

Criticism of Feudal Values and Traditions in the selected short stories of Mulk Raj Anand

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Mulk Raj Anand, Notable for his depiction of two lives of poorer castes in traditional Indian Society, one of the pioneers of aryllo-Indian factory he together with R.K. Narayan, Ahmed Ali and Raj, Rao, was one of the first India- based writer in English to gain a international readership.

Criticism of Feudal Values and Traditions:

Mulk Raj Anand is highly critical of feudalism. Nowhere is his ridicule more vociferous than in his criticism of feudal society and its irrational and quixotic values of life-“The Maharaja and the Tortoise”.“A Pair of Mustachios”. “A Kashmir Idyll” in the Barber’s Trade Union and other Stories,¹ “The Signature” and The Man who Loved Monkeys More Than Human Beings” In Reflections on the Golden Bed and other Stories – are written in mock-heroic vein. “The Maharaja and the Tortoise” describes how the crafty High Priest and Prime Minister of Udhampur state, Pandit Ram Prashad, plays upon the blind religious faith and sense of vanity of the ruler of the state. His Highness Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh Who Prides himself on being ‘Descendent of the sun’, i.e. of the clan of Rajputs to which Sri Ram belonged, and involves him in a highly expensive quixotic project for his spiritual salvation. When Maharaja Ganga Singh reaches the age of forty and feels he is getting old, he seeks the advice of his High Priest to prepare an easy passage for his journey to the next world thereupon.

Pandit Ram Prashad, a clever little lawyer
 Who had been able to maintain his in the state
 For seven years- a longer term of office than had
 Been enjoyed by any other vizier,

The problem of providing the sacred Ganges water to His Highness in his state in the desert of Rajputana, “about a hundred and fifty miles” away from Hardwar, is solved by Pandit Ram Prashad by getting a tank and a pipe-line connecting it with the Ganges it with the Ganges water all the way from Hardwar, constructed at the cost of “a meager hundred and eighty laks,” through “SardarBhadur Singh, a contractor who paid the best commissions” (p.25). Unfortunately when after proper religious ceremonies the Maharaja takes a dip in the tank, a tortoise bites off his toe. Writhing under pain, the Maharaja Shouts: “Catch that swine: Catch that robber who has run away with my big toe” (p.32): Getting out of water and asserting his princely pride, he shouts to the Prime Minister:

‘Bring this biti-chod tortoise before the
 Court and lets it be tired before me and let a just
 Punishment be meted out to it and all the other
 Culprits.....(p.33)

Commenting with biting satire, the author compares the Maharajadhiraj's stentorian utterance with that of the public prosecutor in the states:

The redness in His Highness's eyes as
Well as the cracked fury of his stentorian.....

The clever Prime Minister not only saves himself from the wrath of the Maharaja by citing Manu's holy books which describe killing of a Brahmin as a "Sin punishable by the consignment of the killer to twenty cold hells" (p.35), but also the tortoise. He describes the reptile to be the incarnation of God Vishnu, who as the legend goes "appears to every scion of the Suraj Bansi Clan" (p.36). The Prime Minister assures His Highness of some miracle of divine will within a year if the tortoise is excited to the river Ganges. The Prime Minister's words prove true when the son of God is born to the favorite Maharani within a year. At the instance of the Prime Minister, His Highness the Maharaja declares a public holiday to celebrate the lucky event. After that everyone in the state "believed that the God Vishnu had become incarnate in the old Maharaja and that Ram Raj had come to Udampur, that it had become a perfect state" (p.37).

The comic vein pervades throughout the story, "A Pair of Mustachios." It describes Khan Azam Khan, who claims descent from an ancient Afghan family, the heads of which were noblemen and councilors in the court of the Great Moghuls. He has lost most of his possessions but still retains all his feudal hauteur, of which his up-turned "tiger mustache" is a concrete symbol. Being a member of the family of noblemen, he considers this brand of tiger mustachios to be only his privilege. Incidentally it so happens that "Seth Ramanand, the grocer and money-lender who had been doing well out the recent fall in the price of wheat by buying up whole crops cheap from the hard pressed peasants and then selling grain at higher prices, took it into his head to twist the goat mustache, integral to his order and position in society, at the tips, so that it looked nearly like a tiger mustache" (p.65). As Khan Azam Khan goes to the moneylender's shop to pawn his wife's gold nose-ring one morning, he is roused to great anger and indignation to notice the banys's goat mustache turned up to look like tiger mustache. Unable to control his anger, he asks the shopkeeper seriously, "Since when have the lentil-eating shopkeepers become noblemen" (p.60). During the discussion that follows, Azam Khan splutters, "I would rather I lost all my remaining worldly possessions, my pots and pans, my clothes, even my house, then see the tip of your mustache turned up like that:" (p.68). The clever moneylender takes him on his words and makes Azam Khan sign a document in the presence of five elders of the village, transferring all his household goods and chattels to him. The shopkeeper then brings down his mustache to the brand to satisfy the vanity of the Khan. Azam Khan gives 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 (p.69).

Peudalism is a source of farcical humour in the story "The signature." The India and Commonwealth Bank specially sends its Assistant Manager, C. Subramanian to Nawab Luqman Ali Bahadur, a Nobleman and dignitary of Aliabad state and a Director of the bank to get his signature on some important documents prepared to finalize an important business transaction. When Subramanian arrives, a piece of business which would have normally taken less than five minutes is dragged on over days together, since feudal courtesy demands that a guest be properly and elaborately entertained before any business is transacted.

Subramanian to his great discomfiture is invited to rich and sumptuous dinners at the residences of all the friends of Nawab Luqman Ali Khan and taken for hunting adventure arranged in his honour. He, however, fails to get the feudal dignitary's signature because he has to leave for his estates in Madhopur on an urgent call from there. Little does the great feudal dignitary realize the inconvenience he causes to others by his obstinate clinging to his traditional feudal ways.

There runs a mock-heroic vein throughout the story, "The Man Who Loved Monkeys More Than Human Beings." It also deals with the theme of irrational vagaries of feudal lords. Raja Rajeshwar Rao, the landlord of Hanumanpur in Central India, traces his descent from the monkey god Hanuman, who had helped the god-king Rama to defeat Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, the abductor of Rama's consort, Sita. Having studied science in a college in Bangalore, he has been specially attracted towards Darwin and Spencer who consider all men to be descendants from apes. Since Raja's family alone claims decadence from the monkey god Hanuman, he begins to think it to be the oldest in the world and the preserver of the missing link in the process of evolution. When he is installed on the throne he decided to improve the lot of his ancient brethren because he believes that the anthropoid apes can be brought down from the trees and taught to stand upright. He also feels that if they are given proper training, their brains and sensibilities can be refined. They can then attain the mental abilities of the average soldier or the peasant and can be good substitutes for the recalcitrant sepoy and the farmer.

Mulk Raj Anand refers to cruelty, hard-heartedness and callousness of feudal landlords against poor villagers also in his stories, "the Barber's Trade Union" (The Barber's Trade Union and other Stories), "The Man Whose Name Did Not Appear In The Census" (The Tractor and the Corn Goddess and other Stories), And "The Plantain Tree" (Reflection on the Golden Bed and other Stories). In "The Barber's Trade Union", Rai Bijay Chand, the burly landlord of the village, abuses the barber boy Chandan when he goes to shave him, putting on a white turban, a white rubber coat a pair of shoes and carrying a leather bag in his hand:

"The son of a pig: He is bringing a leather bag of
cow-hide into our house and a coat of the marrow
of, I don't know, some other animal, and those evil
black Angrezi shoes, Get out: Get out: You son of
a devil : You will defile my religion." (p.10)

Like Premchand, the famous Hindi novelist and short story writer, Anand also shows in this story how the landlord, the village sahukar, and the religious priest join hands with each other in exploiting and intimidating poor people. Thanu Ram, the sahukar of the village and the priest Pandit Parmanand take the side of the landlord Bijay Chand and try to insult and humiliate Chandu.

The story "The Man whose Name Did Not Appear in the Census", describes how Ramji, an old and illiterate peasant, does not tell his name to the Census officer because he thinks him to be the man of zamindar. He tells his wife in whispers: "Don't be crazy : I haven't paid the last three quarters of rent. Do you want me to get a shoe beating from the landlord's men" (p.40). In "The plantain Tree", Sukha, The old peasant, who is caught in the flood, wants to pluck the bunch of bananas from his Plantain tree before it is uprooted by flood water and take them to the landlord Suraj Singh's house opposite his own, in the hope of getting some food from him. He is, however, overcome with fear : "But the fear of the mingy, selfish woman, Toti, who was the landlord's wife, no less than the loud voice of Suraj Singh himself, crept into him, as it had done through the bitter years, during which he had done forced labour on the zamindar's estate" (p.111) Sukha, however, plucks bananas and at the risk of his life tries to swim across to Surajbhan's house through deep waters. The landlord's wife and other members of the family, tempted by the sight of bananas, encourage old Sukha from their terrace to move forward quickly. The poor peasant is, however, carried away by a sharp current of water and drowned. The landlord's wife Toti is, however, not at all sorry for Sukha's death. She says:

" The dead one: He was always an ominous
presence about our house.....And he

would not given me the bananas
when I Asked him for the bunchEven
now he has cheated me of the:" (p.113).

The story" The Tractor and the corn Goddess", is written in a different vein. It shown that though An and is critical of feudalism, he admires the attitude of the progressive and on lightened members of the feudal society. When Nawabzada Mumtaz Ali khan, Who has come in contact with young communists during his stay abroad, returns to his estate in Bhagira, take over the charge of his estate after the death of his father and announces reforms for the welfare of his poor peasants and rural folk, he is decried by them as weak, inexperienced and incompetent landlord. The illiterate and ignorant peasants who have been used to being insulted, humiliated, abused, beaten and cheated of their crop by the old Nawab, are unable to understand and appreciate the young Nawab when he renounces all rights to his land forms a co-op in which all the tenants will have, equal rights. When he brings a tractor to plough their fields to save their labour, they look with suspicion at him and condemn him as irreligious person. It takes sometime for the villagers to realize the real significance of the reforms of the young nawab in their life.