

## Feudal attitude in the short stories of Mulk Raj Anand

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### Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand, whose literary genius as a writer constantly keeps scholars and readers amused, still stands at a high-water mark not only as a successful novelist but also as a distinguished short story writer. His success as a writer takes the Indian fiction writing in English at the next level in terms of its richness of substance. His short stories are acclaimed as work of genius and his dealing with causes of the neglected stratum of society pays him great tribute. The objective of the present study is to reveal the misery of the section of society suppressed because of feudal attitude. The feudal attitude, one of prominent themes in Mulk Raj Anand's oeuvre, has substantially been rendered beautifully anew relegating the traditional meaning of it.

**Keywords:** feudal, hegemony, nobility, exploitation

### Introduction

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the term 'feudalism' as "the social system that existed during the Middle Ages in Europe in which people were given land and protection by a nobleman, and had to work and fight for him in return" and from times gone by, it is considered the law of the land by which upper nobility classes maintained control over the lower ones'. This rigid structure of government comprised kings, lords and peasants. However, it was not feasible for the upper nobility to control the whole land so the division and distribution of land keeps going on in the hope of gaining some profits in return.

Anand's short fiction brings forth the social evils which create disharmony among people due to their ranks in society. He showed a vivid picture of feudal life-style, their idiosyncrasies, and the misuse of power, ruthless exploitation of the tenants, farmers and peasants. The vituperative way of dealing with people who are socially, economically and religiously less becomes the prime instrument to harass and exploit them. Amru, who is Brahmin of dhobi caste in "A Cock and Bull Story", makes a high charge in recompense for the rituals. He unfairly treats Chetu, his disciple, by asking more offerings. There are several such examples we come across and are not less than the feudal mentality in a new avatar. M.K. Naik rightly observes it thus, "The Caste Hindu is armed with the feeling of six thousand years of social and class superiority — a feeling which refuses to accept the fact that the untouchable is a human being, but insists on treating him like a Subhuman creature, to be ignored or bullied or exploited as occasion demand <sup>[1]</sup>.

Superiority, in every sense of the word, inveigles the lower rank into doing what is demanded by all fair and foul means. "A Kashmir Idyll", in the collection *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories*, is the story in which the treatment of the officials is not good with their tenants. The nawab, Nawab Zaffar Ullah, courtier of the maharaja of the Kashmir, has all the characteristics of a feudal landlord. He is a glutton too: "The Nawab here ordered the Tehsildar to bring him ten chickens, five dozen eggs and some fruit for our delegation, and he took us about to the dirty houses of the village to show us off, or rather to show himself off, to the poor inhabitants of the township" <sup>[2]</sup>.

He treats a boatman badly after the boatman makes the Nawab aware of the squall that arises in wullar everyday at noon. He informs that it will be difficult to cross the river in the squall which disturbs the boat. He abuses boatman in Kashmiri and catches a young man to help the boatman.

The Nawab abused him in Kashmiri, a language in which curses seem more potent than prayers. The boatsman came again after half an hour and found us all waiting impatiently for the Nawab's return from a visit to the lavatory. His Grace had suddenly thought it fit to have a haircut and a Turkish bath in a hamam, and he did not care what happened to us when he did emerge from his ablutions, and heard not only the insistent appeals of the boatman, but our urgent recommendations, he, as a mark of his favour, clemency, or whatever you may call it, forthwith, stopped a young of the village who was walking along the cobbled high street and ordered him to proceed to our boat and help to row it to Srinagar <sup>[3]</sup>.

The poor young man makes a plea for mercy before the Nawab and says that he is on his way to join the funeral ceremony of his dead mother. The young man's persistent request is not listened to by the Nawab and abuses him for not complying with so:

Swine, dare you refuse? Snarled the Nawab.

You are a liar!

No, Nawab Sahib; said the man, joining his hands. You are like god in mercy and goodness. Please forgive me I am footsore and weary after a twenty-mile march in the mountains where I want to fetch my uncle's donkey. And now my mother had died and I must see the Mullah about securing a place for her burial <sup>[4]</sup>.

The Nawab threatens the poor man to be beaten by some official if he refuses to do *begar* for him: "Run, run towards the boat, bawled the Nawab, or I'll have you flogged by the Thanedar. Do you not know that this is kingdom of which I am a nobelman. And you cannot refuse to do *beggar*" <sup>[5]</sup>. The Nawab has a bleak sense of what humanity is and is far away from the sense of care, love, affection and

responsibility. He beats the poor man, holds him by ears and forces him to row the boat to Srinagar. He felt happy on what he does.

The story "A Pair of Mustachios" in the collection of *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories* reveals how ridiculous these landlords are. The protagonist of the story, Khan Azam Khan who is a pauper now, has the inkling of resplendent memory of his ancestors. He claims himself to be descended from an ancient Afghan family whose heads were noblemen and councillor in the court of the Great Mughuls. 'Mustachios' as is the story sometimes betokens the classification of social rank in the society:

There is the famous lion mustache, the fearsome upstanding symbol of the great order of resplendent Rajas, Maharajas, Nawabs and English army generals who are so well known for their devotion to the King Emperor. Then there is the tiger mustache, the uncanny, several pointed mustache worn by the unbending, unchanging survivals from the ranks of the feudal gentry who have nothing left but the pride in their greatness and a few mementoes of past glory, scrolls of honour, granted by the former Emperors, a few gold trinkets, heirlooms, and bits of land. Next there is the goat mustache - a rather unsure brand, worn by the nouveau riche, the new commercial bourgeoisie and the shopkeeper class who somehow don't belong an indifferent, thin little line of a mustache, worn so that its tips can be turned up or down as the occasion demands a show of power to some coolie or humility to a prosperous client. There is the Charlie Chaplin mustache worn by the lower middle class, by clerks and professional man, a kind of half and half affair, deliberately designed as a compromise between the traditional full of mustache and the clean Shaven Curzon cut of the Sahibs and the Barristers, because the Babus are not sure whether the Sahibs like them to keep mustachios at all. There is the sheep mustache of the coolies and the lower orders, the mouse mustache of the peasants, and so on [6].

Khan Azam Khan lost most of his possessions but still retains all his false feudal proudness, of which his up-turned tiger mustache is a solid mark. When he sees the mustache of the village shopkeeper upward, he abusively tells him to bring them down because they resemble his aristocratic tiger mustache:

Khan Azam Khan happened to go to the moneylender's shop to pawn his wife's gold nose ring one morning and he noticed the upturning tendency of the hair on Ramanand's upper lips which made the banya's goat mustache look almost like his own tiger mustache. Since when have the lentil-eating shopkeepers become noblemen? He asked surlily, even before he had shown the nose ring to the banya. I don't know what you mean, Khan, Ramanand answered. You know what I mean, seed of a donkey! Said the Khan. Look at the way you have turned the tips of your mustache upwards. It almost looks like my tiger mustache. Turn the tips down to the style proper to the goat that you are! Fancy the airs of the banyas nowadays! [7].

The more he sees Ramanand's mustache, the more furious

he becomes. He pressures him to turn his mustache down on the basis of his trade and class. A peculiar deal is signed between Khan Azam Khan and the banya. According to which the Khan will transfer all his household goods and cattles to the banya on condition that both the tips of the mustaches of nouveau riche come down permanently and will be kept in goat's style:

I shall kill you if don't brush that mustache into the shape appropriate to your position as a lentil-eating banya!

I would rather I lost all my remaining worldly possessions, my pots and pans, my clothes, even my house, than see the tip of your mustache turned up like that! Spluttered Azam Khan [8].

Now he has lost everything he had from his ancestors, but the false ego trips of feudality retain so far. The people who gathered around him laugh at him on his foolhardiness:

Only, as soon as Khan Azam Khan back was turned he muttered to the peasants seated nearby; My father was a Sultan. And they laughed to see the Khan give a special twist to his mustache, as he walked away maintaining the valiant uprightness of the symbol of his ancient and noble family, though he had become a pauper [9].

Feudalism is equally the source of farcical humour in "The Signature". The writer here describes the superficial lives and irresponsibility of the feudal lords. In order to make new India certain institutions, specially, banks were working hard. One such bank was India Commonwealth Bank whose director was Nawab Luqman Ali Khan who not only averted to sign on the papers on which depended the sanction of loan, but also wasted a lot of time of a promising entrepreneur.

The story "The Prodigal Son" in the collection *The Tractor and the Corn Goddess and Other Stories* is a discourse between a moneylender and a mother. Gobindi, the mother gets two letters from her son, Sher Singh who serves Indian army. She is illiterate; therefore she goes to the moneylender to get the letters read. She calls her son; good boy, ruby and angel. While it was too much for Ganesh Das to bear, then he says ironically:

Respectful, did you say? That son of an owl, who always used to tease his elders! The scoundrel! Budmas of number ten!.... A thief into the bargain! And a perverter of youth - he utterly ruined my son Trilok Chand with his bad influence!

Oh go and look after your sugar plums and don't pester me. Go, no, you know I can't read Angrezi [10].

There are manifest signs of feudality and superiority in the tone of the moneylender, Ganesh Das when he speaks: "Sender's Address: Havildar Sher Singh. Fancy, the son of a swine, he has become a Holdar now. There will be no holding him when he comes back, the horse of a Holdar" [11].

Ganesh Das abuses Gobindi's son and brings charge against him of spoiling his own son Trilok:

The son of the devil! Illegally begotten! So this is the way he has been encouraging my son to despise me! The hooligan! The lecher! Said Ganesh Das, red in the

face. Of course, he did not need a real wife, frequenting the houses of prostitutes as he did, spoiling my son into the bargain... He could always come back to you for comfort. And..... I have never heard you say a good word for him before. But you seem to have gone mad today, the way you are extolling his angelic qualities! ... Go, away now, go and let have my siesta... Go, or I shall drag you away by the hair <sup>[12]</sup>.

“Boots” in the collection *The Tractor and The Corn Goddess and Other Stories* is a leading example of the caprice and cruelties of moneylender. Milap Chand, the moneylender wants to deprive Govindi, the protagonist of the story of every essential comfort. The story depicts the power of feudal lords of which they misused. Govindi has lost everything as the symbol of bygone love except the boots of her husband Jai Singh, a soldier who died while fighting on the fronts. Milap Chand sees the boots and a bundle of goods lying near Govindi. He snatches out them crying loudly:

Thief! The daughter of a bitch! What were you stealing from here! Open that bundle. And those boots - my son Gulzari Lal wants those! The words stabbed Gobindi's soul and she fluttered under the headcloth like a wounded bird, uttering hiccupping cries and sobbing even as she fell on her bundle.  
Open it bitch! And give me those boots for Gulzari, said the moneylender, pushing Gobindi away from where she clutched the memory of Jai Singh <sup>[13]</sup>.

There is no space for the plea of star-crossed Gobindi. How to save the last remembrance of her husband is her main concern. When she resists the moneylender, she is beaten. So she has to bend before the caprice of the moneylender:

The whole of Gobindi's life seemed to lie in the remembrances of that hold she had on the boots, and she felt her spirit rising and falling as the hope of saving the relic rose and fell.  
Govindi struggled with all the grim strength of her young body for a while, her headcloth falling away and revealing a face convulsed with suppressed sobs. But old Phuphi scratched with her claws and Seth Milap Chand thrust her aside with both hands while the Doctor kicked her as though she were a dog <sup>[14]</sup>.

The landlords orders and deeds are deemed as the highest authority whether they are right or wrong. In the story the character of the landlord of Hanumanpur in “The Man Who Loved Monkeys More than Human Beings” is a leading example of the madness of landlords. Raja Rajeshwar Rao, the landlord of Hanumanpur considers monkeys as his ancestor. Therefore, he proclaims that half of the crop will go to monkeys. He declares that these monkeys will henceforward live in the granary for better care:

Raja Rajeshwar Rao was heard to say that he was henceforward going to make over half of his estate to the monkeys in his kingdom, so that they could be treated as on a par with other men, fed well on grain and slowly trained to cross the borderline which yet divides them from humanity, even as in the remote past his own ancestors had jumped one stage in the history of evolution and become men <sup>[15]</sup>.

All the expectations of the commons' welfare from an educated landlord become null and void when they heard the reservation of half the estate for monkeys. There was a deep silence on this issue:

No claps or shouts followed this proclamation. For the vista opened up before the peasants assembled for the celebrations, was depressingly ominous in days when rack renting and the other burdens of the landlord-tenant relationship had already brought them to the verge of collapse. The farmers had really come, expecting to hear that the new master, who was said to have learnt up to the B.A. Class and was a follower of Jawaharlal Nehru, would announce the cancellation of arrears of rent and interest on the debt, and would distribute the untilled field among the needy. Instead, what they had got was reservation of half the estate for the welfare of the monkeys <sup>[16]</sup>.

The reverence given by the landlord to his ancestors, the monkeys, becomes a great cause of holocaust in the estate. The suffering of the people begins to arise:

The respect for his ancestors offered by Raja Rajeshwar Rao, and the posture theory of human intelligence that he had propounded, certainly spelled the doom of the peasantry. They saw before their dazzled eyes the vision of hundreds of monkeys eating good grain, and prodigally scattering it to the birds, while their own womenfolk cursed the Raja bitterly or sighed, even as their children wept for having been ground down by one tyrant after another, are traditionally soft spoken, they also consider the monkey sacred, as the ancestors of these animals formed the holy army of Shri Ram Chander Ji Maharaj in his war against the Rakshasa King, Ravana. So they remained deplorably docile even as some of them began to die of hunger <sup>[17]</sup>.

A conflict starts between the peasants of Hanumanpur and the monkeys when a ferocious monkey bits at the right hand of a young lad Gopal, son of the peasant Thakur. All the sense of the respect evaporates for the monkeys from the hearts of peasants. The irrational decision of the landlord creates a fracas between peasants and the monkeys:

The respect for the monkeys of the younger part of the population of Hanumanpur evaporated. And, with the evaporation of this reverence, the docility of the face of the monkeys' ravages on grain meant for human consumption, also disappeared. And there was a regular battle between the apes and the humans, in which the enemies hurled stones and bricks at each other <sup>[18]</sup>.

When it became unbearable for the people, they forgot everything about the god Hanuman who ever helped Ram in his battle with Ravana, the demon-king. They resisted against the monkeys to drive them away from the granary: “They found the young bloods bleeding at the hands of the vicious monkey. So they joined and drove the monkeys away from the granary into an adjoining field and into the Raja's palace.” <sup>[19]</sup>

Raja Rajeshwar Rao favours the monkeys. The religious priest proclaims against peasants of behalf of the young

landlord not to molest the monkeys, otherwise they may be treated as outcasts:

When Raja Rajeshwar Rao heard that his cousins, the monkeys, were having the worst of it at the hands of the villagers, he was very incensed and got the village priest, Pandit Haridas, to proclaim, the sacred descendants of the god Hanuman, who had helped Sri Ram Chander to the demon king Ravana, would be declared a malecha, an untouchable <sup>[20]</sup>.

Instead of decree of stopping the war, the peasants decided to continue their fracas against monkeys, because they were on the verge of starvation.

But the taste of victory, and the desperate hunger in their homes, filled the young men of the village with an ardour which was proof against religious sentiment or brute strength. They broke down a whole brick wall and pelted the monkeys with a shower of this ammunition, until half the monkeys ran away and hid in the nearby trees <sup>[21]</sup>.

Owing to regular conflicts between peasants and monkeys, Raja Rajeshwar Rao uses his power and favours monkeys to maintain peace. On the other hand the poor peasants keep on dying through malnutrition:

Raja Rajeshwar Rao heard of the continuing battle and came with his police, and palace servants, to scatter the young villagers with staves and revolvers. The fear of the police is ingrained in our peasant folk, and no one could last out against a lathicharge. The monkeys returned to the granary. And the peasant, old and young, were cowed down. For a few days there was peace in the township, even though it was the peace of the grave, as the oldest men, and the youngest children, kept on dying through the strain of malnutrition <sup>[22]</sup>.

When a deputation of Panchayat goes to him and acquaints him with the bad condition of the poor peasants of his kingdom, he remains strict on his belief of bringing Ram Raj to his kingdom by keeping monkeys and men together leaving everything behind:

Some of the peasants met in the panchayat and decided to go to the mad Raja to end the bitterness and despair that had arisen through his strange dictum. But Rajeshwar Rao was absolutely adamant. He said that he had decided to make the monkeys and men live like brothers, according to Mahatma Gandhi's teaching, and that he had passed orders for the confiscation on half the produce of the estate through his belief that in this way he will bring Ram Raj to his kingdom, besides proving a new theory of science, which may be inestimable benefit to mankind <sup>[23]</sup>.

In "The Price of Bananas" in the collection *The Power of Darkness and Other Stories*, a description of an incident happened at the station between a middle-class Seth and a poor vendor has been focused by the writer. The Seth seems to be a gentleman, a businessman by the look of him, clad in white Muslim dhoti, a delicate 'Lucknow' tunic. He has a beautiful embroidered boat cap on his head. The cap is a symbol of dignity in India. At the station the Seth appears

with a heavy luggage with the help of a coolie. There are many monkeys moving to and fro at the station. When one of the monkeys snatches the Seth's cap away and gets up a neem tree, he whispers:

Are! Are! Father of father! What have you done, monkey, brother-in-law! The businessman shouted in utter confusion. And his face, which had been round and smug, was covered with perspiration <sup>[24]</sup>.

The situation becomes both ridiculous and embarrassing for the Seth when he made a spectacle of himself. It was a perplexity in which the Seth found himself, because the cap for him was a symbol of respect. No one came forward to help him else but a fruit vendor:

Sethji seemed to be only slightly relieved by the voluntary offer of the fruit vendor. But the vendor went ahead, nevertheless, dangling a couple of bananas before the monkey with his right hand, and stretching out his left hand for the cap.

Ao, ao, come down; the vendor coaxed the monkey, lifting the bananas higher up even as he walked up towards the bough on which the animal was sitting <sup>[25]</sup>.

The fruit-vendor allures the monkey of bananas for taking the Seth's cap back. The monkey as they imitate human beings - responds in the same way:

The vendor cooed in a soft voice and gestures to accompaniment of Ao, ao, and the monkey, after looking this side and that accepted the bargain, taking over the bananas with the right hand while he released the wonderful embroidered cap, slightly crumpled with his left hand <sup>[26]</sup>.

The fruit vendor humbly offers the Seth his cap and asks two annas for the bananas offered to the monkey for receiving the cap back. But the Seth refuses to pay more than an anna saying:

The fruit-wallah came and humbly offered the Seth his cap, adding:

Those budmashes are hungry. So they disturb the passengers. He really wanted the bananas. Acha; said the Seth surlily and turned to go into the compartment. Sethji, please give me the two annas for the bananas which I had offered to the monkey.

Are, wah! What impudence! Two annas if you please! For what? ... Sethji shouted each word, with the mingled bitterness of his humiliation at the hands of monkey and disgust in the face of a grimy fruit vendor <sup>[27]</sup>.

The Seth was a miser and did not like to give more than four annas and an anna to the coolie and the fruit-vendor respectively. He becomes furious when they insist on asking for more. He treats them abusively:

Here is your money, coolie. Four annas for you! And an anna for you, fruit-wallah! Sethji conceded.

But huzoor! The coolie wailed. Two big pieces of luggage and.... Go, go! Sala! Crook! Sethji thundered, turning to the coolie. And he nearly came down from the eminent position he occupied in the doorway, to kick the coolie away.

The Coolie went away but the fruit vendor persisted,

saying: Sethji be just, I saved your cap, the mark of your izzat, for you <sup>[28]</sup>.

The Seth persists in his refusal to pay more to the fruit-vendor and said: “Ja, ja! Take rest! Do your work! The Sethji spat fire, while the frown on his face twisted his visage into an ugly, unhappy scowl” <sup>[29]</sup>.

The Seth considers himself justifiable not to pay more for the service done by the fruit-vendor. He justifies himself saying to other passenger in the compartment:

You don't know, Sahib, you don't know these budmashes! They are in league with the monkeys! Bananas are two a pice! Fancy asking for an anna for one rotten banana <sup>[30]</sup>.

An anna for the poor is an important thing and the rich are also aware of this fact. The vendor runs along with the moving train for an anna, whereas the Seth does not pay any attention towards the poor fruit-vendor's plea:

The train had begun to move, and the fruit vendor first ran along with it, then got on to the footstep and clung to the window, appealing, threatening and pleading in turn. But Sethji had turned his head astray and was looking out of the window at the goods train on the other side <sup>[31]</sup>.

Mulk Raj Anand presents the stories of ineffable disgust realistically. His sympathetic portrayal remains not only, in a very restrict sense, in the feudal lords' exploitation of the masses for not keeping their promises, and even not in the harassment of one section, caste and religion by another. This is, however, a very common practice. What Anand radically points out is the harassment of a person who maintains the same social status in the same caste and exactly practicing the same religion is a new phenomenon that Anand very adequately captures. This is really a sympathetic and never ending saga of evil where on the one hand the feudalism was heading towards its end, and the feudal attitude and mentality were the source of endless sufferings on the other hand.

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