



LAND, POWER, AND IDENTITY IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S THE VILLAGE

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Abstract:

Mulk Raj Anand's *The Village* (1939), the first novel of the *Lalu Trilogy*, offers a compelling portrayal of rural Punjab under British colonial rule, exposing the complex intersections of land ownership, social power, and identity formation. This article examines how Anand presents land not merely as an economic resource but as a symbol of authority, dignity, and survival within an agrarian society structured by feudal hierarchies and colonial domination. Through the experiences of Lal Singh, the protagonist, the novel depicts the oppressive mechanisms of landlords, moneylenders, and colonial administrators who collectively sustain systems of exploitation and social inequality. Employing the theoretical perspectives of Subaltern Studies, postcolonial criticism, and Marxist literary theory, this study argues that land functions as the primary site through which power is exercised and contested. It further explores how Lal Singh's evolving consciousness reflects the struggles of the rural subaltern in negotiating identity amidst economic deprivation, social exclusion, and political subjugation.

Key Words: Colonialism Agrarian Society, Peasant Consciousness

Introduction:

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a distinguished place in Indian English literature as one of its foremost social realists whose fiction consistently exposes the injustices embedded in Indian society. Writing during the late colonial period, Anand devoted his literary career to portraying the lives of the oppressed, including peasants, labourers, untouchables, and other marginalized communities. Influenced by Marxist humanism and anti-colonial nationalism, his novels challenge social hierarchies based on caste, class, and economic inequality while advocating dignity and justice for the underprivileged. Unlike writers who romanticized rural life, Anand presents the Indian village as a site of exploitation, conflict, and resistance, where the intersections of colonial rule and indigenous feudal structures shape everyday existence.

Published in 1939, *The Village* is the first novel of the *Lalu Trilogy*, followed by *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942). The trilogy traces the personal and political evolution of Lal Singh, a young Punjabi peasant whose life reflects the changing realities of colonial India. Set in rural Punjab under British rule, *The Village* portrays an agrarian society marked by rigid social hierarchies, economic deprivation, and unequal power relations. Anand depicts the village not merely as a geographical setting but as a microcosm of colonial India, where landlords, moneylenders, village officials, and colonial authorities collectively sustain systems of oppression that deny ordinary peasants control over their lives and livelihoods.

This article examines the interconnected themes of land, power, and identity in *The Village* through the theoretical perspectives of Subaltern Studies, postcolonial criticism, and Marxist literary theory. It argues that Anand portrays land as the principal site through which political authority and economic dominance are exercised, while simultaneously illustrating how Lal Singh's evolving consciousness reflects the search for dignity and selfhood amid colonial oppression and agrarian exploitation. By analyzing these interconnected themes, the study demonstrates that *The Village* is both a critique of colonial-feudal power structures and a profound exploration of peasant identity in modern Indian literature.

Land as a Symbol of Power and Survival:

In *The Village*, Mulk Raj Anand presents land as the central force that governs the economic, social, and political life of rural Punjab: "These are my fields" (45). More than a physical resource, land symbolizes survival, identity, and authority within an agrarian society where agriculture forms the primary means of livelihood. Through the experiences of Lal Singh and the peasant community, Anand illustrates how ownership and control of land determine an individual's place in society while exposing the inequalities perpetuated by colonial rule and feudal power. The novel demonstrates that the struggle for land is simultaneously a struggle for dignity, autonomy, and social existence.

The village economy portrayed in the novel is fundamentally agrarian, with agriculture serving as the principal occupation of the rural population. Peasants depend almost entirely on the cultivation of land for food, income, and the sustenance of their families. Their lives revolve around agricultural cycles, making land inseparable from their economic security and cultural identity. Anand vividly depicts the hardships of farming communities whose survival depends on uncertain harvests, adverse weather conditions, and exploitative economic structures. The precarious nature of agricultural life leaves peasants vulnerable to indebtedness and poverty, reinforcing their dependence on land as their only reliable source of livelihood.

The novel further reveals how land serves as an instrument of political authority under both feudal and colonial systems. Local landlords exercise considerable control over village affairs by virtue of their ownership of land, while British colonial administrators reinforce this power through land revenue policies that prioritize state income over peasant welfare: "The prices have fallen. How can they expect us to pay the taxes?" (27). The colonial revenue system imposes heavy taxes regardless of

agricultural conditions, compelling peasants to borrow from money lenders and sink deeper into debt. This alliance between colonial governance and indigenous landed elites enables the continued exploitation of rural communities, where economic dependence translates into political subordination. Anand thus demonstrates that colonial rule functions not only through administrative institutions but also through local structures of landownership that sustain unequal power relations.

Colonialism and Feudal Structures of Oppression:

In *The Village*, Mulk Raj Anand presents colonialism and feudalism as mutually reinforcing systems that perpetuate the exploitation of the rural poor. Rather than depicting British colonial rule as an isolated political authority, Anand demonstrates how it collaborated with indigenous feudal institutions to maintain economic control and social inequality. The novel reveals that colonial administration depended heavily on local landlords, moneylenders, village officials, and the police to enforce its authority, creating a network of power that marginalized peasants and denied them economic independence. Through Lal Singh's experiences, Anand exposes the oppressive mechanisms that governed village life and sustained the unequal distribution of wealth and power.

The colonial administration appears in the novel as a distant yet pervasive force whose primary objective is the extraction of revenue rather than the welfare of the rural population. British officials rarely interact directly with ordinary peasants, but their policies profoundly shape village life through taxation and bureaucratic control: "The darkness has come over the world. The darkness...They say they have raised the tax on grains" (27). The land revenue system compels cultivators to pay taxes irrespective of the success or failure of their harvests, placing immense financial pressure on farming families. Since agricultural production is vulnerable to drought, poor rainfall, and fluctuating market conditions, many peasants are unable to meet these obligations and are forced to borrow money to survive. Anand thus portrays colonial taxation as a structural mechanism that institutionalizes rural poverty instead of promoting economic development.

The colonial bureaucracy and the police further reinforce these exploitative structures. Rather than protecting the rights of ordinary villagers, they function as agents of authority who safeguard the interests of landlords and the colonial state. Administrative procedures are characterized by corruption, intimidation, and indifference to peasant suffering, while the police rely on coercion and violence to suppress dissent and enforce compliance. Justice remains inaccessible to marginalized communities, whose voices carry little weight within the colonial legal system. Violence in the novel is therefore not merely physical but institutional, embedded within administrative practices that normalize inequality and deny peasants legal protection. Anand's portrayal of colonial Punjab demonstrates that social inequality is sustained through the combined forces of taxation, debt, dispossession, and coercive governance. Colonial power does not dismantle traditional feudal structures; instead, it legitimizes and strengthens them by integrating local elites into the machinery of imperial rule. Through this alliance, economic exploitation acquires political authority, making resistance increasingly difficult for ordinary peasants. *The Village* thus offers a powerful critique of colonialism as a system that preserved existing hierarchies while intensifying rural poverty and social injustice, revealing how imperial governance and feudal domination together shaped the everyday realities of agrarian life.

Identity Formation and Lal Singh's Resistance:

Lal Singh, the protagonist of *The Village*, embodies the struggles of a young peasant seeking dignity and selfhood within an oppressive agrarian society shaped by colonial domination and feudal authority. Anand presents Lal Singh not as a conventional heroic figure but as an ordinary village youth whose experiences of injustice gradually shape his psychological development and political consciousness: "I wish I had never born here, if they had to treat me like that...the abuse...the shouts...the insults..." (98). His journey from impulsive rebellion to a deeper awareness of social oppression reflects the emergence of a peasant identity that challenges inherited structures of power. Through Lal Singh, Anand explores how identity is formed through lived experience, resistance, and the pursuit of personal dignity.

The novel also links identity to notions of masculinity and family honour. Within the patriarchal structure of the village, a young man's reputation is closely connected to his ability to protect his family's dignity and maintain social respect. Lal Singh's actions are often motivated by a desire to defend personal honour and challenge insults directed at himself or his family. Anand, however, complicates conventional ideas of masculinity by showing that true strength lies not in physical dominance but in moral courage and the willingness to confront oppressive authority. Lal Singh's development reflects a transition from impulsive expressions of masculinity to a more mature understanding of justice and responsibility.

From the perspective of Subaltern Studies, Lal Singh represents a peasant subject whose identity is forged through continuous negotiation with structures of domination. His psychological growth illustrates how resistance begins with an awareness of inequality and a refusal to accept social subordination as natural or inevitable. Anand's portrayal of Lal Singh transcends the story of an individual protagonist to symbolize the aspirations of countless marginalized peasants struggling for recognition, justice, and autonomy. By tracing his evolving consciousness, *The Village* affirms that identity is not a fixed social inheritance but a dynamic process shaped by resistance, dignity, and the persistent quest for freedom in the face of colonial and feudal oppression.

Comparative Discussion: Land, Power, and Identity:

The preceding analysis demonstrates that *The Village* presents land, power, and identity as inseparable components of the socio-economic and political structure of colonial rural India. Anand portrays land not simply as an agricultural resource but as the foundation upon which economic survival, social authority, and personal identity are constructed. Through Lal Singh's experiences and the broader depiction of village life, the novel reveals that ownership of land determines access to wealth, influence, and social recognition. Consequently, land becomes the principal medium through which power is acquired, exercised, and contested.

The novel further establishes that identity is shaped by these unequal power relations. In an agrarian society, an individual's social status, dignity, and sense of belonging are closely linked to access to land and productive labour. Lal Singh's struggle for self-respect emerges from his recognition that the denial of economic independence also results in the denial of personal identity. Anand thus suggests that identity cannot be understood solely as a psychological or cultural construct; rather, it is produced

through material conditions and social relationships. The peasant's perception of self is continually influenced by structures of ownership, labour, and authority.

Against this backdrop, Lal Singh's resistance represents an assertion of identity rather than merely an act of personal rebellion. His refusal to accept exploitation reflects an emerging awareness that dignity and freedom are inseparable from the struggle against oppressive social structures. Anand portrays resistance as the first step toward reclaiming humanity in a society where land determines not only material existence but also social recognition and political agency: "He cast his eyes across the fields. What was the land like in the time of his forefathers?" (233). Ultimately, *The Village* demonstrates that land embodies history, livelihood, and collective memory, making it far more than private property. It is the foundation of identity itself, and the struggle for land becomes synonymous with the struggle for justice, dignity, and selfhood. Through this powerful relationship between land, power, and identity, Anand offers a profound critique of colonial agrarian society and affirms the resilience of the rural poor in the face of systemic oppression.

Conclusion:

Mulk Raj Anand's *The Village* is a powerful critique of the agrarian structures that governed rural India under British colonial rule. Through its realistic portrayal of peasant life, the novel exposes how land became the principal source of economic survival, social prestige, and political authority while simultaneously functioning as an instrument of exploitation. Anand demonstrates that agrarian inequality is not merely the result of individual greed but is sustained by institutional structures that deprive peasants of dignity, security, and autonomy. By foregrounding the everyday struggles of rural communities, the novel reveals the human consequences of unequal land ownership and economic dependence.

Lal Singh emerges as an evolving subaltern figure whose psychological growth and resistance symbolize the awakening of peasant consciousness. His refusal to accept injustice reflects the gradual formation of an identity rooted in dignity, self-respect, and the desire for social transformation. Although his resistance remains individual in *The Village*, it anticipates the broader political awareness that develops in the later novels of the *Lalu Trilogy*.

The continuing relevance of *The Village* lies in its exploration of issues that remain significant in contemporary society, including land rights, rural poverty, economic inequality, and the struggle for social justice. Anand's humanistic vision transcends its historical context, making the novel an enduring commentary on the relationship between power and marginalization. As a landmark work of Indian English literature, *The Village* enriches postcolonial and Subaltern Studies by demonstrating how literature can recover marginalized voices and illuminate the structural forces that shape identity, resistance, and human dignity.

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