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Page No: 51-57



The Tea Plantation as a Microcosm of British Imperialism: A Postcolonial Reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand's 1937 book *Two Leaves and a Bud* criticizes British colonialism in India using an Assamese tea plantation as a symbol. This study examines the tea plantation's hierarchical, ethnically divided, and economically exploitative structure as a microcosm of British imperialism. Through Gangu, an impoverished Punjabi peasant duped into bonded work, Anand shows the terrible reality of colonial capitalism. Imperial principles are pushed on the plantation through institutional structures and physical brutality, causing great oppression and resistance. This paper uses postcolonial theory, particularly Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Frantz Fanon, to argue that the plantation embodies imperial dominance: dehumanization of the colonized, commodification of land and labour, and deliberate silencing of native voices. It examines how gender, caste, and class interacted on the plantation, revealing how colonialism deepened social divisions. Literary realism, motivated by his socialist and Gandhian convictions, allows Anand to depict institutional aggression, human dignity, and resistance. *Two Leaves and a Bud* is a powerful critique of imperialism and a literary space for anti-colonial resistance. This study places Anand's book in a postcolonial context and emphasizes its importance to understanding empire's lingering impacts in postcolonial cultures.

Keywords: - Hierarchical, Assamese tea plantation, labour, dehumanization, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and Gandhian beliefs.

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The Tea Plantation as a Microcosm of British Imperialism: A Postcolonial Reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*

Introduction

In Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*, the tea plantation is not only a setting but also a potent metaphor for the oppressive machinery of the British Empire.

The colonial project, with its wideranging economic motives and ideological justifications, mainly relied on territorial conquest, cultural domination, and economic exploitation. The plantation economy was one of the most pernicious instruments of imperialism, combining extractive capitalism with racialized labour practices. In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Mulk Raj Anand crafts a powerful narrative centered on Gangu, a poor Punjabi peasant whose journey into the brutal world of British-controlled tea plantations in Assam serves as a scathing critique of colonial exploitation. Set in the early 20th century, the novel reflects the larger realities of British imperialism, where economic desperation and deceit pull countless Indian labourers into systems of indentured servitude. Gangu, like many others, is lured by false promises of good wages and better living conditions, only to find himself trapped in a regime of backbreaking labour, racial discrimination, and institutional cruelty.

Mulk Raj Anand published *Two Leaves and Bud* in 1937, in order to expose the brutal exploitation of the Indian coolies by the British managers of the tea estates in Assam. Gangu's experience mirrors the fate of thousands who migrated to plantations during colonial rule. The British planters, backed by colonial policies, maintained a rigid hierarchy where Indian labourers were seen as disposable commodities. Anand uses Gangu's character not just as an individual but as a representation of the larger peasant class, crushed under both feudal oppression in their villages and capitalist exploitation on the plantations. The tea estate becomes a microcosm of the British Empire—an isolated space governed by violence, surveillance, and racial hierarchies. Anand's portrayal of Gangu's gradual disillusionment and ultimate tragedy exposes the human cost of imperialism. Gangu's dignity is systematically stripped away by both the white overseers and the Indian intermediaries who enforce the colonial order. His resistance, though limited, becomes a symbol of the resilience of the oppressed. Through Gangu's story, Anand challenges the romanticized image of empire, replacing it with a grim account of suffering and resistance.

Degradation, resistance, and martyrdom are all parts of his path, which provides a starting point for comprehending the systemic violence of empire. This essay makes the case that the tea plantation in *Two Leaves and a Bud* represents the economic, social, and ideological facets of British imperialism in miniature. The rigid racial and social hierarchy of the plantation is reflected in its structure, where Indian labourers are subject to unbridled authority by British planters. It symbolizes a system in which the colonized are denied agency, dignity, and voice in addition to being exploited for their work. This study demonstrates how Anand's realism narrative reveals the mechanisms of imperial authority at both the institutional and individual levels by analysing the book under the prism of postcolonial theory. Anand's literary realism highlights human suffering under colonialism while maintaining the possibility of resistance, influenced by his political ties to socialism and Gandhian philosophy. His depiction of the plantation society emphasizes how caste, gender, and economic oppression intersected with imperialism, demonstrating how colonial systems intensified social injustices that already existed. This essay shows how a seemingly localized story speaks to the global structures and lingering effects of empire through a postcolonial reading of *Two Leaves and a Bud*.

Literature Review

In the literature surrounding *Two Leaves and a Bud*, scholars have consistently recognized Mulk Raj Anand as a trailblazer in Indian English literature, particularly for his pioneering use of social realism and his profound empathy for the underprivileged. Critics and academics often highlight how Anand's commitment to exposing the injustices faced by the

oppressed marks a significant departure from the romanticized narratives of colonial India that preceded him. His portrayal of marginalized voices in authentic settings is seen as both politically urgent and artistically innovative. Anand's dedication to social realism in *Two Leaves and a Bud* is not merely thematic but structural. The novel's narrative is rooted in the everyday lives of Indian labourers, reflecting the harsh realities of colonial exploitation in the tea plantations of Assam. Scholars like K.R. Sreenivasa Iyengar and Meenakshi Mukherjee have noted that Anand's ability to humanize his characters—especially figures like Gangu, the impoverished Punjabi farmer—elevates his work beyond mere protest literature. Gangu becomes emblematic of a whole class of people whose suffering had long been ignored in mainstream discourse. Through such representation, Anand ensures that the reader not only witnesses injustice but emotionally engages with it. In addition to its realism, Anand's creative handling of language has received critical acclaim. He innovatively fuses English with the idioms, rhythms, and sensibilities of Indian speech, producing a literary voice that is both accessible to global audiences and rooted in local experience. This linguistic hybridity has been noted as a hallmark of postcolonial literature, and Anand is often credited with laying its early foundation.

Furthermore, Anand's empathetic approach is deeply embedded in his Marxist humanism, which scholars often emphasize as central to his literary vision. His depiction of the plantation as a site of capitalist and racial exploitation resonates with broader anti-colonial and class-conscious narratives. The tea estate is not just a backdrop but a symbol of imperial oppression, making the novel a compelling piece of political literature. In literary reviews and academic discourse, *Two Leaves and a Bud* is frequently celebrated for marrying authenticity with creative expression. Anand's work does not merely document suffering—it transforms it into a powerful call for justice. In doing so, he redefined the scope and purpose of Indian English literature, creating space for the subaltern to speak within the realm of fiction. Because it depicts the plantation as a place of racial and economic oppression and criticizes colonial exploitation, *Two Leaves and a Bud* has drawn a lot of attention. Anand's ability to portray the common realities of colonial India, particularly the predicament of the working poor, has been lauded by critics like C.D. Narasimhaiah. Narasimhaiah highlights Anand's moral and political significance by situating him inside the Indian literary renaissance.

In her literary critique, Meenakshi Mukherjee emphasizes the realist aesthetics of *Two Leaves and a Bud*, noting how Mulk Raj Anand subverts colonial ideologies through his narrative voice. Anand authentically centres the perspectives of subaltern characters, particularly Gangu, whose lived experience as a poor labourer under British exploitation becomes the focal point of the novel. By refusing to romanticize colonial rule and instead highlighting the systemic oppression of Indian workers, Anand challenges dominant narratives. His creative use of language—infused with local idioms and cultural references—further amplifies the authenticity of subaltern voices, making the novel a powerful instrument of literary resistance. *Two Leaves and a Bud* have also been examined by postcolonial scholars in the context of larger imperialism and resistance framework. Elleke Boehmer's research on colonial and postcolonial literature places Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* within a broader tradition of anti-colonial writing that strategically employs character development and narrative structure to challenge imperial ideology. Boehmer argues that such texts resist colonial narratives not only through content but through form, and Anand exemplifies this by cantering the story around Gangu—a humble peasant whose humanity, struggles, and resistance are brought to the forefront. Through Gangu's evolving awareness and the novel's linear, realist structure, Anand dismantles the colonial myth of benevolent empire and reclaims narrative space for the oppressed. There is still opportunity for a more concentrated examination of how the tea plantation functions symbolically as a condensed picture of the colonial world, even with this wealth of knowledge. This work attempts to link spatial analysis

with postcolonial theory, contending that the plantation environment is essential to comprehending how imperialism operated at the micro level, even if the majority of the criticism now in existence focuses on labour exploitation and racial injustice. Through the integration of critical theory and historical study, the paper advances a more sophisticated comprehension of Anand's creative endeavours and their lasting significance.

Theoretical Framework

Through Gangu's experiences in the Assam tea plantation, Anand exposes the mechanisms through which the British Empire maintained dominance—primarily by dehumanizing and infantilizing Indian subjects. In contrast to colonial narratives that portrayed Indian workers as docile and ignorant, Anand presents them as sentient, suffering individuals caught within a brutal exploitative system. This aligns with Said's critique of the ideological function of literature in upholding imperial power structures. Moreover, the plantation setting itself operates as a colonial microcosm where orientalist binaries are reinforced: the white sahib as ruler and the brown native as labouring body. Anand's subversion lies in narrating this world from the perspective of the colonized, thereby unsettling the imperial gaze and re-entering the narrative around subaltern experiences. In doing so, *Two Leaves and a Bud* not only critiques colonial power dynamics but also exemplifies the kind of counter-narrative that Said calls for in *Orientalism*—one that resists reductive representations and restores historical and psychological complexity to the colonized subject. This theoretical framework allows for a deeper understanding of how Anand's novel participates in the larger project of postcolonial resistance through literature.

Such Orientalist presumptions are demonstrated in *Two Leaves and a Bud* by the paternalistic views of British landowners, who see Indian as both disposable and infantile. Frantz Fanon's examination of colonial brutality and psychology, particularly in *The Wretched of the Earth*, aids in clarifying the plantation's resistance and control systems. Fanon highlights the ways in which colonial government dehumanizes its subjects and uses violence as a means of control. Together with the harsh conditions on the plantation and the harsh methods used to maintain order, reflect Fanon's theory in practice. This study is based on a postcolonial theoretical framework and primarily draws from the works of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Examining how colonial narratives justified imperial control by depicting the East as inferior and subservient begins with Said's concept of Orientalism.

Analysis

In the analysis of *Two Leaves and a Bud*, the theme of **racial segregation and spatial hierarchy** is central to understanding the mechanisms of colonial control depicted in the Assamese tea plantations. Mulk Raj Anand vividly illustrates how physical space is used to reinforce both racial and class divisions, creating a rigidly stratified world where every individual's social status is visibly marked by where they live, work, and move.

The British planters and their families inhabit the most privileged spaces: bungalows on elevated ground, surrounded by manicured gardens and guarded by fences. These spaces are symbols of power, leisure, and racial superiority, physically and metaphorically distanced from the squalid labour lines where Indian workers like Gangu live. The coolies' quarters are cramped, unsanitary, and deliberately placed far from the planter's homes, signifying the dehumanization and marginalization of native labourers. This spatial separation reinforces the ideology that the colonizers are civilized and superior, while the colonized are primitive and expendable.

Anand uses these spatial dynamics to critique the imperialist logic of segregation: showing how space itself becomes a tool of oppression. The movement of Indian workers is restricted, and any breach of these spatial boundaries is seen as a threat to colonial order. For instance, when Gangu attempts to assert his rights or challenge authority, he symbolically—and sometimes physically—transgresses these imposed boundaries, only to be violently put back

in his place. The British planters live in comfortable bungalows apart from the cramped and filthy living quarters of the workers. The ideological gap between colonizers and colonized is reflected in this physical segregation. The colonial elite's inaccessibility is highlighted in Anand's thorough descriptions, which further emphasizes the Indian workers' helplessness.

The Tea Plantation as a Colonial Microcosm

In Anand's book, the tea plantation is not only a setting; rather, it is a fully functional system that mimics the institutions of British imperialism. A distinct ethnic and class structure is reflected in the plantation's geographical arrangement. The conceptual divide between the colonizers and the colonized is reflected in this division, which perpetuates notions of native inferiority and Western superiority. Another important component is economic exploitation. False promises are used to entice Indian labourers into indentured slavery, where they are subsequently caught in a vicious cycle of cruelty and poverty. Therefore, the plantation turns into a location where the capitalist goals of empire control, productivity are exposed. The dehumanization ingrained in imperialist ideas is reflected in the British bosses' use of the employees as disposable resources. The plantation also serves as a place of discipline. To quell dissent and preserve order, surveillance, punishment, and control are employed. Gangu experiences violence when he attempts to stand up to exploitation and defend his dignity, demonstrating how the colonial system uses violent force to quell opposition.

Subaltern Voices and Narrative Resistance: The core of Anand's anti-colonial message is his narrative technique. By concentrating on Gangu and the workers' everyday life, he brings attention to people who are typically left out of literary and historical accounts. The workers are people with families, feelings, and interior lives; they are not faceless crowds. The orientalist propensity to minimize colonial subjects to stereotypes is resisted by this focus on character development and complexity. In order to create a hybrid literary voice that defies colonial linguistic dominance, Anand also incorporates Indian vernacular speech and cultural allusions into the English story. This supports Spivak's argument that new forms of representation are necessary to restore subaltern agency. Anand uses these strategies to turn the book into a place of resistance. He does more than just portray pain.

Racial Segregation and Spatial Hierarchies: Discrimination based on race and class is reflected in the plantation's spatial hierarchies. Physical distance, architectural designs, and social customs all serve to firmly enforce the division between the Indian labour force and the white colonists. The bungalows that the British occupy on high ground represent their power and dominance. The labourers, on the other hand, live in substandard, sickly conditions that only serve to confirm their sense of inferiority. Anand draws attention to the symbolic and psychological aspects of imperialism by using this spatial division. The divide of spaces reflects the conceptual dichotomy imposed by colonial ideology: the ruler versus the ruled, the civilized versus the uncivilized. When a worker speaks up or enters a prohibited area, for example, any violation of these physical boundaries is greeted with hostility, demonstrating how space is weaponized to maintain colonial order.

Economic violence and labour exploitation: The exploitative aspects of the colonial economy are exposed by Gangu's travels. Despite being promised decent pay and compassionate care, he is caught in a vicious cycle of abuse and debt. With little agency and no legal redress, the labour arrangement is similar to indentured servitude. Echoing Fanon's criticism of economic dominance, the plantation operates as a capitalist machine, commodifying human bodies for-profit.

Sexual Violence and Gender: Sexual violence, which is frequently committed by overseers and disregarded by colonial authorities, is especially dangerous for female workers. Spivak's worry about the subaltern woman's lack of voice is related to the silence around female suffering. The novel's tragic ending affirms the human spirit's tenacity and criticizes the moral bankruptcy of empire. Resistance and Agency Despite the overwhelming structures of

oppression, Anand emphasizes acts of resistance. Gangu's refusal to submit, even at the cost of his life, serves as a powerful symbol of defiance.

Resistance and Tragedy: Gangu as a Symbol: Gangu, the central character, embodies both the resilience and the vulnerability of the colonized subject. Though poor and illiterate, he is portrayed with immense moral dignity and emotional strength. His decision to take his family to the plantation is driven by hope, but his eventual realization of the system's brutality leads to disillusionment. Gangu's resistance, though subtle and often constrained, is deeply symbolic. His refusal to completely surrender his dignity, his concern for his daughter, and his final confrontation with the British overseers mark him as a figure of quiet defiance. His tragic death underscores the brutal cost of imperial oppression but also elevates him as a martyr of colonial resistance. Anand does not romanticize Gangu's suffering; rather, he presents it as part of a larger critique of empire. In Gangu, we see the human face of colonialism's victims—not broken, but silenced by a system designed to crush resistance.

Research Gap:

While *Two Leaves and a Bud* has been extensively studied for its realist aesthetics, social critique, and humanist portrayal of the oppressed, there remains a notable gap in scholarship specifically examining the tea plantation as a symbolic microcosm of British imperialism through a focused postcolonial lens. Much of the existing research tends to concentrate on Anand's broader themes of class struggle, caste, and labour exploitation without fully unpacking how the spatial, economic, and racial structures within the plantation reflect the operational logic of the British Empire at large. Furthermore, there is limited engagement with postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Spivak in analysing how Anand subverts imperial narratives by recentring the voices of subaltern characters within an overtly colonial setting. This study aims to fill that gap by integrating postcolonial theoretical frameworks to explore how the plantation functions not only as a site of labour but also as a space where colonial ideologies are reproduced and contested. By re-evaluating Anand's narrative in this light, the research seeks to contribute a more nuanced understanding of how literature can deconstruct empire from within its most everyday institutions, such as the plantation economy.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* offers a powerful and nuanced critique of British imperialism, using the tea plantation as a concentrated symbol of the larger colonial enterprise. Through the lived experiences of Gangu and other marginalized Indian laborers, Anand reveals how the plantation system operates as a microcosm of the empire—structured by racial hierarchy, economic exploitation, and spatial segregation. The novel exposes the brutal realities of colonial capitalism, where the British planters wield absolute authority, while Indian workers are reduced to mere instruments of profit. In this closed, hierarchical world, the values of justice, dignity, and humanity are systematically denied to the colonized. Anand's realist narrative style, combined with his deep empathy for the subaltern, allows him to foreground the voices and perspectives of those historically silenced. His portrayal of Gangu as a complex and dignified character challenges colonial stereotypes and subverts the orientalist discourse that Edward Said critiqued. The novel makes visible the ideological and material mechanisms that sustain imperial dominance—from racial segregation and spatial control to economic dependency and cultural devaluation. By situating the plantation at the center of the narrative, Anand underscores how colonial power is not only enforced through violence but also through everyday practices and institutions.

A postcolonial theoretical framework, drawing on thinkers like Said, Fanon, and Spivak, reveals the depth of Anand's political engagement. The novel resists the colonial narrative by reclaiming agency for its Indian characters and exposing the false moral legitimacy of empire. As Fanon emphasized, decolonization begins with reclaiming the humanity of the

colonized, and Anand's work stands as a literary enactment of that reclamation. Ultimately, *Two Leaves and a Bud* is more than a story of one man's tragedy—it is a searing indictment of an imperial system built on exploitation and injustice. The tea plantation, with its stark inequalities and oppressive structures, becomes a miniature version of the colonial state. In turning his literary lens to this space, Anand not only critiques the historical realities of British imperialism but also contributes to a broader postcolonial project of resistance, memory, and liberation. The novel thus remains a foundational text in Indian English literature and postcolonial studies, offering enduring insights into the human cost of empire.

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