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Lalu's Lost Land: Understanding the Agrarian Collapse in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Village*

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand's 1939 novel, *The Village*, offers an firm look into a pre-independence Punjabi agrarian community, stripping away any idealized notions of rural India. Through the character Lal Singh (Lalu), this paper examines the systematic pull to pieces of rural life by three primary forces: the British colonial administration, the local primitive landlord (Sardar Harbans Singh), and the predacious moneylender (Seth Chaman Lal). The narrative underscores how mounting debt, shrinking landholdings, and rigid social customs functioned together to conquer the peasantry. Lalu's ultimate decision to join the colonial army is framed not merely as a personal journey, but as a predictable consequence of profound agrarian distress. By exploring Anand's social realism, this study positions the text as a visionary lens for understanding the enduring nature of peasant displacement in India.

Introduction

The 1930s marked a ultimate shift in Indian English literature, driven largely by the Progressive Writers' Movement, which sought to pull to pieces peaceful representations of village life. Mulk Raj Anand championed this movement by employing unambiguous social realism to capture the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Set in the microcosm of Nandpur, *The Village* illustrates a wider national crisis where agrarian collapse is driven by a calculated architecture of exploitation rather than natural misfortunes. The daily struggles of the village's farmers reveal an economy crushed underneath the dual weights of imperial rule and local feudalism.

Objectives

- **To analyze** the representation of agrarian collapse and peasant dispossession in Anand's *The Village*.
- **To examine** the mechanics of the "oppressive triad"—the colonial government, the feudal landlord, and the moneylender—in exploiting the agricultural community.
- **To decontextualize** Lalu's transition from farming to military service as a direct outcome of systemic economic failure rather than a voluntary adventure.

Methodology

This paper services a close textual analysis of *The Village*, utilizing post-colonial and subaltern theoretical frameworks to decode the underlying power structures, economic snares, and social hierarchies. The literary analysis is substantiated by historical documentation regarding colonial agrarian policies in Punjab, alongside critical perspectives on Anand's realistic narrative techniques.

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Discussion and Analysis

The Architecture of Exploitation

Anand maps out the agrarian crisis through a trio of dictators that guarantee continuous peasant poverty. At the base is the village financier, Seth Chaman Lal, who continues a cycle of compound interest, forcing farmers to loan ancestral lands to survive crop failures or fund social obligations. Above him operates Sardar Harbans Singh, a landlord who manipulates boundaries, exacts unpaid labor, and monopolizes local resources. Overarching this system is the British colonial state, enforcing inflexible land taxes and revenue policies while remaining indifferent to rural survival.

Social Dogma as a Tool for Control

Economic suppression in Nandpur is heavily reinforced by deep-rooted social norms. Anand critiques how strict caste divides, religious superstitions, and the financial burden of mandatory rituals (such as weddings and funerals) actively drive peasants into the moneylender's clutches. The traditional village operates not as a sanctuary, but as a compliance mechanism. Lalu's defiance of these expectations—most notably by shearing his hair—acts as a direct challenge to the broader economic ladder that demands his total submission.

From Farm to Frontline: The Inevitability of Displacement

Lalu's evolution from a dedicated farmer to a brief, and ultimately a British Indian Army soldier, symbolizes the peak of this agrarian crisis. As generational land is partitioned into unsustainable fragments, farming ceases to be economically viable. His military enlistment is driven by sheer survival rather than patriotism or a desire for rebellion. This shift signifies the collapse of the agrarian ideal, illustrating how a failing land economy forces its youth into migratory labor or armed service.

Findings

- The agrarian collapse portrayed in *The Village* is a systemic, engineered disaster resulting from the intersection of colonial taxation and local feudal exploitation.
- Debt functions as a primary instrument for social and economic supremacy, converting independent cultivators into bonded workers and landless migrants.
- Military enlistment among rural youth represents a forced displacement activated by local economic death, rather than a free career choice.
- Traditional religious and cultural obligations accelerate economic devastation, upholding a social ladder designed to enrich landlords and moneylenders.

The Enduring Legacy of The Village

Mulk Raj Anand's work remains a foundation for analyzing Indian agrarian struggles within English literature. By dismantling the illusion of a self-sustaining, harmonious village, Anand challenges readers with the brutal economic truths of the 1930s. The narrative maps the exact ways in which colonialism, feudalism, and debt collaboratively erased rural livelihoods. Ultimately, Lalu's exile from

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Nandpur stands as a historical evidence to peasant displacement—a theme that ensures the novel's continued relevance in discussions of India's contemporary agricultural challenges.

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