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Disciplining the Coolie, Regulating the Artisan: A Foucauldian Reading of Power and Labor in Mulk Raj Anand's Two Leaves and a Bud and The Big Heart

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Abstract: This article examines the shifting topologies of power and labor subjugation in Mulk Raj Anand's Two Leaves and a Bud (1937) and The Big Heart (1945) through Michel Foucault's analytics of power, supplemented by Marxist political economy and postcolonial theory. While conventional criticism emphasizes Anand's socialist realism or Gandhian humanism, this study demonstrates that his fiction tracks an evolutionary movement from an anatomo-politics of bodily discipline to a biopolitical apparatus of industrial regulation. In Two Leaves and a Bud, the Assam tea plantation operates as an enclosed carceral institution wherein the indentured coolie, Gangu, is produced as a docile body through spatial partitioning, surveillance, and sovereign violence. In The Big Heart, the ancestral thathiar (coppersmith) guild of Amritsar confronts the dislocating shock of mechanization, where labor is governed through machine temporalities, surplus populations, and market fluctuations. By analyzing the dialectic between institutional capture and subaltern counter-conduct, the article reveals Anand's incisive diagnosis of how colonial capitalism and modern industrialization systematically govern and expend marginalized human life.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, Michel Foucault, Disciplinary Power, Anatomo-politics, Biopolitics, Docile Bodies, Subaltern Labor, Modernity.

Introduction

Literary representations of subaltern labor in colonial South Asia have long served as a critical arena for exposing the systemic fissures within imperial modernization and industrial teleology. Within the Anglophone Indian canon, Mulk Raj Anand occupies a preeminent position; his fiction systematically interrogates the socio-economic configurations that dismantle the bodily sovereignty of the peripheral subject. Anand's Two Leaves and a Bud (1937) and The Big Heart (1945) offer twin investigations into laboring-class vulnerability across contrasting terrains: the racialized, coercive indenture of tea plantation coolies in Assam and the dissolution of a traditional coppersmith guild confronting industrial factory mechanization in Amritsar.

While foundational criticism represented by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, C. D. Narasimhaiah, and Saros Cowasjee predominantly interprets Anand through the lens of didactic socialist realism and Gandhian moral humanism, such frameworks treat power as a monolithic, centralized instrument of juridical prohibition. Consequently, they obscure the subtle microphysics through which institutional authority disciplines and reconstitutes human corporeality. Michel Foucault's analytics of power provides a vital corrective. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault demonstrates that modern power operates by producing "docile bodies" through spatial partitioning, somatic drill, and panoptic surveillance (138), a paradigm expanded in "Society Must Be Defended" through the dual axes of anatomo-politics (disciplining the individual body) and biopolitics (regulating the population en masse) (242–43).

Transplanting this theoretical apparatus to colonial and transitional India requires contextualizing Foucault alongside Ann Laura Stoler's insight into the racialized nature of colonial disciplinary regimes (61–63) and Karl Marx's formulation of the machine process, which reduces the living artisan to an appendage of dead capital (Capital 548). Synthesizing these perspectives, this study argues that Two Leaves and a Bud and The Big Heart delineate two distinct yet continuous historical formations of modern power: the anatomo-political disciplining of the indentured coolie through carceral enclosures and sovereign terror on the Assam plantation, and the biopolitical regulation of the traditional artisan through machine temporalities, economic obsolescence, and surplus-population management in urban Amritsar.

Spatial Partitioning, Surveillance, and the Plantation Panopticon in Two Leaves and a Bud

In Two Leaves and a Bud, Anand constructs the Macpherson Tea Estate not merely as a site of agricultural extraction, but as a total carceral apparatus engineered to produce somatic docility. The estate's layout embodies Michel Foucault's disciplinary partitioning, wherein space is partitioned to prevent collective action, enforce cellular isolation, and maintain continuous surveillance (Discipline and Punish 141–43). Encircled by dense jungles, rivers, and armed chowkidars, the plantation functions as an inescapable carceral trap—an "unbreakable jail" without bars (32) where debt bondage and geographical isolation extinguish physical autonomy. This geography materializes imperial hierarchy: the European managers' elevated bungalows command an open-air panoptic gaze over the squalid, low-lying coolie lines, keeping the workers in a state of permanent visibility through native sirdars whose watchful presence enforces absolute submission (78, 201).

This panoptic visibility directly underpins the anatomo-political extraction of labor through strict temporal synchronization. Foucault notes that disciplinary power penetrates the body by aligning human motion with temporal rhythms (Discipline and Punish 152). Anand illustrates this mechanization as estate sirens and plucking quotas overwrite peasant life, compelling Gangu and his family to move with automatic precision: "Snap, snap, snap, the fingers moved with the speed of birds... The back ached, the legs stiffened into stone, but the fingers could not cease their dance" (84). The laborer's body is broken into discrete anatomical parts trained for relentless output under threat of corporeal punishment. Paired with wage deductions and calculated insolvency, this somatic drill traps the coolie within a closed disciplinary loop, where physical exhaustion reproduces debt, and debt perpetually enforces bodily subjugation.

The Manufacture of the Docile Coolie: Biopolitical Neglect and Sovereign Violence

The ultimate objective of disciplinary power, as Foucault theorizes, is the production of the docile body—a physical form whose economic utility is maximized while its political capacity for counter-hegemonic action is extinguished (Discipline and Punish 138). In Two Leaves and a Bud, Anand demonstrates that the creation of the docile coolie relies upon a deliberate policy of bodily attrition and institutional neglect. The biological vulnerabilities of the laborers specifically their susceptibility to starvation, cholera, and malaria are weaponized as technologies of subjugation. As Jill Didur observes in her analysis of the novel, the plantation represents an early instantiation of the Plantationocene, an ecological-carceral matrix wherein the environmental reorganization of land is co-constitutive with the racialized disciplining of indentured subjects (342–45).

This structural abandonment embodies Foucault's definition of sovereign biopower: the capacity to "foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (The History of Sexuality 138). While the European managers maintain access to clean water, screens, and preventative medicine, the coolie lines are left in filth. When an epidemic of cholera sweeps through the settlement, claiming Sajani's life, Anand exposes how colonial medicine operates not as an instrument of therapeutic healing, but as a bureaucratic apparatus of economic triage: She lay there, shriveled, vomiting bile and water, the skin of her hands wrinkled like dry paper... Gangu ran towards the dispensary, but the gates were barred. 'The doctor babu is asleep,' the chowkidar snarled. 'Coolies die every day; the Sahib cannot be disturbed for a dead woman.' (Anand, Two Leaves and a Bud 134)

The coolie's life is systematically derecognized; it is treated as bare biological life (zoē) stripped of political or ethical qualification. Dr. John, the estate's medical officer, does not serve the coolie population as a healer; he serves the administrative board as an inspector of labor viability. The bodies of the sick are treated as defective machinery whose maintenance cost exceeds their productive return. Yet, Anand illustrates that in the colonial plantation, modern disciplinary techniques do not fully displace older, spectacular displays of sovereign power. Foucault explains that while disciplinary power works quietly through norms and surveillance, traditional sovereign power reveals itself through spectacular, physical demonstrations of force inscribed upon the body of the condemned (Discipline and Punish 32–34). On the Macpherson estate, this sovereign excess is incarnated in Reggie Hunt, who patrols the plantation boundaries atop a polo pony, wielding his whip as a physical extension of imperial supremacy. Hunt operates within a framework of sovereign exemption, treating the coolies as beasts of burden and the women as sexual property.

When Hunt corners Leila in the tea bushes, intending to rape her, she breaks the prescribed script of docile submission and flees toward her father's hut. Gangu's instinctual intervention to shield his daughter disrupts the racial-disciplinary contract of the estate. Hunt's reaction is immediate and sovereign: he raises his hunting rifle and shoots Gangu dead in cold blood (Two Leaves and a Bud 198–200). The subsequent courtroom scene—wherein an all-white jury acquits Hunt of murder on the absurd medical pretext that Gangu died from a "ruptured spleen" precipitated by chronic malaria (204)—confirms the total collusion between the disciplinary plantation and the colonial judiciary. Sovereign power claims the absolute right over life and death, confirming that beneath the veneer of modern administrative routine on the colonial plantation lies an unyielding apparatus of racialized terror.

Regulating the Artisan: Industrialization, Machine Temporalities, and Population Management in The Big Heart

In The Big Heart, Anand relocates his narrative from the plantation's physical enclosure to urban Amritsar, shifting analytical focus to the biopolitical regulation of an industrial population ("Society Must Be Defended" 242–43). The ancestral thathiar (coppersmith) guild of the Billimaran derives its dignity and communal cohesion from manual craftsmanship. The introduction of steam-powered machinery by native capitalists ruptures this guild autonomy, instituting what Foucault terms the "body-machine complex" a coercive regime that establishes an instrumental coding between the human body, its gestures, and the mechanical apparatus (Discipline and Punish 153). Anand renders this fracture through a stark acoustic and spatial contrast: the traditional, polyphonic "thump-thump of the hammers" is eclipsed by the factory's "monstrous brick belly... making the work of twenty men in twenty minutes" (22). As Karl Marx observes in Capital, industrial mechanization strips the worker of somatic agency, converting the craftsman from a tool-wielding subject into a mere appendage of the machine (548).

Crucially, modern power operates here through the biopolitical production of an "excess population." The artisans are not constrained by physical barricades or travel permits; rather, they are immobilized by the abstract violence of market forces: technological displacement, structural unemployment, and price devaluation. Unable to compete with cheap factory output, the coppersmiths are driven into destitution and cast out as surplus labor. This economic displacement is spatialized across the changing sensory ecology of the Billimaran, where open-air workshops lit by charcoal fires are supplanted by the factory's blinding glare and toxic stench of oil and sulfur, eliminating guild sociability and subordinating physical movement to rotating assembly belts (Anand, The Big Heart 67). The artisans are thus trapped within an obsolete productive space, governed through the silent, attritional violence of capitalist regulation.

The Controlling Switch: Subaltern Counter-Conduct, Discourse, and the Divided Working Class

Power relations, as Foucault contends, are never absolute; "power is exercised only over free subjects" and inevitably incites resistance ("The Subject and Power" 790). In The Big Heart, Anand avoids romanticizing

subaltern solidarity, dramatizing instead how "counter-conduct" (Security, Territory, Population 201) fractures along opposing ideological lines when confronting industrial modernity. This divide is embodied by Ralia's reactionary Luddism versus Ananta's socialist humanism. Starving and dispossessed, Ralia demonizes the steam engine—crying, "The engine is a devil! It has eaten our bread!" (112)—and pursues a regressive revolt aimed at smashing the machinery. Lacking an analytical grasp of capitalist production, Ralia attacks the physical apparatus rather than the relations of ownership, devolving legitimate grievance into chaotic, reactive violence.

Conversely, Ananta champions a counter-hegemonic discourse that embraces technological modernity while challenging its capitalist deployment. Rejecting technological fatalism, he urges the artisans to seize control of production: "If you have the controlling switch in your hand, you can make the machine a slave rather than your master... If we break the engine, we break our own hands" (90, 187). Ananta reframes the "controlling switch" as a metaphor for proletarian sovereignty, modeling an ethical "care of the self" (The Care of the Self 35–37) to transform passive victims into organized political agents.

Yet Anand resists utopian didacticism, concluding with tragic irony. When the mob storms the factory, Ananta shields the equipment, only for Ralia to seize him and dash his head against the lathe: "Ananta's skull cracked like an earthen pot... and his body slumped to the floor" (214). Murdered neither by the police nor the mill owners, but by the very craftsman he sought to liberate, Ananta becomes a casualty of subaltern fracture. By engineering systemic scarcity and despair, regulatory capital turns the marginalized against one another, exhausting revolutionary energy in self-destructive fratricide while preserving the hegemony of the machine and the market intact.

Comparative Synthesis: The Evolution of Power from Field to Factory

A comparative reading of Two Leaves and a Bud and The Big Heart illuminates an evolutionary continuum in Mulk Raj Anand's critique of power and labor. Across these two works, power shifts from the anatomo-politics of individual discipline to the biopolitical regulation of a population. In Two Leaves and a Bud, subjugation operates through direct physical enclosure within a panoptic plantation camp using cellular, localized instruments: boundary ditches, roll calls, plucking baskets, and the overseer's cane. In The Big Heart, authority disperses into the abstract mechanisms of industrial capitalism, wherein market volatility, commodity devaluation, and machine temporalities render entire craft communities economically obsolete.

Concurrently, the spatial logic moves from carceral containment to urban disposability. Gangu's predicament is defined by forced physical immobilization within the tea garden, where flight invites brutal retribution. Conversely, the thathiars of the Billimaran are not forcibly locked in; they are cast out onto the streets, governed through market abandonment rather than physical confinement.This transition also alters the nature of violence and subaltern agency across the texts. Gangu suffers an act of sovereign execution—murdered by a white planter whose racial impunity is subsequently ratified by a colonial court. Ananta's demise, by contrast, is a structural biopolitical casualty—a chaotic impact against cold iron during a riot induced by economic precarity. While resistance in the plantation remains limited to individual flight, grief, and appeals to paternalism, the industrial setting elevates counter-conduct into an organized discourse of trade unionism and technological reclamation. Ultimately, both protagonists are physically destroyed, demonstrating the profound vulnerability of the laboring body across both disciplinary and regulatory regimes.

Conclusion

Reading Two Leaves and a Bud and The Big Heart through a Foucauldian framework recalibrates Anand's critical standing, elevating him from a mere chronicler of social suffering or practitioner of socialist realism to an incisive genealogist of modern power at the colonial and industrial periphery. Long before the post-structuralist formulation of panopticism, biopolitical regulation, and docile bodies, Anand's fiction dissected the exact techniques through which capital, the state, and mechanical infrastructure capture marginal human life. In Two

Leaves and a Bud, Anand exposes how the colonial plantation operated as an apparatus of corporeal discipline designed to reduce living labor into silent, obedient instruments of imperial extraction. In The Big Heart, he charts the fraught dawn of India's industrial transition, revealing how unregulated mechanization operates as a biopolitical force that fractures guild solidarity, alienates tactile craft, and channels class despair into self-destructive fratricide. By denying his narratives easy, sentimental reconciliations—leaving Gangu unavenged under colonial law and Ananta crushed upon the factory floor—Anand avoids didactic escapism. His novels deliver an uncompromising diagnosis of modernity: an architecture of power that cannot be dismantled through spontaneous rage or moral appeals alone, but demands a rigorous understanding of the spatial, disciplinary, and biopolitical networks that govern the human condition in the Global South.

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