



## THE PORTRAYAL PEASANTRY IN 'THE SWORD AND THE SICKLE': FROM AFFECTION TO RESISTANCE

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**Cite This Article:** Nishtha Bharti, "The Portrayal Peasantry in 'The Sword and the Sickle': From Affection to Resistance", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 2, Issue 1, Page Number 244-246, 2017.

### **Abstract:**

This paper proposes a cross-disciplinary approach to understanding the idiosyncrasies of the peasantry as a class, by viewing them through the optics of fiction and social science. Its primary assertion is that fictional narrative can be an ingenious medium of comprehending social critique in tumultuous times. Fiction can provide an account of subaltern ideas, perspectives, and values which cumulatively represent a society's culture, politics and economic structure. The very act of writing - about someone, for someone - implies a social engagement. It is in itself an agency of self-realisation, which provides one with the confidence of recognising the potential suggestiveness of the creative medium. This argument is anchored around a meticulous reading of Mulk Raj Anand's novel, 'The Sword and the Sickle'. While analysing Anand's rendering of the peasantry in this novel, an attempt will be made in this paper to situate two major postulations centered on the dilemma of the peasantry, as epitomised in the views of Goran Hyden and James Scott. The idea is to locate the interface where Anand's depiction of peasantry overlaps with the ideas of Hyden and Scott, and what this implies for the intuitive possibilities inherent in literary representation.

**Key Words:** Peasants, Fiction, Resistance & Power

### **Introduction:**

Those of us who study politics have usually underestimated the symbolic power of the fictive medium in capturing the collective experience of marginalised groups. This paper tries to rectify such a fallacy by proposing that literature helps us to reflect upon the dynamics through which certain political representations become hegemonic. It contributes to understanding how the dominant modes of power are constructed, how the subalterns are kept outside the spaces of performance of power and the terrain over which such marginalisation can be challenged. A work of fiction is therefore a complex sociological entity. Being conditioned by historical social forces and pressures, fiction cannot afford to disregard the burning issues of the day. Not only does it provide an insight into the private biography of the author, it can also be easily interpreted as a statement about the issues of the author's age, and of the world he lives in (Dudek, 1977). As a storehouse of facts about a plethora of central social phenomena, it reports on human experiences in different historical eras. Through these accounts in fiction, comparisons could be made over time across different societies.

Foregrounding such a logic, this paper attempts to explore how Mulk Raj Anand incorporated the trails and tribulations of the peasantry in his novel 'The Sword and the Sickle' (1942), and how his depiction finds an echo in the postulations of political scientists such as Goran Hyden and James Scott. This idea is based on the belief that by utilising the imaginative possibilities afforded by the creative medium, Anand has made a sincere effort to approach the hardship of the peasantry, finding a space of his own amongst the raging debates of his time. He has shown a deep responsiveness to the existence of social evils, which is easily discernible in his depiction of the plight of the peasants in this novel. This paper will particularly focus on manner in which the peasants in the novel resisted the tyranny of oppressive forces, both native and foreign, and also simultaneously compare their course of action with those described by Hyden and Scott. The aim is to highlight the notion that a work of fiction is never merely a literal statement, it is a site of contemplation, mediation and communication. Even when decades and centuries have passed, the vocabulary of events is re-translated again and again into meanings relevant for other times. Fiction therefore allows us to ask questions about multiple interpretations of political power and its implications. By asking these questions about the manifestation of power, and the way it is evidenced in everyday life, we can examine social relations and understand how they influence our daily lives, which is where most of us experience politics. Keeping these notions in mind, the next section will explore the ideas of Goran Hyden and James Scott to establish the extent to which their conceptualisations are congruent with the portrayal of the peasantry in Anand's novel.

### **Anand's Projection of Peasantry and Its Interface with Alternative Politics:**

In this section, we will attempt to find out how the ideas of both Goran Hyden and James Scott find resonance in Anand's *The Sword and The Sickle*. The reason for taking this path is to determine whether Anand was somehow trying to make his own way through these varied standpoints, by offering his own interpretation of the peasant question in the novel. It is quite conceivable that he used the creative medium to resolve the centuries old debate on the significance of the peasantry in thwarting injustice and restoring fairness.

In his study of African politics (2006), Goran Hyden has opined that a significant amount of agency in the arena of both economics and politics hinges on informal behaviour and institutions. He insists that power

relations in a colonised milieu such as that of Africa, are predominantly personal. They are not just reflected in anomalous behaviour that defies formal authoritative structures. They are in fact the social structures that are embedded in the fabric of our society. Moreover, they are so entrenched that they tend to influence the operation of formal institutions. Hyden is pointing towards the parallel institutions that Africans had created so as to escape the volatility of the market and the wrath of a colonial state. This is the essence of Hyden's concept of the 'economy of affection', that is "constituted by personal investments in reciprocal relations with other individuals as a means of achieving goals that are seen as otherwise impossible to attain" (Hyden, 2006, 73).

This 'economy of affection' is a pragmatic and reasonable way of dealing with the idea of choice, especially in contexts of uncertainty. People indulge in affective behaviour and shape informal institutions for various reasons. They may do so from a vantage point of either strength or distress. They may also do it when confronted with opportunity or restraint (Hyden, 2006, 75). In 'The Sword and The Sickle', we find Lalu taking solace in the fellowship of similar informal institutions. He joins the revolutionary group under the leadership of a Nawab, Count Rampal Singh. Even after his disillusionment with the Count's ideology, he offers his help to the peasants to ameliorate their circumstances, to collaborate with them in gaining their liberty and to escape from their fetters of slavery and destitution.

Two experiences facilitate Lalu's decision in choosing this path of action: his expulsion from the army owing to the rumours that he had been in touch with an outfit of seditionists in Germany, and his awareness of how much the atmosphere in India had transformed during the war that had aroused political turmoil even amongst the simple farming community. The ruination of the rural lifestyle had advanced rapidly during the time Lalu was away, partially because of the urgency to increase production so as to support the war effort. The taxation issues had also been aggravated by the war. While on one hand the peasants were unable to feed their own families as a consequence of the famine, on the other hand they were coerced to pay the revenue by the landlords. When the peasants could not pay the revenue because of the failure of the harvest season, they were ousted from their lands. Even those tenants who had been cultivating their lands for generations were dislodged without any intimation and their land was transferred to the new tenants. All this was carried out by the landlords to demonstrate their loyalty to the Britishers and to support their grandiose life style. There was no authority to which the peasant could have taken their grievances for redressal.

Hayden asserts that one of the key features of economy of affection is that no matter who is involved, the idea is to address a problem by appealing to another person for help, rather than struggling to find a solution on one's own (Hyden, 2006, 75). This is precisely what motivates Lalu in 'The Sword and The Sickle' to join Count Rampal Singh in his endeavours to uphold the cause of the peasants. Lalu's priority is to overcome the hurdles that prevent him from achieving his goals. He understands that in order to present a firm confrontation to oppressive forces, he must unite with the other peasants. And this is exactly what Hyden is proposing - people invest in alliances with others so as to obtain collective goals.

James Scott opines something similar when he suggests that "peasants band together in defence of their lifeworld as the forces of modern capitalism impinge on their livelihoods" (Scott, 1976, 9). What Scott is suggesting is the concept of 'moral economy', which can be perceived as a subtype of the 'economy of affection'. 'Moral economy' mediates the relationship between peasants and other marginalised groups in society and the state or market. In his seminal work, 'Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance' (1985), Scott undertakes the task of better comprehending the emergence of peasant organisations, movements, and rebellions, through 'everyday resistance'. He is of the opinion that more often than not, peasants' everyday forms of resistance, motivated by their disapproval of existing political conditions can provide stimulus to confrontational forms of advocacy politics.

Scott points out that class struggle is ubiquitous in nature and we can find its manifestations in our daily lives. In particular, he points to the political gravity of verbal remarks, people's private characterizations of their higher-ranking officials, the form in which they recollect past events, as well as vandalism, pilfering and other activities. He insists that the fact is, for all their prominence, peasant rebellions, let alone peasant 'revolutions', are quite infrequent. Not only are the conditions which engender large-scale peasant revolts relatively rare, but even when they manage to appear, they are abruptly suppressed.

This does not mean that he is denying the fact that even a failed revolt might attain something: perhaps a few relaxations from the state, a brief cessation of hostilities from the landlords and, not least, a memory of defiance and courage that might serve as inspiration for the future generations. However, such gains are do not hold much import in comparison to the carnage and repression that often accompany defeat. For these reasons, Scott emphasises on understanding what he calls "everyday forms of peasant resistance - the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most of the forms this struggle takes stop well short of collective outright defiance. (Scott, 1986, 6)" Scott goes on to elaborate that for the peasantry which is scattered across the countryside, facing opposition from organized, collective forces, everyday forms of resistance seems particularly important (Scott, 1986). Everyday resistance involves hardly any planning, and often the persons or institutions targeted do not even immediately realise what has been done at their expense. The unpleasant, disparaging remarks that peasants

make or the jokes they crack on the sly about their landlords, employers, government officials, or the like can be designated as forms of everyday resistance. Other examples are peasants appropriating grain or appliances from atrocious landowners and employers; gathering in the night-time fruit or grain belonging to contemptuous officials; and secretly setting fire to equipments that rendered people unemployed, such as tractors.

In 'The Sword and the Sickle', the peasants register their aversion to the authorities through a number of such acts. When the Manager of the Nasirabad estate kills the son of a tenant, they do not go to the court, but make their outrage visible by taking out the procession of the dead body of the child, with the intention of showing their protest. They do not resort to violence, but they do make their presence felt. Another instance of 'everyday resistance' in the novel pertains to the efforts of the peasants to thwart the unpopular forms of collective agriculture introduced by the Imperialist government. It is a remarkable example of the defensive techniques employed by a hard-pressed peasantry. In a similar fashion, evasion of taxes in the novel is another classic tool used to curb the ambition of the foreign government.

According to Scott, when such acts are infrequent and isolated, they are of little significance, but when they become a regular occurrence, it would typify resistance (Scott, 1986, 26). The quality underlying much peasant resistance is that it often brings about instant and tangible advantages while at the same time depriving the appropriating classes of resources. The persistence of such resistance comes directly from the fact that it is embedded in the shared struggle encountered by a class. And this very struggle forms the basic plot line of our novel under study, 'The Sword and the Sickle'.

A close reading of the novel will also disclose that the contours of resistance are set, in part, by the institutions of suppression. The combination of feudal exploitation and colonial exploitation set the peasantry off, for being abused on two equally extractive levels. This phenomenon is in congruence with Scott's idea that the level of repression structures the choices which are available to the peasantry. Depending on the circumstances they confront, peasants may fluctuate between methodical electoral activity to violent clashes or to nondescript acts of theft. This fluctuation is determined by the level of social organization of the peasantry as well as changes in the level of suppression. We find that more than once, the peasantry in 'The Sword and the Sickle' had been viciously quashed from open, radical political activity at one moment to occasional measures of petty resistance in the next. It is in this manner and not through revolts, let alone formal legal means, that the peasantry makes its political presence felt.

#### **Conclusion:**

The success of a literary artist lies not only in the ideas he is projecting but also the manner in which he is expressing those ideas. Anand's creative genius allowed him to rise above the spatial and temporal boundaries of his work and provide his readers with revealing insights about the condition of the peasantry. It was his ability to blend his spirit of inquiry with the major conflicts affecting his times that made his fiction accessible to people from all backgrounds. It is an undeniable fact that at the juncture of India's struggle for Independence, the peasants experienced widespread social dislocations and political perturbations. It is a phenomenon that has been thoroughly documented by historians and sociologists and economists. But fiction has afforded us another way of looking at this occurrence. It has gone beyond the macro-dimensions to tell us what was happening and how the resolution of the peasant question through the community was being exerted. Anand has provided us with firsthand knowledge of the rural world and made us aware of the realities of peasant life. He has successfully brought to bear upon his readers the intensity of the ordeals faced by the peasants and in the process, pulled the reader into the orbit of cathartic recognition.

#### **Acknowledgement:**

I thank Dr. Manindra Nath Thakur for his valuable inputs and guidance towards the ideas introduced in this paper.

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