

## Mulk Raj Anand's Short Stories: A Thematic Perspective

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### Abstract

The aim of the research is to analyse Mulk Raj Anand's some of the celebrated short stories in order to deduce the major themes which he deals with. His entire corpus, however, expresses the predicament of human beings, especially that of the subjugated and oppressed, and Anand unmistakably portrays through his writings all the sordid aspects of our actions responsible for the sufferings. His short stories reveal a variety of themes like religious hypocrisy, social injustice, exploitation of the have-nots, tradition versus modernity, and the position of women in the traditional Indian society.

**Keywords:** Indian-English fiction, Hypocrisy, Exploitation, Feudal Attitude, Traditions

### Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand, undoubtedly, is one of the doyens of Indian-English fiction writing. As a prolific writer, he has authored about fifteen novels; some of them are *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1941), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), *The Big Hearts* (1945), *Seven Summers* (1951), *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), *The Death of a Master of Arts* (1964), *Confessions of a Lover* (1976), *The Bubble* (1984), etc. Besides it, he has produced more than six collections of short stories, such as *The Lost Child and Other Stories* (1934), *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories* (1944), *The Tractor and the Corn Goddess and Other Stories* (1947), *Reflection on the Golden Bed and Other Stories* (1953), *The Power of Darkness and Other Stories* (1959), *Lajwanti and Other Stories* (1973). He also has two collections namely *Indian Fairy Tales* (1946) and *More Indian Fairy Tales* (1961) to his credit. He is such a versatile genius whose writings include subjects like education, art, music, dance, painting, sculpture, etc.

Among the early influences on his life were those of his mother who, nonetheless uneducated, adroitly recounted the fables and folk tales to him, and of his cousin Kaushalya in whom he saw a soulmate with whom he could at least commune. As he grew up, he was greatly influenced by Gandhiji. When he went to Europe for higher studies he came in contact with many emerging as well as established writers. Karl Marx, Tolstoy and Ruskin also influenced him to a large extent. Though, he was strongly influenced by them in a number of ways, he is not tied to any particular system or belief, rather he synthesized all of them and evolved for himself a comprehensive historical humanism.

Owing to his sensitive and precocious inclination, Anand was enraged by the widespread evil practices such as untouchability, caste system, religious hypocrisy, exploitation of the poor, women's problems, corruption among bureaucracy and so forth.

As we have discussed that the Indian stories which Anand heard as a child influenced him to a great extent. As a result, his short stories may be referred to as a means, which propagates Anand's notions. He wants his readers to be aware

of the evils of such a system which obstructs men to be civilized.

'Religious Hypocrisy' which is one of the themes Anand depicts prominently, and wherein the religious customs, traditions and rituals contributively act as an instrument of exploitation. Anand portrays this theme from different angles. The Maharaja, Maharaja Ganga Singh Bahadur hopes to get heaven easily at the age of forty in the story "The Maharaja and the Tortoise" in the collection *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories*. He spends about one hundred and eighty lakh rupees on bringing the river Ganga to Udhampur from Hardwar by pipelines to offer oblations to the Sun from which the Maharaja considered his clan to be descended. At this age, he understood the significance of the religion. He asks his Prime Minister about his hope of getting heaven easily. The Prime Minister, Pandit Ram Prasad, who is a Brahmin and a great hypocrite, finds a way out to exercise more control on the Maharaja: "It so happened that as Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh reached the age of forty and felt he was getting old, he sought the advice of Pandit Ram Prasad, who was both the High Priest and the Prime Minister of Udhampur, to prepare an easy passage for his journey to the next world." (25)

Pandit Ram Prasad, who is a hypocrite and clever enough, advises the Maharaja to donate his weight in gold to priests. He suggests the Maharaja to worship and offer oblations to his ancestor, the Sun, every morning on the banks of the river Ganga. He also cautions the Maharaja against the ill-consequence if the ritual could not be followed properly:

According to the holy books, on the appearance of every full moon, he should donate his weight in gold to the priests, entertain seven hundred of them to a feast in the palace and take a prayer, mentioning the name of God three hundred and seventy-five times on the rosary after offering oblations every morning to his ancestor, the sun, seated in the lotus seat by the edge of the Ganga. If this ritual was not followed, said the *Pandit*, His Highness was in grave danger because, the access to heaven apart, he would have prolonged illness, as the planets Saturn and Venus were daily clashing in the scroll of his horoscope. (25)

The priests and religious institutions are the propellers of religious hypocrisy. The demands of the priests are high. They demand more and more money in return of the rituals done by them. Amru, the Brahmin of dhobi caste in "A Cock and Bull Story" in the collection *The Reflections on the Golden Bed and Other Stories* takes advantages of his designation. He offers rituals to people and asks for money in return. He even exploits his disciple Chetu by asking more gifts and giving more starch on his clothes when the price of rice and all edible things were high. Amru, the protagonist of the story, considers himself superior as he regards himself the descendant of the holy bull of which horns rests this world:

Amru calls himself the Brahmin of the dhobi bull caste because he believes, like all others of the tribe that he is descended from the bull on the horns of which rests this world of ours. And, according to his superior status as the descendant of the holy bull on the horns of which rests the world, Amru had carefully imprinted the figure of a bull in Sandur on his forehead. He also wore clean clothes, washed by his disciple Chetu. (50)

People have an indrawn faith in religion and follow its practices and customs blindly. Savitri, in the story "Savitri" is forced to be *Sati* with her dead husband. Though she is educated and modern, yet she is compelled to follow the age-old custom for the sake of religion.

Anand repeats several times in his short stories that a corrupt and ridiculous religion formed in devotion to a non-existent God Who is even unable to provide any relief to human beings' misery. In fact, it creates more new problems for man in various ways. Anand has great belief in the essential goodness of man.

The theme 'The Feudal Attitude' which has recurrently been shown by the author highlights the suppression and oppression of the poor farmers as well as the people of the low-caste. The class of feudal lords solidifies into an upper nobility class. These feudal lords feel that they are much superior to the commons. As a result, they arrogate what they want from the people working under them. Anand reflects the tendency of feudalism through his characters like Nawab Zaffar Ullaha in "A Kashmir Idyll", Ganesh Das in "The Prodigal Son", Milap Chand in "Boots", Raja Rajeshwer Rao in "The Man who loved Monkeys More than Human Beings", the Seth in "The Price of Bananas" and Latif in "A Confession" and so on.

Anand focuses on feudal life-style, its cruelty and caprice. The feudal lords regard it their divine right to exploit and abuse the have-nots. However, there are some feudal lords like Raja Rajeshwer Rao and Khan Azam Khan who foolishly waste their money for the sake of sham pride.

Anand exposes the caprices and cruelties of these feudal lords whereby they create an atmosphere of sub-humanity in society, which causes the poor and the downtrodden to live a miserable life. The story "A Kashmir Idyll" in the collection *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories* is an account in which the behaviour of the officials is not good with their tenants. The nawab, Nawab Zaffar Ullah, a courtier of the Maharaja of the Kashmir possesses all the inclinations of a feudal landlord. He exploits a poor young man who is on the way to attend his mother's funeral. The poor man persistently 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 at Srinagar. The Nawab rejects the poor man's plea thus:

Swine, dare you to 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. (144-45)

And when the boy politely refuses to perform the duty for a genuine cause, he is compelled to serve the Nawab and finally has to bow down before the Nawab's caprice:

The man extricated his ear from the Nawab's grasp as we were about five yards from the boat, and, perhaps because he thought he had annoyed His Grace by so overt an act of disobedience, he knelt down at his feet and, still weeping and moaning, joined his hands and began to draw lines on the earth with his nose as a sort of penance for his sin. (145-146)

'Treatment of Women' is another theme which Anand handles very empathetically and shows the position of women in a traditional Hindu society. Anand as an emancipator of womanhood shows all the evil aspects such as 'Sati Pratha', 'Purdah Pratha', female infanticide, child marriage, dowry system, educational restraint, etc. and subsequently represents a society dominated by male where woman is regarded only as commodity of pleasure, honorary-based servant and a child bearing instrument.

Lajwanti in the story "Lajwanti" is maltreated by her in-laws. Her husband having been away at college on his studies, she is forced to accede to Jaswant's idiosyncrasy. He has an evil eye on Lajwanti and beats her when she refuses to bend before the caprices of Jaswant. However, everything is connived at the doing of him by her mother-in-law. Lajwanti, a young motherless rustic girl, whose husband is away at college finds herself alone and feels uneasiness in her in-laws. There is no one but Maina, her lovely bird, to express her indrawn feelings. When Lajwanti refuses to surrender before Jaswant, he beats her and the mother-in-law connives at his doing, because she favours Jaswant, who works on the land and not Balwant, Lajwanti's husband, who wants to be a clerk.

When it becomes too much for Lajwanti to bear, she tries to run away to her father's house. But Jaswant catches her on the way and beats and asks her to return home abusively:

"Let me go — I want to go to my father's house; Lajwanti said, without lifting her gaze to Jaswant.

'No, you are returning to your husband's home!' Jaswant ground the words. And he twisted her wrist as she tried to get out of his grasp.

'Brute!' she cried. And without shedding any tears, she began to sob, 'leave me alone!'

The throttling growth of Jaswant's bestiality gripped her young body and he shouted hoarsely:

'Prostitute! Bad woman! Running away! What will our brotherhood think? — You disgracing us like this...

Lajwanti collapsed in a huddle at his feet. The brother-in-law hit her with his right foot." (89-90) \*SSS refers to *Selected Short Stories*

Basanto and Hiro in "The Promoter of Quarrels" are cheated by a shopkeeper Lala Nanak Chand, who too has an evil eye

on Hiro and values Hiro's body worth lakhs. Although the condition of both the women is not well-off, yet he pays them less than their actual earnings.

The ponderous customs and fear of elders are abiding plights which restrain numerous women in our society to talk satisfactorily even with their husbands. "The Tamarind Tree" shows Roopa longing for tamarind fruit, but she cannot say that to anyone. Arti in "Hiccup" is blamed of having some inappropriate relations with her father-in-law by her mother-in-law. What concerns more the mother-in-law is not Arti's health but the prestige of family. The women such as Gobindi, Sohini, and Sobha are badly treated by the rich in other stories as well.

The condition of women as shown by Anand in his short fiction is a tale of social degradation and deprivation wherein women are always targeted for no reason sometimes by man and most of the time by other woman. She is not considered the part of the social fabric and her aim is either to serve her in-laws or to bear the responsibilities of being a mother.

'Tradition versus Modernity' is the theme of changing India and Indian mindsets. It is about the impact of modernity on the Indian tradition. Anand ostensibly brings out the effects of modernization on the minds of the orthodox Indian. He depicts a vivid picture of confrontation between tradition and modernity as well as the upheavals which were sweeping over the social set-up during Anand's adolescence. The aim of Anand has always been to overcome the problems which retain man's progress. He has no nostalgic or sentimental attitudes towards Indian tradition. The problems faced by him were nicely portrayed.

In the story "The Power of Darkness" the people of Kamli village are more likely to remain in darkness rather than accepting a modern idea of constructing a dam, which would not only save people from floods, but also produce electricity to dispel the darkness from the country. But this modern idea is opposed by the villagers, which presents a situation of mayhem where the age old tradition collides with modern approaches. When the dam is constructed in the Punjab, the village Kamli is about to submerge. The inhabitants of the village disapprove of the dam and without understanding the profits of it. They consider it not more than a foreboding and have an indrawn faith upon their traditional deities: "Of all the gods and goddesses of our country, Shakti is the most supreme. To be sure, everything is Shakti, soul and body, earth and sky and the waters that flow from their union." (158 SSS)

Due to the arrival of a tractor in the story, "The Tractor and the Corn Goddess", the whole village plunges into chaos. The tractor is brought to the village to improve the old agricultural method of farming by a progressive young landlord. But it is regarded to be haunted with supernatural elements. The modern idea of farming using the machine is rejected.

Chandu in "The Barbers' Trade Union" is, however, a dynamic and energetic young boy; he is reprehended for his dress by which he looks like Sahibs. Sajani, in "Silver Bangles" is also maltreated on wearing her bangles made of silver by the lady of the house. In reality, the poor have no right to put on nice clothes and precious metals. The haggard customs and beliefs are responsible for this evil and Anand draws our attention to the miseries of the people stemmed from the traditional conservativeness. The he age-old tradition can only add to the miseries of people rather relieving them of

their afflictions.

To sum up, in whatever way we estimate Anand's short fiction; be either derivatives or offshoots or corollary of his novel or vice versa, is still an issue of further investigation, nonetheless, it has its merits and charm. The short stories of Anand have very broadly presented the issues which affect everyone and are appealing to mind. He has presented a very realistic picture of the unjust social order of society prevailing in our country and vehemently spurns all religious fanaticism and false pride to confirm his sympathetic inclination towards the sufferings of the people. The exploitation, the underlying theme, superposes onto all the other themes in the form of the plights of the poor and the helpless, which is a ubiquitous and lasting phenomenon of Anand's short stories, and the bases of the sufferings of the people are casteism, feudalism, suppression of women, modernization, religion, etc.

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