Connecting the Postcolonial

Ngugi and Anand

Lingaraja Gandhi
This book is dedicated to my father
late. C. Kale Gowda, a freedom fighter
and a Sarvodaya worker who infused
in me, even as a boy, passion for
the life of the mind
Acknowledgements

It was as a student of M.A., in 1982 that I conceived the subject of this book when I happened to study Ngugi’s *Weep Not, Child*. I had infrequently dwelt on the subject for a decade till I finally took up this great task. I remember with deep sense of gratitude Prof. D.A. Shankar who helped me extensively in completing this book. I am greatly indebted to Prof. R. Ramachandra, my teacher who supervised my Ph.D. thesis with patience, and taught me with affection the value of patience in the pursuit of scholarship.

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Lingaraja Gandhi
Preface

With Rabindranath Tagore winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, the literary centre started moving from its assumed location in the West to the rest of the world. That great Indian moment was, perhaps, the beginning of the growth and spread of literature, which is now being satisfactorily baptized ‘Postcolonial Literature.’ Various nomenclatures like Commonwealth Literature, New Literatures in English, World Literature Written in English, Non-Hegemonic Literature—employed to describe the body of writing emerging from former colonies are symptomatic of the problem involved in defining the postcolonial. It was Rushdie who described this new phenomenon in his four memorable words, ‘the empire writes back,’ which in Chinua Achebe’s coinage becomes ‘the empire fights back.’

Again, interestingly, the lead for moving of the political centre; dissolution of the empire and the granting of independence to the countries colonized by European powers came from India in 1947. The Indian liberation struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi became a unique example for the rest of the world to emulate, and most African countries attained Independence in 1960s. Thus, Tagore and Gandhi became symbols of freedom—literary and political—in the postcolonial world. In the present study, I have attempted to trace, particularly, the influence of Gandhi on Ngugi and Anand in their constructions of the fictional worlds. The influence, while
it is quite evident on Mulk Raj Anand, Ngugi speaks of his introduction to the visions from non-European world when he was in Leeds where he studied commonwealth literature. And, Ngugi speaks of the importance of Gandhi as a symbol of anti-imperialist force in the interview given to me, which is appended to this book.

Through an exploration of literary and spiritual kinship between Mulk Raj Anand, a pioneer Indian English novelist and Ngugi wa Thiong’o (James Ngugi), a Kenyan novelist in exile, the present book seeks to understand the postcolonial and examines the central issues of the postcolonial world. Instead of applying some of the assumptions of the postcolonial theory to read the works of Anand and Ngugi, I have attempted to examine the language of the fiction each one employs in rendering the chosen fictional world. This is a first full-length comparative study of these two writers, and I have compared both writers side-by-side instead of in separated chapters.

Since each one’s literary output is enormous and covers the genres, other than fiction, the present discussion is confined to Anand’s Untouchable, Coolie, Two Leaves and a Bud, The Village, Across the Black Waters, The Sword and the Sickle, The Road and some short-stories and Ngugi’s The River Between, Weep Not, Child, A Grain of Wheat, Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross, Matigari and few short-stories. I have also taken into account the non-fictional writings of Anand and Ngugi since both have often said that their non-fictional writings are part of their imaginative writings.

Plot summation of the novels is generally avoided. Instead, I have highlighted some common components of Anand’s and Ngugi’s fictional worlds. For instance, (a) both writers have shown preference for adolescents as central characters in their
works; (b) the type of consciousness that both writers attribute to their protagonists is not ‘cerebral’ but centered around the loins; (c) the attitudes of these two writers towards land, roads and towns in a colonial system are strikingly similar; the meanings of their lands are often rendered in terms of ‘fig trees’ unique to their lands—in the case of Anand it is the ‘banyan’ and ‘pipal’, and in Ngugi’s works it is the ‘mugumo’ tree that becomes significant and (d) neither writers lets go an opportunity to make World Wars serve as an ingredient of their works.

Accordingly, the book contains the following sections: (1) Introduction, (2) Awakening, (3) The Excremental and the Genital, (4) Naked Land, (5) A Land Like All the Others and (6) Conclusion. I have also appended to the book the interviews with Ngugi and Anand, as well as Anand’s letters. These letters and interviews permit a glimpse into the amazing concurrence that Anand and Ngugi display in their approaches to the problems of life and literature.

More than the language of fiction, or the eloquence of expression, it is the vision of each of these writers that has left a lasting impression on me. Their fictions visualize a society based on the human bond and equality. It would but be appropriate to conclude my preface with Ngugi’s commitment for humanitarian vision of society well ingrained in his words: “We must all struggle for a world in which one’s cleanliness is not depended on another’s dirt, one’s health on another’s ill-health, and one’s welfare on another’s misery.”

Lingaraja Gandhi
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Introduction

Dissimilarities between Mulk Raj Anand and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o are self-evident. They belong to two distinct cultures: Indian and Kenyan. A generation separates the two contemporaries. Anand’s career as novelist began with the publication of Untouchable in 1935, three years before Ngugi’s birth. The latter’s first novel, Weep Not, Child appeared in 1964. These differences though, are superficial; the points of contact between them are startling.

The greatest political reality for both is perhaps colonialism (in Ngugi’s case, neo-colonialism as well). Their youthful days coincided with their nations’ struggle for liberation from oppressive foreign rule; they grew up amidst turbulence. Born in 1905, Anand saw his country enter its intensest phase of the freedom movement when Gandhi returned from South Africa in 1915. Anand was arrested and caned by the police for innocently breaking the curfew during the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in 1919; in 1921 he was jailed for a brief period for participating in the Civil Disobedience Campaign against the British (Anand records these events in his autobiographical novels Morning Face and Confession of a Lover). “The era into which I was born,” says Anand, “was... the turning point of my country” (Apology for Heroism, 71). That could as well apply to Ngugi. Ngugi was born in 1938 and grew up during the ‘high noon’ of colonial oppression and the native resistance; 1952-57 were the years of the Emergency and the Mau-Mau struggle in Kenya. He was deeply scarred during the Emergency, though he was not personally involved in the struggle. His brother Wallace Mwangi had joined the Mau-Mau after a dramatic escape from detention camp. His parents and relatives were put in detention. Understandably, young Ngugi became a
Awakening

Mulk Raj Anand and Ngugi wa Thiong’o (James Ngugi) favoured very young boys as central characters in many of their novels. The practice of making children and adolescents protagonists is neither new nor limited to novelists of any one culture. Dickens, Mark Twain, Kipling and Golding among many others have presented humanitarian viewpoints effectively through the eyes of children. But this book is interested in the portrayal of adolescents in colonial situations—such as those seen in Untouchable, Coolie, The Village, The River Between and Weep Not, Child.

The scope to encapsule in the state of adolescence the conflicts and contradictions of a society under colonial rule is immense. Adolescence provides a suitable arena to enact the clash of opposing cultures; an adolescent eagerly seeking the state of maturity offers excellent ground to contrapose the forces of tradition and the forces of modernity.

Doubts regarding the wisdom of granting centrality to adolescents have bothered some readers of Anand and Ngugi. Eustace Palmer, for example, is of the opinion that the

... main weakness of Weep Not, Child is the choice of Njoroge as the central consciousness. Not because Njoroge is too passive and ineffective to be at the centre of the novel’s events, but because a young, inexperienced boy is not the best vehicle to demonstrate that an obsession with education as a panacea is escapist. It is in the nature of young boys to dream, and have illusions about the future, and one can hardly except them to understand the complexity of national affairs. The same
Chapter two sought to understand national awakening in terms of the growth of an individual from boyhood to adulthood. It was seen that in the fictional worlds of Mulk Raj Anand and Ngugi, the tensions and bewilderment of youth at the threshold of maturity provide a dependable index to the national situation. The attempt in this chapter is to examine the type of consciousness these writers attribute to their protagonists. The operative consciousness in their worlds is not ‘cerebral’ but is centered around the loins. This consciousness could be termed ‘anal’ or ‘excremental’ in the case of Anand, and ‘genital’ in Ngugi’s case. ‘Excremental’ and ‘genital’ are not loaded with the meanings one may associate them with in psychoanalysis. This thesis finds the terms ‘excremental’ and ‘genital’ convenient to understand the nature of a special kind of consciousness in the fictional worlds of Anand and Ngugi. Essentially evaluative in nature, this consciousness manifests itself in the interaction of the young heroes with their social and political environments.

It is perhaps better to begin with illustrations and Coolie serves the purpose well. The action of the novel starts with the shifting of the fourteen year old protagonist Munoo from Bilaspur village to the city of Sham Nagar and the implications of the drastic change in environment are powerfully worked out in an episode related to excretal activity. In the altered atmosphere, Munoo wakes up to a crisis: he cannot locate any place in and around his master’s house to relieve himself. In the village, the first thing the boy did when he woke up in the morning (like all other villagers), was to relieve himself in the
Land is perhaps one of man's most urgent physical and spiritual needs. The bitterest of battles between peoples are fought over land and territory. Man's noblest aspirations and his fundamental feelings like desire, fear, greed and envy seek to express themselves potentially through the image of land. This may partly explain: (a) Mulk Raj Anand's eagerness to solicit for his novels—especially the Lalu Trilogy—the shadow of the Mahabharata, and, (b) Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's allusions to the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament in his works.

Anand has frequently remarked that the Mahabharata operates behind many of his works. Replying to a query in an interview regarding the use of the novel form for the depiction of colonial conditions, Anand says: "There is only one novel, that is, Mahabharata. In fact all my themes, situations and characters for novel writing are chosen from Mahabharata. That is a source book." In another context, commenting on Across the Black Waters, he says that "Across the Black Waters may be a short book of the Mahabharatas being written all over the world by various writers all showing that in a war... few survive." The majority of peasants in The Village who join the British Indian Army can understand the First World War only in terms of the Mahabharata:

... the war beyond the black waters was only another Mahabharata because the Angrezi Badsha was a cousin of the Badsha of Girmany (Germany), just as the Pandus were cousins of the Kurus. The principles of light and darkness, right and wrong, were arrayed on opposite sides, fighting for supremacy, and all the powerful kingdoms within reach were drawn into the
War provides an excellent starting point from which to examine the relation between land and people in the novels of Anand and Ngugi. Both writers expose the pretensions of colonizing missions through arresting pictures of oppression by the colonizer not only in the colonies but in the colonizer’s land. Anand and Ngugi were alert to the fact that the world wars had discovered the colonizers in the most uncomfortably ambiguous position. The labelling of the colonized as ‘black’ (‘Kala admi’) was in effect an attempt at discrediting native culture and civilization; yet, ironically, these ‘savages’ were called to fight in the wars “to save the British empire from defeat and collapse” (Weep Not, Child, 58), “to save the cause of civilization” (Across the Black Waters, 193). One of the Indian officers in Across the Black Waters aptly observes:

They think we are all Gurkhas with Khukries in our mouths, savages who will creep up to them, take them by surprise and kill them. And the Sarkar is treating you as shock troops for that reason. Now you show them some of your savagery. All brave men like hand-to-hand fighting... you must charge the enemy with your bayonets, wherever you find him (127).

These peasants of the Indian sub-continent who were transplanted to the European war front knew not what shell fire or high explosives were; they called the war planes ‘steel birds;’ and were taught bayonet fighting only. Yet, they are asked to face the ‘strangest weaponry!’ The reader is made aware of a shocking paradox: on the one hand the colonial power encourages the Indian sepoys to prove their ‘inherent savagery’ against Germans; on the other, it preaches them ‘peace’ and ‘love’ at home (India)!
The literary output of each of the two writers here studied is immense. The fact that they very prolific must not make us forget the severe challenges they had to face when they started to write. Both wrote ‘protest’ literature. Their books did embarrass at times the political establishments. Both had to define the realm in which the novel was to operate in their lands. The challenge was to uphold the relevance of non-Eurocentric models against the Eurocentric. This had to be achieved by relating their own traditions to modern experience. As Ngugi puts it in *Decolonizing the Mind*.

Amidst massive illiteracy, amidst the conflicting phonetic systems even within the same language, amidst the new superstitions of the bible and the church, how can we talk meaningfully of the African novel? How could I contemplate the novel as a means of my reconnection with the people I left behind? My targeted audience—the people—were the two classes represented by Kamiriithu. How could I take a form so specifically bourgeois in its origins, authorship and consumption, for such a reconnection with a populace ridden with the problems outlined above? (67-68).

Both writers dealt with this problem by conceiving their writings within the context of a world heritage. Ngugi says:

The social or even national basis of the origins of an important discovery or any invention is not necessarily a determinant of the use to which it can be put by its inheritors... Gunpowder was invented in China. It was effectively used by the European bourgeois in its spread and expansion to all the concerns of the globe.
The present book primarily aims at tracing influences central to both Ngugi and Anand, especially of Marx, Gandhi and Fanon in the constructions of their fictional worlds. Also, an attempt has been made here to examine and present a comparative study of language of the fiction which these two great novelists have employed in rendering the chosen fictional world. Besides novels, their non-fictional writings have also been taken into account. The interviews with Ngugi and Anand as well as Anand’s letters have been appended in the book which are sufficient enough to give a glimpse of the amazing concurrence that they display in their approaches to the problems of life and literature. It has been aptly remarked on the contents of the present book:

“...your study shows acute perceptiveness of motive forces behind my novels and Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya...your study will be valuable for the new young students.”

—Mulk Raj Anand

“Although others, including myself, have noted the common ground occupied by Anand and Ngugi, no one to my knowledge has explored it so thoroughly.... It is indeed the comparative element, which I chiefly admire in this book, because Gandhi constantly cross-refers between the two-writers.”

—Dr. Alastair Niven
Former Director of Literature
British Council in London

“Mr. Gandhi rightly points to certain common concerns and motifs in the writings of Ngugi and Anand and produces what I believe to be a notable example of parallelist comparative study.”

—Prof. Mohan Ramanan
University of Hyderabad

Contd. to back flap...
"The literary kinship between the Kenyan and the Indian writer is successfully established through an analysis of the colonial consciousness... Gandhi's handling of the argument is discriminating and perceptive."

—Prof. R. Ramachandra
University of Mysore

Dr. Lingaraja Gandhi is a Senior Reader in English in the University of Mysore, Mysore. He has to his credit many research articles of national and international repute. Dr. Gandhi is a bilingual writer who writes both in English and in Kannada.

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