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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	Author	Title of the Paper	Page No.
1	Dr. Jeyaseelan Gnanaseelan	A Corpus Analysis of the Prepositions used in Letter Writing in English	01
2	Abolfazl Ramazani & Sima Sharbaz	Dialogic Voices in T. S. Eliot's <i>The Waste Land</i>	16
3	Dr. Shamala Ratnakar	Multicultural Identity and Immigrant Tradition in Rohinton Mistry's <i>Squatter</i>	35
4	Shachi Sood & Dr. Vandhana Sharma	The Woman in the Body: Locating the Individuality within Patriarchy in Dattani's <i>Thirty Days in September</i> and <i>Ek Alag Mausam</i>	41
5	R. Saradha	From a Marginalist Vacuum towards a Nominalist Continuum: A study of Shoban Bantwal's <i>The Dowry Bride</i>	48
6	Dr. M. Lavanya & Prof. Dr. R. Ganesan	Perceived Physical and Psychological Stress among Higher Secondary School Students: A Pilot Study	57
7	Dr. Shivaji Sargar & Prof. Shivaji Kalwale	Allusiveness in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot with special reference to <i>The Waste Land</i>	65
8	Dr. R. R. Thorat	Use of Mythical Symbols in Raja Rao's <i>Kanthapura</i>	71
9	Dr. Pooja Singh & Dr. Archana	Glam to Sham: Woman's Innate Desire for Commitment	77
10	Dr. Sudhendu Giri	Modern Entrepreneurial Spirit in an Urbanised Economy	88
11	Ali Arian	The Elements of Humanity and Sufism in Henry David Thoreau's <i>Walden</i>	105
12	Tania Mary Vivera	Mindscaping Oskar Schell: Mental Spaces and Conceptual Blending in <i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i>	111
13	Mr. Chaitanya V. Mahamuni	Digital Video Watermarking Using DWT and PCA in Encrypted Domain	118
14	Dr. Aruna	Behaviour of Consumers Regarding Electronic Goods in Pune Region	129
15	B. Moses	Syntax and Semantic Problems in Translating Indira Parthasarathy's <i>Helicoptergal Keezhe Irangi Vittana</i> into English	134

16	Dr. Yogesh Jain	Mutual Funds & Other Financial Instruments: A Study of Customer Behaviour with special reference to Udaipur	138
17	Dr. S. Karthikkumar	Feminism vs. Humanism in Anita Rau Badami's <i>The Hero's Walk</i>	152
18	Dr. Shivani Jha	Ecocriticism and Ecocritical Interpretations of Selected Recent Indian Writings in English	156
19	Abu Siddik	Vivekananda's Vision of Religion: A Brief Survey of Hinduism and Islam	163
20	S.A. Thameemul Ansari	Best Practices in ELT: A Need for Reflection in the English Classroom	169
21	S. Rajeswari	The Big Heart: Conflict between Tradition and Modernity	176
22	Prof. Arvindkumar A. Kamble	Western Women in Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest'	185
23	Prabal J. Roddannavar	The Representation of Hatred in <i>The Bluest Eye</i>	188
24	Prof. Divya Chansoria & Mr. Umakant Gajbir	Democracy, Human Rights and Its Implementation	193
25	Mr. Chandan Bharti Mishra	An Analysis of Habitat Fragmentation and Recent Bottlenecks Influence	197
26	Dr. Shilpa Mishra	The Politics of HRM in India	202
27	Megha Katoria	Representation or Misrepresentation: Image of Women in Media	210
28	Dr. Ram Kalap Tiwari	Role of Spiritual Activities to Strengthen Mental Health and Well Being of Adolescents	215
29	Chintan V. Pandya, Jignasu P. Mehta, Aditee J. Jadeja & B. A. Golakiya	Antifungal Activity of Crude Extract of <i>Butea Monosperma</i>	226
30	Dr. Jaydeep Singh Dangi	<i>Computer par Hindi Suchana Praudyogikike Vikasmein Badha Nahin Balki Vikas Hain</i>	230
31	Angela Sadeghi Tehrani	A Rebellion through Confession – A Note on the Confessional Tone of the Poems of Kamala Das and Feroz Farrokhzad	233
32	Dr. Riktesh Srivastava	Analysis of n-Tier Electronic Commerce Architecture Using Different Queuing Models	239
33	Nima Shakouri	Revisiting the Role of Gender in the Use of Language Learning Strategies: A Poststructuralist Look	247
34	Shahnawaz Ahmad Mantoo	Geo-strategic Importance of Bangladesh in Contemporary South Asia: An Analysis of Bangladesh-US Partnership	255
35	Ashish Kumar	Social Entrepreneurships in India: An Exploratory Study	261

The Big Heart: Conflict between Tradition and Modernity**S. Rajeswari***M.L.R Institute of Technology, Affiliated to JNTUH, Dundigal, Hyderabad (A.P), India***Abstract**

The Big Heart is written from the torment of living between the two worlds 'one not quite dead and the other refusing to be born'. The main thrust of the novel was a passionate plea to accelerate the death of the old order and the birth of a new order that refuses to be born. Instead of giving a static picture of reality, Anand inquires into the central conflict inherent in the social reality and emphasizes the need for the emergence of higher levels of conscious by dealing a mortal blow to the old values and striving for the emergence of a new order. And this he did by means of his hero Ananta, the big heart, who became a martyr in the whirlpool of events consequent to the tension between the two social orders, the old and the new.

Key Words: torment of living, passionate plea, emergence of higher levels, mortal blow, tension

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand is among the pioneers of the modern Indian novel in English. His concern for the underprivileged and downtrodden is a pervasive theme in much of his writings. The untouchables, coolies, tea-planters, coppersmiths and sepoys of the early novels were clearly known as living people by Anand before he rendered them into art. The Big Heart (1945) reproduces the terrific intensity and concentration of Untouchable. The issue here is not between the 'untouchables' and the 'higher' castes, but between the 'thathiars' (the hereditary coppersmiths) and the capitalists (LallaMurliDhar and Seth Gokul Chand). Actually the epigraph in The Big Heart is taken from Byron's speech on the Luddities (the Nottinghamshire weavers) in the House of Lords on 27 February 1812 which figures in Toller's play too. The Big Heart is Anand's seventh novel, but the first to have

a factory hand as its protagonist. Ananta, a coppersmith, returns to his home-town of Amritsar after having worked in Bombay and Ahmadabad. He brings with him Janki, a young widow, whom he loved and who was now slowly dying of tuberculosis. In Amritsar, Ananta resumed his hereditary trade, but like most people of his brotherhood, he had difficulty making a living. The introduction of the machine had thrown the artisans out of work. Though Ananta suffered from the coming of the machines, he could still see their usefulness. Ananta knew that the machines were there to stay, and he drew an interesting analogy between machines and dowry while talking to Janki: "Like the fashionable bride we have accepted, that we make use of them, provided we keep our hearts and become the masters". 2

Conflict between the Forces of Tradition and Modernity:

The basic conflict in *The Big Heart* was between the forces of tradition and modernity. It is written from the torment of living between the two worlds 'one not quite dead and the other refusing to be born'. The main thrust of the novel was a passionate plea to accelerate the death of the old order and the birth of a new order that refuses to be born. Instead of giving a static picture of reality, Anand inquires into the central conflict inherent in the social reality and emphasizes the need for the emergence of higher levels of consciousness by dealing a mortal blow to the old values and striving for the emergence of a new order. And this he did by means of his hero Ananta, the big heart, who became a martyr in the whirlpool of events consequent to the tension between the two social orders, the old and the new.

The novel depicts the events of a single day and the setting is in Billimaran the cat-killers Lane. The ironmonger's bazaar stands for the machine, and thus modernity, while the bazaar kesarian stands for tradition. The fettering images by which modernity was symbolized - "screws and bolts and nails and locks" - show the author's ingrained partiality against tradition. The poor artisans who were thrown out of job as a result of the introduction of the machine turn against the machines. Ananta, who has had sufficient experience as a factory worker in Bombay and Ahmadabad, tried to persuade them to accept the machine and a trade union to demand jobs for all.

Anand's Ideological Focus:

Basically, Anand's ideological focus in the novel was on the tension between the values of the pre-capitalist Indian society and the

values of the emerging system of capitalist modernization and his approach to the question of change was from a humanistic view point. The primary emotion that moved Ananta was a deep compassion for his fellowmen. Ananta was marginalized by the society because of his enormous appetite. He had earned a bad name from the people he did not like. He was also tortured in secret by a conscience, which grew like a cancer inside him. He suffered mentally and struggled like a tormented beast in the cage of his soul. He was protesting against the decay around him.

The main protagonist of *The Big Heart* Ananta had a revolutionary mentality about society, which marginalized him because of his habits. But he did his work. In Bombay no one cares for one's habits. Ananta did not feel odd there but was marginalized by his own thathiars for his drinking. He also had been refused a job in the new factory. The thathiars even marginalized Ananta by spreading rumors and spoiled the matches for his marriage. The effect of marginalization falls on Ananta's personal life. Karam Devi, step-mother of Ananta uttered a cry about how his son was treated by the thathiars. Because of Ananta's habits Karam Devi was lashed by the evil tongues of the thathiars.

A Pervasive Darkness:

A pervasive darkness lingers over the whole action of the novel and Ananta's great anti-capitalist cry—"There is no talk to money, brothers; one must have a big heart"³—was like a recurring shaft of light briefly illuminating the general squalor and despair, almost a modern version of a warrior call.

For Ananta was the natural embodiment of hope. Ananta was motivated not by an intellectual Marxism but by undisciplined impulses, what was referred to as 'his thathiar conscience'. Ananta was able to discern that it was not the machines which endanger men's livelihoods, but the masters of the machines—the administrators and financiers. (30) "Machines don't think or feel it is men who do".

Ananta's friends also treated him differently. He thought that his friends Ralia and Dina could understand him. But they too looked down upon him because of his unacceptable relationship with Janki. Ananta expressed his feelings to Janki saying that many people hated him than loved him. Their love was based on paradoxes such as the filthy endearing abuses. These were the results which came out from the quarrels he picked up when he was drunk. This was because of his devotion to the withering widow, Janki, whom he was not married according to the sacred custom of the seven gyrations round the ceremonial fire.

Murli frowned and said that he hated the low thathiars. Especially he hated Ananta saying that Ananta was the scoundrel who corrupted the whole lot of the low thathiars. Because of Ananta's habits and his relation with Janki, Murli abused Ananta. Murli suggested to Gokul not to offer any job to Ananta. He said that Ananta was an alcoholic, a lecher who had seized and detained unlawfully a widow, Janki. When the thathiar boys made fun, Murli joined them to abuse Ananta. Here traditions and cultures play an important role in the case of Ananta. In *The Big Heart*, the sorrow was always in the air. The classical tune, which a

hereditary musician plays on sitar, releases in Ananta a view of permanence of all things. This can be seen in the earliest stages of the novel, which concerns a fraternity of coppersmiths, and these first scenes are written in the present tense as if to emphasize their relevance to contemporary India. The encroachment of industrialization colours the daily routine of Ananta and his colleagues, as a victim of poverty and poor sanitation. He is swept by and unbearable sense of futility, the inadequacy of one man's sympathy to 'spread the balm of pity over the rotting flesh of the whole of Hindustan'. This echoes Anand's own despair. Anand realized that the nation was about to assume responsibility for its own affairs. Ananta's pessimism, like Anand's, is transitory. In humane service to others lies not merely the future of India, but fulfillment of self.

Basically Anand's ideological focus in the novel was on the tension between the values of the precapitalist Indian society and the values of the emerging system of capitalist modernization, and his approach to the question of change was from a humanistic viewpoint. Ananta was the creation of Anand's search for a higher consciousness, the integral man, the need for humanistic compassion and fundamental change.

Ananta was indeed the symbol of this new man and herein lays the significance of his martyrdom; he sacrificed his life for the creation of a new brotherhood based on 'unbounded love' and 'limitless compassion'. *The Big Heart* also showed another significant aspect of Anand's approach to Indian social reality. The caste-class interpenetration, which had become a

decisive factor in Indian reality, was at the root of the conflicts in the novel. With the increasing growth of capitalist modernization, class gradually begins to replace caste as the predominant vehicle of exploitation. Within the caste a new division appeared, turning the thatthiar brotherhood into two warring groups—a minority to the rich and a majority of the deprived. Anand creates this new feature of Indian social reality with great skill in the novel. The introduction of the machine and the deprivation of the artisans and the resulting conflicts form part of this reality. But the artisans who were thrown out of job turn into inveterate enemies of the machine and the factory. Ananta was sufficiently experienced and intellectually mature to realize the crux of the situation. He says “... it is no use banning the tools, but it is a question of who is master of machines--we or--” (40). Ananta knew that this was the central political question involved and hence his call to the thatthiars: “I tell you there is no hope for our land except in Revolution”. (62)

He knew that an essential prerequisite for the Revolution was the formation of the trade union, but he failed to convince his fellowmen, for, as Saros Cowasjee puts it; he fails to “dramatize his cause”. The result is anarchy, and Ananta himself falls victim to the rage and fury of Ralia. Without any notice Ananta was removed from the work. He was uncomfortable. He was trapped and felt uncontrollable anger. But he was helpless.

All the things seemed to have conspired against Ananta without any job and without money in his pocket he felt alone and

seemed to be marginalized by his isolation and identity crisis. Though Ananta lived among people who belong to the same community he felt lonely.

Even though Ananta was capable, the modernization of the machines deprived him of his work. His inner vacuum made his position worse by marginalization as though he had been caught by the thatthiars of the same community. Everything had conspired against Ananta. He found himself helpless. There was a famine in the land and human beings fought like dogs over a small piece of bread. The opening of the factory by Chaudharis, Gokul Chand and Murli Dhar, had made almost all the skilled thatthiars jobless. Life had become miserable and Ananta had built up the misery in a sequence of images in a single day. There were haunting situations. Being a man of delicate feelings Ananta felt his isolation and marginalization more intensely.

There are many things about The Big Heart which are attractive. In no other novel had Anand so clearly attempted to organize a whole social, economic and political picture. The problems of caste and class are complex and they cannot be solved separately, for they are often linked together and influenced by the cash nexus. The coppersmiths are Kshatriyas, the second highest caste, but their profession had lowered their social status. With the coming of the machine and the enrichment of the few, a sub-division had appeared among the people of the same caste: the rich looked down upon the less prosperous of their brethren. Money is God and in novel after novel Anand repeated that there were only two types of people in the world in our time, the rich and the poor. In

the final analysis, money decides both caste and class; it also decides one's political affiliations. The Big Heart is the story of a community in which there was just enough machine to destroy the craftsmen but not enough to create a new society.

Ananta recollected the childhood memories and compared his present marginalized existence. He was worried about his condition. Ananta had seen beggars before, but today they seemed to him to have sunk to the lowest depths of degradation. For the beggars seemed too weak even to lift their head. Ananta stood to contemplate them for a moment and found that starvation had bent their spines. As Ananta was marginalized by the people around him, he came to that position of crying out in his soul and soon he realized that he did not believe in any God. He had indeed never paid for years and viewed that therefore had no right to call such a Being if one such existed. The helpless conditions of the people change their positions. The helpless people became beggars and beg for their livelihood. Ananta compared his present life with the life of beggars. He could only feel a smothering wordless feeling for the man kneaded in his own filth, for the others whom he had seen and still more for the kith and kin who had turned upon him this morning and called him a traitor.

Puran Singh encouraged Ananta to have hope and never surrender to fear. Puran Singh also said to Ananta that so long as you go on, through wearing, exhaustion and doubt, in the spirit of devotion to work and service of others, holding fast to the light that is in you, will be so strengthened that you will go a long way. That is the long

pilgrimage to oneself and others. Ananta was in a difficult position wondering what to do and what not to do. The effect of the treatment by his own people made his thoughts put him in a stage of confusion about his future. There was a scarcity of foodstuffs in the town. There was a famine of cash in the villages. Added to this the scarcity of metals everywhere... The life of a coppersmith like Ananta was like a water-bubble.

The Treatment Given to the Thathiars:

The treatment given to the thathiars by their elders resulted to form union. They haven't been able to make up their minds, whether they hate machines too much to take jobs in the factory or whether they are really looking for jobs there. Ananta's sufferings by the treatment of his own thathiar community made him think and talk so. And though the rational part of him failed to come to his rescue, his mind was filled with an atmosphere in which one oppressive fact was incandescently connected with another. Ananta is oppressed, marginalized everywhere by the people.

The rich merchants like Murli Dhar and Gokul Chand, who are benefitting with the help of machine, treated Ananta insultingly. They abused Ananta because they wanted to hoard their money even after death. This bringing of the machines alters the whole character of Ananta. They made him as a slave to the machines. Ananta was on the edge of this new and terrible world. He was involved in the despair of those who do not know whether to take the plunge into the dark whirl or run back to the shores of the past. Ananta was horrified at the prospect of

the coming years of ruin. People were harassed by the changes that had brought them from the horse-carriage to the motor-bus.

The relation between Lala Murli Dhar and Kaseera Gokul Chand, the managing partners, expected to be harmonious on account of money considerations seem strained because of caste differences. We see how the two evils co-exist and coalesce in society. Anand emphasizes here the impossibility of avoiding contact with castes other than one's own as a result of the changed consideration of life and the increasing use of machinery for a variety of purposes. The novel also shows the pro and anti machinery reactions and suggests that we should respond more favourably to the impersonal processes of modern scientific and technological development. Anand's aim was to project exploitation and show how these were the causes of marginalization in all its facets, the practice of religion being one.

Defeat by the Machines and the Masters:

Ananta was defeated by the machines and the masters. Accepting the worship of the rich docilely as a decree from heaven, as his kismet, Ananta lost his manhood, his place in the thatthiar brotherhood, sense of community. Ananta had forced the owners to employ him. If one had the controlling switch in one's hand, one could make the machine a slave rather than your master. Ananta's stepmother Karam Devi receives complaints about this from other ladies.

Ananta's stepmother suffered to get a match for him. She failed always in her attempts because their relatives marginalize him

because of his habits. As the times were bad without jobs Ananta's habits made his condition much worse. He received frequent abuses. Their talks were filthy towards Ananta. Ananta's stepmother Karam Devi, had to face taunts from other ladies like Mehru's mother, Gauri etc. about her son living with Janki. Karam Devi moans over the misfortunes, resuscitating her belief in 'Karma', recognizing and accepting their role on earth as due to the faults they and theirs had committed in their past lives.

Not only Ananta receives abuses from the ladies but also from children he receives shrieks. The children even laughed and shrieked as they capered aside from the path of Ananta. He would be respected if he had good qualities and good habits. The children only laughed the more and wouldn't leave him. His eyes stared with a rapt expression into the void before him, as though, right at the moment he had been caught in the world of time. All the things began to dominate his life.

Ananta felt mad by the behavior of Lal Chand. He vowed that he would no longer remain as one of the broken thatthiar community. He refused to live under the shade of the thatthiar community. But he greeted Lal Chand in the familiar manner putting all his emotions under control. Especially the thatthiars like Ananta had to work all hours. Lal Chand reduced the wage and said that Ananta was lucky to get work when everyone of the thatthiar brothers was workless. The domination of Lal Chand over Ananta even regarding reducing an established wage reveals that Ananta was oppressed by the upper thatthiars. Ananta laughed to control his

bitterness and said there is no talk of money; it is a question of heart, put his hand on the handle of the pickle-maker's cart and walked away. He felt as though his soul was torn with guilt. People like Ananta, one of the best craftsmen, would not be able to take on at the factory, for the reason he lived with a widow and was addicted to drink.

Even though Thathiars belonged to the high caste in Hindu society, they were treated as low caste because of their professional status. In big cities high-class Lalas and businessmen ate and drank together. Ananta because of economical backwardness and his relationship with Janki who was not as sound as Lalas was viewed differently. They expelled him from the thathiar brotherhood. The community abused Ananta for he had forgotten the highest duty he owed to himself and his religion. Ananta did not listen to the old views because brotherhoods were breaking up, and he could not keep their ancient customs alive without being called a fool.

Ananta's character is a fine example given by Mulk Raj Anand where the illegal affairs of the person make the friendship dull. Though he was being friendly with other thathiars he found himself suddenly facing profound silence. The various strands of the memories of his childhood and youth had emerged in him. His relation with the pretty widow Janki from Batala made the thathiar friends silent even he offended them. Ananta faced many complications. There were huge gaps in his understanding of the world. And native wit could not go beyond certain instinctive truths. So that he had often had to ask himself how he could master his destiny with only a heart and the study courses of

comrade Adhikari to go upon. All such questions had occupied him intermittently. All these complications could be removed only when he took Janki away to Bombay.

Ananta knew that in taking the plunge into the struggle for 'Revolution' he had entered an arena where only the hardest search would yield a way among the thorny paths of the tiger-infested jungle of this world. The trouble lay in the many bonds of custom and habit and superstition, which bound him. The waves of disgust and abandon welled up in him. Ananta felt that unnecessary sufferings and marginalization was only possible to be resolved by 'Revolution', as a new kind of religion.

Ananta thought of his position and God's grace upon him. God will answer to the upper thathiars and their treatment towards him. Ananta came back from Bombay full of love and with a sense of their izzat as men - as his brothers. He was certain that his torment was due to his lack of patience and lack of courage. For, as far as roguishness, selfishness, stupidity, suspicion and stubbornness went, he had been no different from the others until lately.

The Big Heart - The Most Polemical of Anand's Novels:

The Big Heart is the most polemical of Anand's novels. Large portions of it have the dialectic of debate as different spokesmen among the coppersmith fraternity propose alternatives for modern India. The central split in The Big Heart - Anand implies that it was the fundamental disconnection in India itself - is between those who believed that 'we belong to suffering' or who like Ananta, believe

passionately that men are the shapers of their own destiny. A partially interesting character is Bhagat, the poet whose name means the 'devoted one'. He (like the poet in Untouchable) finds the Gandhian view of 'swaraj' inadequate since it does not presume the total destruction of the money system. The poet's scorn, like Ananta's, is most earnestly directed against the bourgeois merchant class in India who have 'an utter contempt for the lower orders ingrained in them as part of their dharma'.

The Big Heart is rich in subsidiary action and though the neo-luddite crisis (the threat of the machines to mass employment) is brewing throughout the novel, we are offered a comprehensive study of a coppersmith fraternity in Amritsar at any time. The Big Heart is a metaphor, for a society hovering on an abyss of chaos. Coherent revolution, organizational mass protest finding its inspiration not only in books but in a popular yearning for human dignity, is what Anand appeals for here. That Ananta loses his life in the struggle for a trade union movement is not entirely pointless. As the poet tearfully explain to Janki, his existence depends on in the consciousness of the coppersmiths who are increasingly realizing Ananta's dictum that is heart, not mind, men, not machines, which matter. 1

The martyrdom of Ananta regenerates hope and the novel, in line with Anand's concept of social tragedy, ends on a note of optimism. Puran Singh Bhagat consoles Janki, invites her to go to the shop and sit among the thathiars to "become one of them" and says: "though Ananta is dead...the spirit of his comradeship will

survive...The tides of love will flow and wipe out the waves of hatred..." (230) Symbolically, Janki "got up and lit the kerosene oil lamp and the radiance gradually spread to each nook and corner of the room and dispelled the shadows". (231) When at last the poet leads her down the stairs, the two seemed to be walking towards a new future.

The Big Heart is, in short, Anand's sympathetic depiction in fictional terms of the changing social reality of India, his compassion for the sufferings of the poor and the deprived, his passionate zeal for change and his painful realization of the gap between the need for Revolution and the unripe material conditions and above all his relentless search for the integral man and for the emergence of a higher consciousness.

Anand's art on the other hand, shows a strong tendency to transcend the frontiers of commonly shared cultural values in the society, examines the situation in its states of flux and reflux and attempts to dramatize the emergence of new meanings, values and practices to do in a different context. Perhaps it is these similarities in approach to life and experience that enabled Anand to discover his literary benefactor in Forster and made Forster recognize the artist in Anand.

According to Nirad Chaudhari, the main thrust of the novel is passionate plea to accelerate the death of the old order and the birth of a new order that refuses to be born. Agreeing with Nirad Chaudhari, adding that Anand inquires into the central conflict, the social reality and emphasizes the need for the emergence of higher levels of

consciousness by dealing a mortal blow to old values and striving for the emergence of a new order. And this he did by means of his hero Ananta, the big heart, between the two social orders, the old and the new.

Ananta was the creation of Anand's search for a higher consciousness, the integral man, the need for humanistic compassion and fundamental change. As a responsible artist, Anand suggests various answers to the human problems dealt with in his novels, refraining from imposition of any kind. He should develop a "big heart" that cherishes values like equality, human tenderness, religious tolerance, devotion to duty, liberty, etc.

Ananta urged the workers to form a union to bargain collectively with the factory-owners for jobs and keep the old brotherhood alive. In this he won the support of the poet Puran Bhagat Singh. But he was unable to muster sufficient enthusiasm among the jobless, who were carried away by the demagogy of

the student leader, Satyapal. Events take an unexpected turn when Ralia, one of the castaways, starts wrecking the machines. Ananta tried to stop this wanton destruction and was killed by the raging Ralia. Ananta was thus a victim of rage and insanity, not of a religious or political creed and his sacrifice of the unselfish man for humanity.⁵

Janki in *The Big Heart* dares to live with Ananta, though their relationship has no social sanction. Janki's position is higher than that of a wife in devotion and that is further proved after Ananta's death. Her ailment as a T.B. patient does not break her spirit. Guided by the spiritual mentor, Puran Singh, she continues Ananta's mission after his death by organizing the women comrades for a revolutionary life and by living with and for others.⁴ Thus, in this novel, Anand ends on a note of hope, although throughout the novel he has depicted many negative aspects of marginalization.

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