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Reading the Early City: 'Hard City' in Mulk Raj Anand's "*The Big Heart*"

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**Abstract**

This paper explores *The Big Heart* as a milestone in the emergence of the literature of the early industrial town. The novel profiles the early 'industrial town' represented by Amritsar. Anand himself signals this shift of focus by moving his protagonist Ananta from the big industrial and commercial metropolis Bombay to the small town of Amritsar. The setting of the novel in Cat Killers lane in the city of Amritsar, symbolizes the two diametrically opposite ideologies; of tradition and of modernity, of "soft city" vs "hard city". The former is represented by the opening of the lane into Bazar Kaserian, the ancient market and the later into the new Ironmonger's Bazar. The soft city of yester years, of dreams and illusions has been turned into merciless industrial hard city.

The novel puts an unremitting focus on the originary moment of the conflict between hand work and machine work that gets exacerbated by the machine age or 'Iron Age', as the narrator terms it. Thus the early industrial town is focalized for the reader by the dominant presence of the machines in colonial India, poised to enter the modern era.

**Key Words:** Early City, Hard City, Soft City, Industrial Town, Conflict

**Introduction**

The novel *The Big Heart* opens with a grim invocation of the machine age. The gloomy atmosphere is better described in the following line; "...the men and women of Billimaran, children too, have assumed a different hue. They are paler and sallow, where grime and dirt does not hide their bodies. For they work harder, they say, to buy the new gadgets of 'iron age'." (The Big Heart, 24) It then goes on to explore through its protagonist Ananta's guarded and cautious embrace of the machine, like India's embrace of many other imports from 'Vilayat' (England), the English language included, the problems and prospects of the tempering of a mechanical civilization by the ministrations of the human heart. The novel is organized for the

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most part like a debate on the pros and cons of the machine with the major characters taking pro and anti-machine views and with Ananta treading on a fine line between them.

The novel explores the tradition-modernity debate as it is mediated by these pro and anti-machine stances. The fact that the machines are wrecked on a massive scale at the end and the fact that Ananta is killed tragically suggests a momentary defeat of the forces of modernity. The many debates in the pages of the novel and the novelist's investment of Ananta, the workman, Puran Singh Bhagat, the poet, and Janaki, the archetypal wronged woman, with a greater humanity shows however that this defeat is not definitive and decisive. *The Big Heart* holds out the possibility of creating the contours of the city with a human face. It is a place where the opposing forces of tradition and modernity will be reconciled and where Ananta's fine workmanship, Puran Singh Bhagat's millenarian or messianic poetry and Janki's feminine tenderness will blend to compose the soft city of our needs and dreams.

**Tradition-Modernity Conflict**

Anand's seventh novel *The Big Heart*, well received by readers and critics, is his first novel to have a factory hand as a protagonist. The protagonist of the novel, Ananta, who believes in science and technology, represents the coppersmith or the *thathiar* class and always makes efforts to uplift them from their deplorable condition through modernity and its invention. To M.K Naik, "Ananta the young coppersmith, called "big heart" owing to his generosity, aggressively champions the machine and modernity in a traditional society and finally pays the price with his life." (165) Ananta knows that industrialization, will play a revolutionary role in the life of Indian people. It will unify economic life of India and finally give birth to modern cities, which will be the centre of modern culture and increasing democratic social life and form where progressive movements, social, political and cultural, emanate.

Although his suffering is an account of the introduction of machines, the harbinger of modernity, he strongly believes that they can eradicate the flaws from the society and can create a healthy environment for humanity and its values. Leela Gandhi Points out, "Here, Ananta single handedly takes on the task of bringing the lessons of modernity and mechanisation to his suspicious and unchanging community." (202) In order to fortify the jobless workers Ananta urges them to form a union and demand employment from factory owners. He meets with a tragic end for his misadventure, but his humanistic outlook, offers to correct the age-old psyche of factory workers by bringing together the apparently contradictory worlds of tradition and modernity.

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**Anand's View on Industrialisation**

Anand was a visionary, an urban planner who has closely studied the development of modern European city London. As observed by A.S Dasan, "Urban planning and modern architecture were part of Anand's artistic concerns." (41) So Anand who had deep understanding of both India and England, chose the middle path. As a progressive social and political thinker, Anand believed that machine was the powerful tool for the prosperity of mankind, but that needed to be controlled. He wanted to give justice to anyone and everyone who got affected by the machines. He depicts in the novel *The Big Heart*, a situation in which uncontrolled industrialisation causes great problems to the social structure. The novel accepts the installation of machine but is resistant to the uncontrolled introduction of it.

In a letter to Saros Cowasjee, Mulk Raj Anand stated the purpose of writing the novel: I wrote this novel at the end of World War II in London when the machines of Western civilisation had nearly destroyed the world. I was convinced that if India also went the same way, after freedom, without controlling the machine, but allowed it to become the instrument of exploitation, then we would also produce the same horrors...I was thinking of Gandhi's natural rejection of machine. I wanted to show that though we can't reject the machine altogether, we have to control it, as a driver controls a railway engine. (121)

The letter clearly states Anand's attitude to the machine. He wants India to be industrialised but not at the cost of traditional occupation. Here Anand cautiously treads on a double edged sword. Industrialisation is one side of the sword that can affect the society adversely by eating up the jobs of traditional artisans, while on the other hand, totally rejecting the machine may jeopardize the growth of the nation. Anand's task is herculean as he negotiates the double edge with Ananta, the protagonist whom the traditional society accuses as immoral and does not accept as a leader.

For Ananta, the demonization of machines should be stopped. There should not be any bloodshed for the machine or by the machine. The peace, harmony and serenity should be maintained even after the introduction of the machine. He works to uphold peace. His death by the machine and for the machine is a temporary defeat to Anand's vision of soft city and the victory of hard city, but this victory sends a note of caution that the hard city will bring doom to the society one day.

The introduction of British machines produced goods that could reach the most interior parts of India, forcing thousands of village artisans to unemployment. The newly established

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industries did not induct the village artisans, throwing them into impoverishment that Anand did not desire. He wanted the modern industries to give employment to the village artisans so that there would be simultaneous development. In short *The Big Heart* is a trumpet of prophecy, if industrialisation is mishandled, it will produce more menace than good.

**Failure of the Hero**

In Anand's entire novels we find the protagonist brings into the focus the injustices in the society. He brings out a revolutionary hero, who says "...that realization of a good life is only possible after the destruction of the present order. The novels end on a note of hope in the anticipated Revolution. Though the *milieu* of the novels differs, the character of the message and messenger remains remarkably consistent." (Bald, 480) Here, Ananta's failure stems from his own limitations. His only fault is that he is big hearted, humane and brave. He believes in the Darwinian doctrine of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. He has worked accordingly to stay relevant for the society. His death is predestined. As his nemesis, Satyapal, Mejid not Ralia, Dina, Mehroo, have much hold on public than that of him. He must die so that others could survive and he would be immortal. He believes man is wholly responsible for his own destiny, but the manner of his death ironically indicates one of his sacrilegious jibes- 'God works in a mysterious way' (216).

In a society as duplicitous as it is orthodox, his liaison with Janki is frowned upon. He is accused as immoral, and the society made him feel so. But he did no wrong in rescuing a widow, whose elderly husband had just died and who was supposed to face much humiliation in widowhood. Now Ananta feels the difference between Bombay and Amritsar; "In Bombay few people worried about illegal liaisons. But in small town like Amritsar, where everyone knew everyone else, they were narrow minded and malicious." (48)

His fidelity to Janki, even when she is consumed by tuberculosis, is worth mentioning. Ralia, who beats and starves his wife, is more acceptable to the thathiars than Ananta, who genuinely loves Janki and has given her a new lease of life. His reputation as a whore-monger and a drunkard, though false, deprives him of the moral authority demanded of a leader in a tradition bound society. His agnosticism is looked upon as another facet of his immorality, and he is, through no fault of his, suspected of being in the service of capitalists. But, above all, he is unable to channelize his cause and hence unable to offer an immediate remedy for misery of unemployed. The starving workers want immediate return for joining the union but he delivers lectures of sound logic. It sounds great but not to the hungry. For Ananta revolution is religion. Ananta addresses the public for a revolt:

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The Revolution is not yet. And it isn't merely in the shouting. Nor is it in this single battle in Billimaran, brothers. It is only through a great many conflicts between the employers, authorities and the workers, in a whole number of battles which our comrades are elsewhere fighting, that there will come the final overthrow of bosses. (261)

Opposing the union is Satyapal, "devil's own son" (237) a man of indiscriminate hatred. He hates the English, and the Russians, the communists and the capitalists and much else. He is in favour of immediate action to seize the factory and wreck it. As the basis of his militancy lies in the common suffering of all those present, his words have a stronger impact on people than do those of Ananta;

Men live and "work for a cubit stomach" in our time,' shouted Satyapal. 'And yet they can't earn enough even to subsist on the margin where life hangs on to death. I say death to the traitors who join hands with outsiders in the name of internationalism and betray their countrymen. (194)

These provocations speak more to the struggling thathiars than the solemn appeal of Ananta to form union to ensure right to proper wage. He knows that revolution will be a far cry unless the coppersmiths learn to unite. For Satyapal, forming union is a betrayal as it would not help the proletariat rule. It is a bigger propaganda that suits the factory owners. Viroo, one unemployed thathiar, declares not to respond Ananata, despite Ananta's attempt to convince them with personal connection. Satyapal seems to have stolen the show of protest against the factory owners. He is the vehicle of extremism, provocative irritability and spreader of contagious hatred. His speeches are fiery. He is strongly supported by Professor Mejid whose oratorical skills attract the audience.

The real enemy is hidden there, said Mejid, mounting the platform again, that factory, which is going to convert you all from feudal slaves to wage slave...greatest danger now facing all nations is the wealth of the rich and development of the machine....skyscrapers in New York, railways in miles of tunnels underground, telephones, cables and wireless and millions of aeroplanes which touch the ceiling of the sky, speaking not a word of cheer to humanity but only death-these will surely bring their Nemesis to this world! (262)

One student among the audience responds; "For, as soon as they have introduced this kind of industry into our country on a sufficient scale, they will appear in the role of the parasitic rentier class which they have played elsewhere." (258) The biting cynicism, mockery prompted

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by courage of despair made Satyapal hysterical. One can guess the deep humiliation that has been meted out to him. His bitterness of speech reached the whole circumference of Billimaran as most of the audiences have experienced suppression in their life. He was indirectly targeting Ananta; “Hypocrites, renegades, traitors, we shall show you! We have lists ready of the traitors who have made peace with the oppressors!” (260)

Ananta was calm and composed, giving a moderate view. He was against the militant call of Satyapal. He knows Satyapal’s speech has no ground reality. But Ananta’s views were developmental. As K N Sinha observes;

Ananta firmly believes that a new life has to be created, a life in which the machines will not be objects of terror but harbingers of plenty, prosperity, and love. Ananta’s sacrifice is the ritual necessarily to be enacted if such life is to become a reality....The rather roguish, quizzical Ananta is an enormously living character. He meets his doom, fighting for a noble cause and, thereby, achieves his salvation. Living, he provides sustenance for others; dead, he sets a pattern of life for others to follow. (56)

Ralia, the hot blooded thatthiar, youth declared war against the factory. Calling him as the destroyer lord Shiva, he charged towards factory madly with a hammer. He was constantly cheered by Satyapal, “What was made must be broken, the cause of ruin must become a ruin-then only will the bosses learn!”(*The Big Heart*, 269) Ralia broke the machine in frenzy. Ananta who was around, consoled him with soothing words. In fits of anger, he scolded Ananta and called him traitor. In return Ananta gave him a resounding slap. In return, abusing Ananta, “you will not break my pride...Machine man, swine!...You are the brother of these machines and machine wallahs-traitor, blackleg.” (274) At the end Ralia does a thoughtless crime by killing his friend Ananta. He dashed Ananta’s head in the broken part of the machine and his heart stopped beating.

Because of machines Ralia and his family suffers the most, and Ralia is shown ranting at the machines throughout the novel. During the political discussions he is for the most part sleeping and drunk, and he kills Ananta unintentionally while wrecking the machines. Ananta is thus a victim of rage and insanity, not of religious or political creed, and his sacrifice is the sacrifice of the unselfish man for humanity. At the end the poet Puran Singh Bhagat declares, “...the man Ananta was really immortal from the memories of him that he had left behind in the hearts of his friends and relatives; that in the long run it was, as he had tried to tell the coppersmiths, their manhood and not the machines which was of consequence to him.” (280)

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Ananta at the end became a Christ like figure whose death was for the cause of the society, who was more sinned against than sinning.

**Conclusion**

In *The Big Heart* Anand is not without a softcorner for industrial capitalism with a human face. British rule is evil, but there is much good in British institution. Capitalism is another name of exploitation, but there are capitalists who have the welfare of the workers at heart. Gandhi's aversion to machines is as unacceptable as his support of an unplanned, individualistic, profit making industrialisation, but he is right that 'violence breeds violence'. The whole of man's nature is governed by economic conditions, and when Anand depicts individuals he never lets us forget that these people themselves are victims of unjust institutions.

Anand's perceptive treatment of the complex Indian problem in the novel with the action happening in a single day is masterly. Anand never follows the technique of flashback to compensate for the time. The message of the author is clear: the challenge that modernization throws up cannot be resolved by violence, but only by compassion and understanding-through heart. Therefore the protagonist Ananta reiterates his pet phrase "there is no talk of money, brothers: one must have a big heart" (26). His vocal rejection of money is a message toward the formation of 'soft city'.

Anand focuses in the novel on how industrialization has played almost a revolutionary role in the life of Indian People. But industrialization gave birth to modern cities which became the centres of modern culture and from which all progressive movements social, political and cultural emanated. Here, Ananta fights against the age old notions of his own fraternity and against the owner of machines, making the novel a fine blend of tradition and modernity.

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