



Mulk Raj Anand's Experimental Novel *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* - A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT:

Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi is an experimental novel written by Mulk Raj Anand. This is a confessional work that details Anand's encounter with Mahatma Gandhi in Sabarmati Ashram for the first time. This work gives a complete picture of Anand's encounter with Gandhi which reveals the personality of Mahatma. It also reveals the socio-political scenario of the country and his relation with other leaders. Though, Anand calls it as a novel, its structure and features are more inclined towards a drama. The present paper attempts to study the features of this experimental work that will provide enough details to attribute it the genre of drama than a novel.

While Mulk Raj Anand's adeptness as a novelist and short story writer is widely acknowledged, little is known regarding his experimentation with the accepted forms. In the English speaking world such limited familiarity regarding his experimentation might be attributed to the restricted works and scarcity of the works published. *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* is a part of the series of autobiographical (experimental) novel written by Mulk Raj Anand.

Anand's contribution to Indian English novel and short stories is evident, his eagerness to experiment and transgress the accepted norms of literary genres is ascertained in the after words to *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi*. Anand(1990) writes in philosophical tone, why he experimented with the existing genre.

In the long Confessional Novel, *Seven Ages of Man*, (of which four volumes have been published), I began to depart from the narrative to romantic novel to fiction –fiction in answer to the question which a disciple of the sage in the *Brihdankaya Upanishad*: "What shall I do with my life?: And the Sage answered: Ask yourself everyday Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I Going?" [142]

Anand expresses the intentions behind writing the autobiographical confessional novel, Anand (1990) writes,

The first section of the fifth volume entitled: *And So He Plays His Part* still further departs from letters, diaries, and journals and novel within the novel, to dramatic dialogues entitled, *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* placed in Sabarmati Ashram where Krishan Chander Azad comes down to earth from the elitist snobbery of Bloomsbury. By deliberate departure from the popular novel, through the stream of consciousness method, the author seeks to recreate Azad's intense awareness of moments of pleasure and pain, death and despair, to the search for deeper awareness in dialogue with life. [142, 143]

The present experimental novel written by Mulk Raj Anand is written in dialogue form, which bears a resemblance to drama in many ways, as if it were, staged almost, "theatricalized". The narrator performs the duties of a stage director who does not interfere in the action of the novel. He does not describe or explain any thing. The narrator though present in the action does not lend a hand in understanding the story. William Gaddis from America experimented in a similar way in *The Recognitions* (1955).

Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi, written in 1927, first published in 1991 is a speck in the splurge of experimentation of Anand and this paper attempts to bring out his passion for experimenting, the multifaceted purpose of this confessional dialogue with the life and its major features that match with that of a drama. His belief in the ideology, art for society's sake emerges very well in the present work also. *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* is a confessional novel written about emotionally fraught and morally charged situations in which Anand finds himself when he stayed for some time in Gandhi's Ashram.

Mulk Raj Anand resided for a long time in England and was an active participant in the literary circles. He was aware of the amendments of literary forms during that important phase. But it is also important to comprehend the characteristics of a 'novel' in this context. 'Novel' is comparatively a new genre of literature which did not have strict norms till eighteenth century. It is Defoe, Richardson and Fielding who established the norms for this literary form. Ian. P. Watt (1957) in his critical analysis of the rise of the novel observes that,

It is true that both Richardson and Fielding saw themselves as founders of a new kind of writing, and that both viewed their work as involving a break with the old fashioned romances, but neither they nor their contemporaries provided us with the kind of characterization of the new genre that need: indeed they did not even canonize the changed nature of their fiction by change in nomenclature, our usage of the term 'novel' was not fully established until the end of the eighteenth century. [10]

Discussing the prominent features of the novel, Ian. P. Watt observes that 'realism', 'plot', 'narrative', 'character development', and 'usage of time, space, and place' occupy greater importance. Thus Richardson and Fielding established that the 'novel' should ideally have a story which is woven around the predefined plot. A set of characters with proper names which indicate their identity and their personality will develop along a particular duration of time. The plot of a novel is unique where the novelist presents the past experience as the cause of present action, thus a causal connection operates through time. According to Ian two such aspects suggest themselves as of especial importance in the novel, they are characterization and the presentation of the background.

Experimental literature was gaining greater significance during the time when Anand wrote this 'novel', especially in terms of form and technique. Experimentation in all the genres of literature with a special focus on fiction, poetry and drama began to splurge with the writers taking keen interest in marching forward towards modernism. Experimental literature is almost like experimental medicine. According to one of the prominent experimental theorist Emile Zola, "Experimental medicine, which but lisp as yet, can alone give us an exact idea of experimental literature, which, being still unhatched, is not even lisping." [3]. Experimental literature takes birth from observation and a specific idea of the author. Some of the prominent writers who marked this type literature are T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Hemmingway.

Among all genres of literature, novel received much of the experimentation by breaking one or more of the features of a novel. And the major feature of an experimental novel is, it is a novel without much story. Narration is the important feature of a novel which will be missing from an experimental novel. Experimentation with characters, theme, narration and other important features became significant among the writers in 1910s.

In *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi*, albeit he aimed at revealing his inner self, he did not select expressionistic style as the ulterior focus is at exhibiting the august personality of Mahatma Gandhi. Anand as a person, is highly excited about meeting people, and associates greater significance to the encounters of two individuals, (let it be just a gardener he meets as illustrated in *Seven Summers*) and attempts to document them. Thus his *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* is a congruous documentation of his rendezvous with Gandhi, who is the prominent inspirer of Anand's life.

The significant writers who inspired him to take up this new creation are Lawrence Houseman, a playwright and philosopher after whose work Anand named the present work (Houseman's work is

Little Plays of St. Francis), Marcel Proust and James Joyce who used stream of consciousness. Anand writes about his inspirations in the after words of *Little Plays*,

The urge to recreate the hero anti-hero in the various milieus inevitably demands departure from the narrative novel to stream of consciousness, (contd)

in the manner in which Marcel Proust recalls *Remembrances of Things Past*, James Joyce ventures into form less form and Andre Gide includes critique of his novel by the characters in *The Counterfeiters*. [143]

This experimental novel has two features that match that of a novel, they are the characters have proper names with a specific identity like Krishna Chand Azad. Discussing regarding the names of characters in a novel, Ian. P. Watt writes, 'proper names have exactly the same function in social life .— they are verbal expression of particular identity of each individual person'. Anand assumes his favourite name Krishan Chander Azad, as a continuation to *Seven Summers*, a confessional work. While explaining the reason for selecting this name, he says,

Gandhi : ---- What is your name ?

K.C.Azad : Krishan Chander Azad ---- And I want to live up that name. As Krishan I want to be like the love-God:Chander means moon : Azad because I want to be free – and work for India's freedom. So I have adopted Azad as my non-deplume. I write poems. [scene I, 22]

The second feature of a novel that is present in this work is description of surroundings. But Anand does it like a stage director describing it at the beginning of each scene.

This novel does not have one uniform story continuously developing along the timeline unlike a novel. This novel does not have characters that develop along the story and time. Anand divides the odyssey into 15 exempla and names them to indicate their themes, like scene I is the Three Vows, scene II Prayer, scene III The Drunkard and like wise. Written from the heart, and with conviction this confessional work is truly an experiment in terms of form, structure, plot, theme and characterization. This experiment has more than one feature to be recognized as a play. To call it a play straight away would be unfair as the author did not intend to write a play. But a close observation of the work, unfolds many characteristics of a play.

M.H. Abrahams in 'Glossary of Literary terms' defines drama as the "Literary form designed for the theater, where actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated action, and utter the written dialogue" [43]. Tracing the major features of English drama, we come across the division in the action of a play which is introduced by Elizabethan dramatists. They imitated the Roman playwright Seneca by structuring the action into five acts which further were sub divided into scenes. Apart from this, atmosphere, characterization, chorus, comic relief, confidant, dramatic irony, plot, setting, soliloquy, stock characters, stock situations and three unities (unity of time, unity of action and unity of place) were considered to be the significant features.

But in the due course, drama has experienced astounding experimentation. Among the crucial changes, the effect of revolutionary thinkers like Marx, Freud, and Einstein made vital impact on playwrights. Thus theater received continuous experimentation from not only playwrights but also directors, actors and technicians ex. Marco de Marrinis, Pirandello, Croce and many more. Many enthusiastic theater practitioners violated the norms set by the Elizabethan playwrights. A variety of plays took genesis owing to the need and creativity of the theatre practitioners. And so, August Strindberg rightly points out regarding these experimentalists,

Anything can happen, everything is possible and plausible. Time and space do not exist. Upon an insignificant background of real life events the imagination spins and weaves new patterns: a blend of memories, experiences, pure inventions, absurdities, and improvisations. The characters split, double, redouble, evaporate condense, fragment, cohere. But one consciousness is superior to them all : that of the dreamer. For him there are not secrets, no inconsistencies, no scruples, no laws. He neither condemns, nor acquits, only relates. [205-6]

Little Plays, divided into 15 scenes (no acts) is difficult to narrate as a story, as it employs stream of consciousness technique. Each scene is sui generis in its theme and doesn't necessarily connect with the subsequent scene. For example, the first scene 'The Three Vows' is all about Anand's first meeting with Gandhi and his acceptance of the three vows that would allow him to stay in Sabarmati Ashram. The

second scene 'Prayer' is all about prayer at Sabarmati and a dialogue between Gandhi and Anand about the right prayer. In this manner, there is a change in the theme but the structure is dialogue form through out. Each scene separately reveals the ideology of Gandhi from various facets like, the rules of Ashram, concern for the old, pursuit of cleanliness of the down trodden etc

The first major feature that gives it the status of a play is, the entire work is written in the dialogue form. The important features of this work that allows the work may be staged as a play are, stageability, description by the author about acting arena, stage directions, stage and setting, limited number of characters, spoken form of language, and dialogue form. Anand makes the characters speak out and doesn't employ any narration to reveal the characters. The characterization is comprehensible only through the words and actions of the characters.

The language used is evidently spoken form of English and in some contexts Hindi words are used. For any dramatic text the element that transforms it into a performance text is the usage of spoken form of the language. The following conversation in scene 3 shows the intricacy of spoken form of the language used by Anand,

GANDHI: Beti....Ooth! [The hysterical woman utters sob words

GANDHI: Beti.....

MAHADEV DESAI: Wife of Hari, drunkard. [35]

Second major feature of it is, each scene is set (to be enacted) in one acting arena and directions are clear and appropriate for staging. The action detailed in the text is well suited for a performance. The stage directions including seating arrangements that supplement the performative ability of the text. In the beginning of scene 4 'Property is Theft', Anand details the setting.

In the Verendah Office of Mahatma Gandhi Mahadev Desai is seated on the left, on the right, by the Mahatma's table is Mary Margaret Fuller, American young woman, temporarily working as secretary to the Mahatma in the Sabarmati Ashram. Mahatma Gandhi is dictating answers to a questionnaire to Mahadev, who passes the papers to Mary, Krishna Chandra Azad comes in, joins hand to the Mahatma and asks (4,40)

The stage directions show that a make -shift realistic setting would be suitable for staging it as a play. Coming to acting arena, the action of 9 scenes takes place in the verendah of Sabarmati Ashram. Since most of the action takes place in one setting, stage decoration would not be difficult. The number of characters in each scene are limited, in the first scene Gandhi, Azad, and Mahadev Desai participate like wise in almost all the scenes the number of characters does not exceed more than seven. This makes action on the stage comprehensible.

All the above attributes of *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi*, make it a steageable play. When a theatre practitioner attempts to perform it on the stage, he / she would encounter the problem associated with its length. But even this problem can be solved by selecting scenes depending on one's focus. If one focuses on the humanitarian aspects of Gandhi's ideology, scenes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 are appropriate, and if one is interested in Gandhi's association with plethora of leaders like Subhash Chandrabose, Sarojini Naidu, Maulana Azad etc. scenes 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 are suitable.

Anand's *Little Plays* determines the context of his encounter with Mahatma. This text would take its due importance if the context could be aptly created on the stage and then, this play would display, "the significance of Indian interpretation of history, conceptions of man, vision of good life, views on freedom, state, democracy, violence, human unity, ecological problems, mean end relationship and political morality" [10]. To conclude I would call it as Saros Cowasjee calls *Seven Summers* as 'the best auto biography of childhood yet written by an Indian novelist in English' [xii], *Little plays* is the best confessional play yet written by an Indian English writer. This experimental confessional novel lacks major criteria to call it or treat it as a novel and has adequate characteristics to treat is as a play. Anand attempted to create the memory totally to the reader/audience.

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