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“Will of Her Own”: Interrogating Patriarchal Paradigm and Assertion of Gendered Subaltern in Mulk Raj Anand’s

The Old Woman and The Cow

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Abstract

Women as ‘object’ have been subjugated by male hegemony in masculine society. The postcolonial subaltern studies relocate the marginalized predicament of women dominated and ‘colonized’ in the patriarchal cultural construction as the ‘other’, in Gramsci’s word ‘the subalterns’. The subaltern feminist scholar Spivak addresses women as ‘gendered subalterns’. Convincingly focused on the issues of subaltern women, Anand’s *The Old Woman and The Cow* (1960) deals with the mistreatment, neglected and tormented psyche of Gauri and her marginalized position in the patriarchal society and also her protest to gender discrimination. After initial silence and sufferings, Gauri ultimately negotiates patriarchal humiliation and as a ‘new subaltern’ articulates her individual dignity and resistance through her journey from victimization to self-consciousness breaking her dependence syndrome. This paper aims to study Anand’s *The Old Woman and The Cow* (renamed as Gauri) from subaltern perspectives with a view to explore the marginalized condition of Gauri, a ‘gendered subaltern’ and her final resistance to the patriarchal hegemony in her journey from silence to self-assertion.

Key words: women, gendered subaltern, patriarchy, oppression, resistance, self-assertion.

Introduction: Subaltern studies as postcolonial discourse grounded on Hegel’s theory of master-slave dialectics between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ interrogate the social relationships, irrespective of caste, class, colour and gender, in terms of the dominated and the dominant. The term ‘subaltern’ generally denotes the socially excluded and oppressed people at the margin of society. It now embodies any person or group of minority or lower ranks based on race, caste, class, sex, gender, language, and religion. The word ‘subaltern’ was used by Antonio Gramsci in his *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (1971) for the subordinate social classes on whom the dominant power groups exercise certain ‘hegemony’ or dominance by consent (Gramsci 203). Likewise, the term ‘subalternity’ refers to the condition of subordination in the forms of colonial, political, economic, social, cultural, racial, linguistic and sexual dominance. Gramsci talked about two types of ‘subalternity’– ‘old subaltern’

and ‘new subaltern’. According to him, the ‘old subaltern’ is meek and voiceless, while the ‘new subaltern’ is bold and confident to revolt against injustice. Therefore, ‘protest’ and ‘the spirit of resistance’ shape the idea of a ‘new subaltern’.

The subaltern discourse and the question of ‘subalternity’ raised by Gramsci, influenced thinkers like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri C. Spivak and others who employ the subaltern dynamics to the narrative of the neglected and the exploited, and socially ostracized people like lower classes, the tribal and women who are at the margin in the hegemonic power-centre. Following this framework of subaltern studies, the postcolonial feminist discourse postulates that women are ‘the other’ marginalized or colonized by the patriarchy in the process of social acculturation. In the context of masculinity, women are weaker and fragile. The patriarchal society where, to quote Sangari and Vaid, “each aspect of reality is gendered” (*Recasting Women* 2) degrades woman as inferior, ‘the other’ making her a ‘gendered subaltern’. The term ‘gendered subaltern’ implies the gender discrimination or ostracization based on the cultural formation of sexuality. Gayatri C. Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* talks about the ‘gendered reality’ or gender based subalternity in relation to culturally marginalized women, the ‘female subalterns’ considering them as voiceless. Spivak writes: “If in the context of colonial production the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (83). Therefore, woman who is meek is an ‘old subaltern’ because woman hardly can articulate their voice in the male-controlled power structure. Though, later on Spivak argues in favour of Gramsci’s concept of ‘new subaltern’ who can resist and raise voice against the hegemonic domination.

Objective: In the light of the above discussion, Anand’s *The Old Woman and The Cow* will be examined in this article from the stand point of gendered ‘subalternity’ where woman is ‘the other’, the margin and man is in the ‘centre’ of power enjoying the authority. The paper examines how the woman protagonist tries to march from the marginal position to ‘the centre’ in the journey from ignorance to assertion and emerges a ‘new subaltern’.

Women and Patriarchal Paradigm: Woman has been made an object of domination in masculine society. India is, traditionally, a ‘patriarchal’ country where woman is both worshipped and whipped. ‘Patriarchy’, a male-centered hegemonic institution, perpetuates a system of gender inequality “in which female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (Rich 58). In fact, woman in India has been located as an inferior ‘second sex’ while man is considered the superior and stronger sex. Unlike men, women are expected to be emotional, feeble and dutiful. The image of women is created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* describes the relation between the two sexes as basically ‘political’. In the ‘gender constructed’ arrangement a woman is controlled by patriarchy which imposes strict fidelity and subservience on woman. Man, woman’s constant oppressor assigns her ‘a secondary place’ which ensures her life of suffering and injustice.

Anand’s Representation of Woman in *The Old Woman and The Cow*: The Indian novel in English has so many perspectives to highlight on, out of which the artistic treatment of woman issues is one of them. Almost all the writers of Indian writing in English have

practiced to write about women and their world. Like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) has convincingly focused on the issues of women and their status in the patriarchal Indian society. A humanitarian writer compassionate for the underdogs and the underprivileged which chronicle his fictional narratives, Anand's *The Old Woman and The Cow* (1960) depicts with “a keen sense of actuality” (Iyenger 356) the picture of the position, suffering and subjugation of woman in the traditional Indian patriarchal set up, where woman is kept unfelt, trapped and dominated. The novel having a woman protagonist makes an ardent appeal for the recognition and approval of women's rights and dignity. It is the only novel, Balarama Gupta remarks, “dealing with woman and her status in society. It reveals Anand's emphatic plea for the amelioration of woman.... Anand vividly portrays the wretched position of Indian woman in rural society and suggests the changes that are coming about by giving a lively description of heroin's enlightened reaction to traditions and customs corrupted through man's selfishness, ignorance and vested interests” (Gupta: 95-96). Anand as a humanist here emphasizes the equality and justice for woman ensuring development and needed progress of women, the ‘second sex’ in the society. Because he was “conscious of the need to help, raise ... [all] suppressed members of society, to human dignity and self-awareness in view of the abjectness, apathy and despair in which they are sunk” (*Apology for Heroism* 93). He regards each and every oppressed human being as a distinct individual’ (Khan, xix). In that sense, the character of Gauri is, in the words of Anand, his “offering to the beauty, dignity and devotion of Indian women” (qtd. in Verma, 177).

The novel which conveys Anand's ‘concern’ for suffering humanity dramatizes the pathetic plight of woman in Indian male society through the poignant tale of bovine Gauri who is transformed from an obedient, submissive and meek woman to one “with a will of her own” (*The Old Woman* 283). Gauri is a simple peasant girl from Piplan Kalan located on the Himalayan foothills. She endures patiently all the hardships and injustices the society metes out on her. In her life of ‘unremitting toil, hunger and pain’, she suffers from her uncle, mother-in-laws, and even from her husband. She is also mistreated by her mother who sold her to an aged lustful merchant, Seth. She comes back to her husband who rejects her for ‘rumours’ about her moral ‘fall’ even in the critical situation of her pregnancy. Besides, she becomes victim to sexual assault from Dr. Batra in Hoshiarpur clinic where she settles as a nurse under the apprenticeship of Dr. Mahindra. Finally, she makes her own choice and determines not to return to her husband. It is a story of a journey of Gauri from her ignorance to that of self-knowledge and freedom. The journey begins with the conventional womanly life of Gauri that comes to an end with her final decision to leave the village with an aim to lead a free life of her choice. She becomes self-realized with the humanitarian influence of the city doctor, Colonel Mahindra. At last, she grows self-conscious about her intrinsic personal space as an independent individual which propels her emancipation from the male dependence. Ramesh Kumar Gupta says: “The leit motif of this novel develops in Gauri's journey to emancipation” (20). This emancipation develops in three phases. The first phase depicts her as docile and obedient woman like ‘a meek and

gentle cow'. The next phase shows Gauri's consciousness of her injustice and ill-treatment and her attempt to make adjustment. In the third phase, she challenges her oppressors and gives up her husband while bearing his child in her womb and emerges as a bold defying woman. Anand here creates an image of woman different from the weak and submissive one, who "no doubt emerges a symbol of 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 into helpless victims" (Rajan 267).

In the novel Gauri gets married to Panchi, an independent farmer in the village of Chota Piplan. He is "the holy bull" who, according to Dieter Reimenschneider, 'appears to be highly egoistic, full of self-pity and superstitious beliefs and have lost his humanity' (qtd. in Sen 265). A typical Indian dominating husband, he behaves inhumanly to his wife. His possessive but spineless personality compels Gauri to continue a subjugated life of "the gentle cow". The metaphors of "cow" and the "holy bull" suggest the very pattern of their relationship which is of the dominated and dominant one. In the beginning, Gauri is depicted with a traditional image of a housewife who is compliant and unvoiced. She adjusts with the situation in her life till her capacity of endurance because she nurtured the early notion that: "suffering for us, sister, suffering, only suffering for us women" (116). It is this sense of 'suffering' and torture which shroud her course of life, which is commonly experienced by Indian women. She is badly treated in the family and society 'where husband is the senior partner and the wife is under his general guidance' (Altekar 110). She lacks in identity and space there. The detested situation does not allow her importance either in the family or in the corner of the mind of her husband, in spite of her tender and devotion to him. When Panchi is in urgent need, she stands by him and prays for him and harvest. Realizing Panchi's financial crisis she gladly offers her ear-rings, her only possession to him for mortgage: "It will help us pay for the seed and the lentils and the rice till the next harvest" (63). But he buys wine with the money. Despite this deep affection, he tries to beat and accuse her at every opportunity. He taunts Gauri as "betrayal of my salt" (30) and kicks her back. A typical husband, he reproaches Gauri for the outbreak of famine and drought rampant in Piplan Kalan: "only after I have married, have all my troubles begun..." (29). Panchi being influenced by Kesaro again blames her: "She [Gauri] has ruined me..." (29), while addressing her to be the embodiment of Kali, the destroyer. He supports Kesaro when she "calls her the incarnation of Kali, the black goddess who destroys all before her who brings famine in her breath and lays bare whole villagers" (29). She is continuously associated with the destructive image of "Kali Mai, who wears a garland of skulls round her neck" (29). It is the patriarchal hypocrisy where women are both worshipped as goddess and accused as wicked force. Gauri as a rustic woman is domesticated with an image of destroyer, an evil force, without any fault of her own. This is because in the patriarchy achievement and success are credited to the male only whereas failure and crisis are credited to women who get neglected everywhere. Woman once rejected by the husband is considered "unlucky" and burden. Even the family relatives reject her. Forsaken and insulted by her husband, Gauri returns to her mother's home for peace of mind. But she is not welcome there. Her uncle, Amru expresses openly to Lakmi his unwillingness about her

return: “Her husband has turned her out. This unlucky girl must have brought him troubles, as she brought difficulties to us” (10).

Women are not allowed freedom of speech in the male society. Women are expected to be silent, submissive and kept under male control. This is sanctioned even by the women. While trying to poison the mind of Panchi, Kesaro, Gauri’s mother-in-law complains against Gauri: “control her, if you can... This bride of yours! ... She has begun to answer me now, when she was meek and obstinately silent before!”(37). Panchi’s attempt to ‘control her’ creates extreme trouble for Gauri who suffers from marital disharmony and domestic slavery. Basically Panchi’s weak and over credulous nature as a husband, followed by the insinuations from Kesaro and Mola Ram, makes him behave like a “wild bull’ with cow-like subservient Gauri. So Gauri’s married life is disturbed because of the authoritative attitude of Panchi who threatens her with a male chauvinism: ‘It is the duty of a husband to check his wife when she is wrong’ (49). This shows that marriage ‘being the destiny that society traditionally offers women’ (Beauvoir 451) sanctions a passive role for women. This patriarchal cultural ideology is reflected in the typical expectation of Panchi. Even before the marriage, Panchi held the traditional view of the husband-wife relationship which prescribes the subjugation of a wife at the hand of her husband, her master: “— a girl whom he (Panchi) could hold in his arms at night and kick during the day, who would adorn his house and help him with the work on the land...”(5). Here woman becomes an object to be manipulated and dominated under the custody of patriarchal paradigm where wife beating or ‘kicking’ renders much pleasure to male ego. In the name of wedlock wives/women are constantly abused and tormented by their husband mercilessly. Duties socially assigned to women are to cook, clean, ‘adorn’ her husband’s house without any ‘room of her own’. Apart from these domestic chores, wife’s duty is to satisfy her husband’s libidinous desires, humbly succumbing herself to male chauvinism and physical violence. The patriarchal idea of marriage, a sacred institution in India prescribes that ‘husband is a living deity’ (Arora 116), and as ‘pativrata’ ‘wife’s service to husband is only duty and concern in her life’ (Kapadia 169). Panchi having oriented with this patriarchal ideology wants his wife to lead a conventional life of complete docility and submission. A typical possessive husband, he unhesitatingly justifies the husband’s role in chastising “his wife if she goes wrong” (49). This shows the patriarchal hegemonic desire to control a woman simply through the domination over the body. The sexually marginalized predicament reminds one of what Simone De Beauvoir says: “She is thus called ‘the sex’, meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. . . . She is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (6).

Patriarchy values women in terms of fidelity and chastity, one of the supreme virtues cherished by Hindu masculine society. Traditionally, a good wife is expected to be absolute loyal to her husband (Altekar 110), irrespective of his quality and crudity. According to *Manusmrit* (V. 154), ‘A virtuous wife should serve her husband as if he were a god, whether he be of evil character or lustful or devoid of good qualities’ (Kane 562). In this

socio-cultural ethos, it is the responsibility of women and wives to maintain the marital loyalty and purity. Once doubted and challenged it is woman who has to suffer and prove herself pure and ‘undefiled’. Sita in *Ramayana* exemplifies this. Panchi as a member of patriarchal society believes in the ideal of wifely chastity. Deeply overcome by Kesaro’s words, Panchi begins to suspect about Gauri’s affair with Rajguru. Obsessed with doubt Panchi wants to test his wife’s moral purity and therefore, asks her, “Tell me the truth, bitch.... What is the proof of your purity”? (281-282). Shocked at his husband’s behaviour, poor Gauri fails to prove her chastity. She honestly confesses, “I have been true to you” (282). Dissatisfied as he is, Panchi behaves very unjustly. He kicks her and shouts at her: “you have cut my nose, bitch from Piplan Kalan, what curse upon my fate prospered in my marriage with you, daughter of a whore!” (282). The way Panchi addresses his wife as ‘bitch’ and ‘daughter of whore’ brings out the marginalized subaltern condition of women like Gauri.

However, ceaseless tyrannical humiliations and denial in the patriarchal society make Gauri encounter the hard reality. She can no longer bear with her disgrace and exploitation. Now she wants freedom. She prefers to break the patriarchal shackles in order to live with respect and dignity rather than living in perpetual shame and disrespect in her husband’s house where she is wantonly mistrusted. In critical moments she takes the crucial decision to leave her husband. She finally returns to Dr. Mahindra who makes her think on her own self. In fact, Dr. Mahindra’s accompany and inspiration in which she finds only ray of hope brings out her inner self changing in her attitude and behaviour. Self-conscious woman-cum-nurse, she now accepts the crude challenges she comes across. The courage, born out of her inner purity, enables her to defy the irrational husband and the gossip mongering society. Finally, the reticent woman who always “remained shrunk in the shell of her own demure little personality, shy and hesitant...” (Sinha 75) emerges a rebellious woman who, as Ramesh Gupta remarks, “has been changed from gentle cow to a self-willed woman with her own individuality” (21) unwilling to be cowed down. In fact, her desire for individuality creates the spark of revolution in her heart. She cries out grudgingly: “How long can I go on being patient against the nagging of that woman and your shoe beatings on her behalf!” (44-45).

The mood of defiance and self-confidence finds finer expression in her reaction to Panchi who, instigated by others, suspects her fidelity and strikes and threatens her to depart from his house. But out of his utter surprise, Gauri hardly cares of him as she is no more amenable creature to obey every order and whim of her husband. So the way she reacts to her husband’s authorial words not only makes Panchi and Kesaro surprise with her but also shows her defiance and protest: “If I am a curse on you, I will go away... I shall go and work in Doktor Mahindra’s hospital and have my child there. And I will not come back again. And if you strike me again, I will hit you back” (282-283).

Gauri, like Savitri in Narayan’s *The Dark Room*, breaks her long silence against her exploitation. Her voice of self-confidence and transformed-self is again uttered at the crucial juncture of her life – the “Agnipariksha” – the ordeal. Panchi challenges Gauri to

give proof of her purity with reference to Sita whose ‘chastity was doubted during her stay with Ravana!’ (283). She confronts Panchi and the village elders and boldly resists the social customary rigidities. Gauri knows well that she is not Sita of *Ramayana* to be sacrificed. She asserts: “I am not Sita that the earth will open up and swallow me. I shall just go out and be forgotten of him” (283). Instead of the ideal myth of Sita, she now gets associated with the powerful goddess Durga (whose another name is Gauri) who defeated the evil force. So the title is very suggestive of the journey of Gauri from the traditional woman (Sita) to that of a modern challenging woman (Durga/Kali), the fighter. Now, Gauri is ready to fight against the cruel forces that impede her life. Malati Agrawal compares her indomitable energy with that of goddess Kali: “Gauri sparkles with this sudden flashing power that had come into her, turning her into a Kali, the divine ‘destroyer’” (143).

Gauri is no more a self-sacrificing wife, like Sita. When her self-esteem put in danger, she barks like a rebellious tigress and registers her voice of protest against her husband whom she once worshipped and devoted as ‘pati’. Now she, unlike traditional woman, unhesitatingly calls him to be a coward. She angrily shouts: “He is weak, spoilt creature! He pretended to be a lion among the men of the village!” (283). Thus she devalues husband (pati) from ‘paramguru’ to a pretender. She also bravely breaks her marriage which is no more heavenly eternal bond to her. M.K. Naik comments in this context: “Gauri escapes, becomes self-reliant and is transformed into a veritable tigress. This is a neat reversal of the age-old Sita myth in the modern contest” (159). At the end she resumes the profession of nurse to fulfill her life with new meanings she discovers. At this juncture, she is now reborn and a changed soul. M.K. Naik in *Mulk Raj Anand* says appropriately: “The Modern Sita need not renounce life, but can be reborn into a life, richer and fuller, she need not vanish from the world but can re-discover the world” (94). In the re-discovery of her life she emerges a new subaltern, who articulates her profound anger and protest against the patriarchal social system that denies her space and identity through her departure from her husband’s house forever. The novelist remarks:

Her face shone from the pressure of stricken heart, transfigured from a gentle cow’s acquiescent visage of the time when she arrived in Panchi’s house, to that of a woman—with a will of her own She waved her head to forget Sita and thought of the road to the town (284).

The road she follows is a way of her own to freedom, self-assertion and enlightenment freeing her from all kinds of enslavement. This transformation in her “achieved with grace and courage” (Verma 182) exhibits her inner confidence and resistance. In fact, Gauri, a valiant modern woman is the symbol of self-determination and moral strength. Malti Agrawal says: “In sum, Gauri is the replica of a modern woman who refuses to be a fiddle and finally emerges as a bold, dignified human being... Gauri completed her journey from victimization to consciousness and broke from the dependence syndrome” (146). In this expedition she emerges from bovine Gauri to a defiant woman, an Indian Nora. Thus, the novel brilliantly traces the whole process of changes of Gauri from a puppet in man’s hands

to the status of an independent who, like a voiced subaltern, asserts her equal rights and space with man and demands respect, dignity and identity too.

Conclusion: The novelist through the narrative of Gauri delineates realistically the problems of women and their status in the Indian society and poses the questions of equal right and justice, irrespective of men and women. While voicing a strong protest against ill-treatment of women Anand wants to convey the message for women through the example of Gauri that they should be strong, daring and capable of raising their voice against oppression and also fight for their status and dignity even if required individually. So far as the narrative is concerned, Anand represents Gauri as a role model for a courageous and confident woman who strongly resists against her exploitation and emerges as an independent defying woman with her desired value and status in the male dominated society. She takes the final decision to desert her dominating husband in order to live freely with respect and dignity. She initially appears the traditional submissive ideal woman, a ‘gentle cow’ representing a voiceless ‘old subaltern’. At the end, she, as a ‘new subaltern’, contests and asserts the voice against the patriarchal ostracization for an alternative life of her own. To conclude, it can be said that unlike docile voiceless ‘old subaltern’, Gauri, undaunted, self-dependent defiant woman emerges a ‘new subaltern’ who registers her ‘spirit of resistance and protest’ in her journey from self-ignorance to self-assertion.

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