not fail to bestow mental strength on the faithful. She expresses her anguish over the people’s grudge to feed the poor and fill the bowls of the sadhus. But she does not show contempt to the sadhus. She uses these holy persons and places with a definite purpose. They are used as symbols of eastern spirituality. The temples provide refuge to the destitute and sadhus and give solace to the miserable. Hunger eliminates the barriers of religion and caste and brings all the poor on an equal level. The physical hunger is never satisfied but sanctity of
spirit can be fully vindicated. The poor turn out spiritually rich; the haves-not proves to be the real haves.

Markandaya proves that the plight of the woman in rural India has a meaningful role in the changing scenario of Indian society. She is the first Indian writer who probes into the women’s psyche. A woman occupies a conspicuous role in her novels. She portrays the woman who struggles against those forces which are beyond her control as Rukmini in *Nectar in a Sieve*. But it does not mean they rebel. In *A Handful of Rice*, Nalini is shown as an ideal sufferer and nurturer. The tolerance of these women is born out of their faith. Their strength lies essentially in their innate capacity for sacrifice. Love and compassion are inherent qualities in them and are not blunted by the passage of time or social oppression. Even in novels like *A Handful of Rice*, where male characters are the protagonists, the women are shown calm and soothing as if to counterbalance the ambitious nature of male characters. She shows her awareness of the female consciousness through her characterization. But it does not make her a feminist, all the same.

She views industrialization sans its ill effects following Gandhian ideology and accepts industrialization as a positive sign for the progress of the country. Despite the traces of Gandhian philosophy in her writings, she does not show any direct political or philosophical commitment nor does she show influence of any ‘ism’.

The microscopic study of the social novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya presents an exhaustive picture of their perception of poverty, hunger and exploitation. As they all belong to the same social milieu during the transition period of India they perceive the reality in almost the same manner but represent
it with their individual approach to it. Anand and Bhattacharya possess more detached approach whereas Markandaya is more sentimental. The emphasis of one writer on each one of the themes differs from that of the other. Anand deals with varieties of exploitations, Bhattacharya with ‘so many hungers’ and Markandaya focuses on poverty with reference to human relations.

In view of their sociological research, Markandaya is less convincing than Anand and Bhattacharya. Markandaya’s lack of constant touch with the Indian social milieu due to her expatriate status is responsible for her inconsistencies in case of the social background. Anand too in his attempt to be more realistic gets carried away with linguistic experiments which are neither natural nor normal. Regarding the accurate details of poverty and hunger pertaining to Indian village life, Bhabani Bhattacharya is better placed than the other two.

We do not find the acute psychological delineation of these themes in Anand and Bhattacharya as much as in Markandaya. Most of Anand’s characters are stereotypes and Bhattacharya’s are archetypes. Anand uses his characters as spokespersons of his philosophy of life; Bhattacharya too makes his characters and situations unfold his ideology. But Markandaya peeps into her characters to find out their perception of poverty, hunger and exploitation. Her characters are free to grow on their own. Anand’s characters on the contrary, are formalized, because Anand is of the view that it is not an individual’s consciousness that determines their social existence but it is the class or the caste which determines the individual’s awareness.
Anand depicts the conflict of the class or the caste against the materialistic and social evil forces of exploitation and degradation. But for Bhattacharya and Markandaya it is the conflict between the class and the individual as well. The individual establishes his dignity and nobility while fighting against the evil forces at the risk of immolation and annihilation. The individual shows his readiness to sacrifice himself for the sake of his fellow brothers.

All the three are fundamentally against fanaticism of the religion. Anand discusses all the negative aspects of it, but Bhattacharya and Markandaya find some solace in it. They believe that religion can play a significant role in human life. Both feel that faith is essential for strength and progress. On the contrary, Anand looks at religion as an obstacle in the way of progress. He believes that only the religion of love and work can tender a bright future to mankind.

Anand attacks all the social evils but the first social evil he condemns is the hierarchy of the caste system. He calls it the deepest and firmest root of all other social evils. Bhattacharya does refer to it more with its ill effects in his novels but relegates it only to the secondary position. Markandaya almost ignores the caste system. Her characters do not suffer due to their castes but due to their class. For Anand the caste was so fundamental that he started his career as a writer with the theme of untouchability and returned to it even after the gap of twenty five years with the same intense compassion for the low caste though without being equally angry with the high caste.

All the three writers condemn the degradation of women in the Indian society. Bhattacharya and Markandaya express their regret at it by making them the principal characters of their novels, whereas
Anand expresses it through his minor characters. Being realistic novelists, none of them make their female characters revolt against their exploitation. While portraying the realistic pictures of Indian women, Bhattacharya and Anand protect the image of the Indian traditional woman only. Anand delineates women as altars for pity and suffering. He shows them as puppets in the hands of fate and mere objects of enjoyment for their men folk. Bhattacharya pictures the idealistic woman whereas Markandaya portrays her as an individual sensitive creature trying to find or create her own place in the male dominated society.

Anand and Bhattacharya show their inclination to Marxism in their youth; but their matured perception as writer shows the influence of Gandhi which was indispensable during the period to which they belong. Markandaya does not show any direct influence of any particular philosophy but shows her concern for humanity as a whole. Bhattacharya also does not show any affiliation with any particular ideology but he avows admiration for Gandhi and approves many of his views. However, Anand goes to such an extent that he not only uses Gandhi as an influence but makes him a participant in the action of his novels.

All the three novelists exhibit serious commitment to the welfare of the common people and are inspired by the indomitable spirit that yearns for the alleviation of human sufferings. They obviously write with the clear intention to awaken the readers to the real problems through the portrayal of the contemporary society and its challenges.

They are obsessed, as it were, with the themes of poverty, hunger and exploitation from the very beginning of their writing
careers. In fact all of them come in limelight with the publication of their first novels depicting poverty, hunger and exploitation. They resemble quite palpably with one another in their awareness of the passionate sense of injustice, their recognition of innumerable social evils, their hatred for religious and social prejudices responsible for exploitation, and their sympathy for the servile, subhuman conditions of the downtrodden.

Their perception of Indian sensibility or ethos is strikingly the same, dealing with the widening gulf between the rich and the poor. They condemn the arrogance and inhumanity of the rich and the privileged but at the same time, they also, do not spare the poor for their docility and submission. They believe that, being writers, they must be one with the society for the betterment of mankind at large. It was with this humanistic vision that they chose the form of the novel as a vehicle for communicating their vision of life. They follow the similar pattern by choosing their protagonists from the poor and exploited class of society. They select bitter and gruesome realities resulting from poverty, hunger and exploitation. They make their protagonist undergo bitter hardships and suffer. And finally, they show that the unfathomable richness of the human spirit cannot be impoverished by the evil forces. They can only test the indomitable spirit of man.

All the three novelists uphold the human dignity and human values. The poor preserve the sense of moral values even in the face of dire poverty. The poverty and hunger, which dehumanize the rich, call forth the best traits in the poor. They unfailingly reveal the essential nobility, unselfishness and the moral uprightedness of the poor. The poor do not compromise themselves in respect of their honour, nor do they sell away the freedom of their soul. While bringing out the social
foibles through social conflicts all the three novelists show their firm grip over human reactions to poverty, hunger and exploitation.

The writers show great respect for the Indian tradition and the ancient Indian values but they rarely refer to the Indian mythology, in their social novels. Neither do they show any direct impact of the western philosophy while handling the Indian themes. But they do not fail to show their disgust at the British imperialism or colonial exploitation.

They express their disapproval to the Western industrialization. They are critical about several of their practices which disturb the lives of the common people. They feel that Industrialization will urbanize all life and bring in all the evils of the urban society. It will change the consciousness of the rural people. All the three artists have demonstrated the perceptible shift of socio-economic activity from field to factory and from village to city. The gloomy picture of the exodus is common in both.

They have been criticized by Indian critics as expatriates who are unable to peep deep into the Indian consciousness portraying only the surface reality. No Indian novelist with only the Indian domicile could paint the Indian society with that detachment which is so necessary in literature with which these three have painted it.

In their realistic writing the note of pessimism is dominant, except perhaps Untouchable. Other novels are grim tragedies of the poor and the exploited. Out of the ten novels studied not less than seven novels end with death or defeat of the protagonists. In Bhattacharya’s He Who Rides a Tiger the protagonist triumphs over his own self but it does not mean that he succeeds in eradicating the evils of caste and class system. Bhattacharya’s another novel Goddess
*Named Gold* ends with a positive note, but it also admits that poverty cannot be removed through magic.

All the three are not equally optimistic about the eradication of the evils of poverty, hunger and exploitation in the immediate future. The political freedom cannot be the sole remedy for it and they are proved quite right because even more than sixty years after independence poverty, hunger and exploitation exist as in the past in large parts of India. Though the industrial revolution has taken place in the world, a large number of countries are still recognized as poor countries. It does not mean, at the same time, that writers under consideration are pessimistic. But optimism cannot be sensed in the ends of these novels. It can only be inferred through their total outlook towards life.

They disclose their faith in the basic goodness of man. They believe that if the sense of compassion and love accompany the sense of fair justice, if there is honesty of mind prevailing with the sincerity of purpose, the poverty, hunger and exploitation will be eradicated from the earth.

The intellectual exercise during the present research proves that all the three writers’ portrayal of poverty, hunger and exploitation is so closely intertwined that to separate them even for the sake of study is an arduous task. Their novelistic art makes them create their novels with an intense organic unity. No hair splitting discussion can remove one theme from the other with impunity. The three writers differ in respect of the themes only in emphasis—light or heavy, the shifting of bands of light—bright or dim, and in numerous gradation of tune—high or low.