

## Mulk Raj Anand's Stories '*A Kashmir Idyll*' And '*The Price Of Bananas*': A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

The present paper proposes to analyze the stories '*A Kashmir Idyll*' and '*The Price of Bananas*' by Mulk Raj Anand and bring out the similarities in theme, characterization, and action. Having different backgrounds and settings, the stories share the theme of exploitation of the have-nots by the rich and the privileged on the one hand and the submissive and yielding behaviour of the exploited class on the other. The pitiful circumstances in which the villains are placed seem to be divine retribution for the wrong done by them. The paper aims to trace the similarities in the above stories and analyses the events that can be studied on parallel lines.

**Key Words:** Poverty, exploitation, humiliation, privileged, underprivileged.

Mulk Raj Anand was an eminent Indian writer who wrote about the socio-cultural fabric of the pre and post-independence periods. He studied the societal structures and intricacies of human relationships. In his works, he brings out the pathetic condition of the backward and downtrodden people. The dominant themes in Mulk Raj Anand's short stories are poverty, exploitation, and oppression. Presenting a realistic picture of pre-independent India, most of his stories portray the callous, heartless, and cruel attitude of the rich and the privileged towards the deprived and the destitute. The plot of his stories is structured on a conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited. The evil of the villain is ridiculed by the writer and his sympathy and concern for the oppressed and deprived are easily discernible.

The stories '*A Kashmir Idyll*' and '*The Price of Bananas*' are also typical of Anand's characteristic themes and vision. If in '*A Kashmir Idyll*' feudal power and tyranny are exposed and ridiculed, '*The Price of Bananas*' is a saga of exploitation of the poor by the rich business class. Both stories share the theme of cruelty, exploitation, and hard-heartedness against the poor and vulnerable strata of society.

Nawab Zaffar Ullah is a merciless, callous, whimsical, and unpredictable nobleman in 'A Kashmir idyll'. The description of Nawab at the beginning of the story hints at the crudeness of his mind and behaviour which we later come to know as the story progresses. Ill-mannered and with unpleasant obesity, he doesn't seem to be a wise and respectable character from the very beginning. He forced his company to narrator and his party which the latter found uncomfortable. He eats like a glutton and talks like a lout.

"For His grace was rather a silly young man with the manners of a lout and a high blood pressure in his too opulent flesh" (A Kashmir,154)...He told a few dirty stories and then launched into a discourse of which ribaldry was so highly spiced with deliberate obscenity...(A Kashmir,155)

Although a petty nobleman, he behaves as a capricious tyrant and egoist. His irrational behaviour continues till the end of the story. When he is warned about the impending danger that the squall might upset the boat, he gives a damn to the warning. He doesn't listen to anyone and prefers his 'haircut' and 'Turkish bath' to the safety and security of the fellows in his company. Through the character of Nawab, Anand presents the worst kind of feudal exploitation. Nawab, as a petty nobleman compels a young tenant to row his boat to Srinagar, fifty miles from that place ignoring his pitiful plea that his mother has died and he has to see the Mullah about securing a place for her burial.

'Run, run towards the boat', bawled the Nawab, or, I'll have you flogged by the Thanedar. Do you not know that this is the kingdom of which I am a nobleman? And you can't refuse to do begar'.(A Kashmir,157)

The exploited young man protested hesitatingly but soon compromised to the situation as the Nawab headed to physical violence and threats. The man not only agreed to go but also admitted his disobedience knelt down at his feet, and drew lines on the earth with his nose as if he had done some serious sin. To see him doing that kind of penance, the Nawab bursts into uncontrollable laughter, his gestures indicating that he felt himself at the top of the world. The humiliation inflicted on that young man is mortifying and disgraceful.

'But the situation which had been tense enough before had become very awkward now as the man grovelled in the dust and rolled about, weeping, wailing, whining and moaning and sobbing hysterically with the most abject humility.' (A Kashmir,159)

The exploited strata of the society of that time seems to be too weak to retaliate, too submissive to show any resentment. This unassertive and passive behaviour from their slaves further inflated the ego and vanity of their feudal lords. Nawab's laughter in the story is significant of his ego and the sadistic pleasure that he takes from the pitiable condition of the slaves. The story takes a sudden tragic turn as the laughter of Nawab, symbolic of his false pride and arrogance becomes the cause of his ruin as he is choked by that fit of laughter. The ending of the story contrasts the pride that human takes in himself and the uncertainty of his very existence. Some superpower governing the world seems to be working for retribution and the writer's sympathy and concern for the downtrodden seem obvious from the course of action that the story takes.

The 'Price of Bananas' is also a saga of exploitation in which the rich business class represented by the Seth is without any conscience and totally indifferent to the plight of the poor labour class. The exploitation met to the 'coolie' and 'banana vendor' in the story is presented in a more restrained and discreet manner than the crude and ribald treatment met to the begari in the story 'A Kashmir Idyll'. The character of Seth is a finer version of the egoist and callous Nawab. Like Nawab he is the villain in the story, the exploiter of vulnerable section of the society. The appearance of the Seth in 'white muslin dhoti' and 'an embroidered cap' is a sophisticated version of the clumsy and unpleasant looks of the Nawab. The heartless and unsympathetic behaviour of Seth towards the poor labourers is in the same line as of Nawab's.

The Seth represents a class that is totally ungrateful and thankless to the people who serve them physically so that the rich can enjoy a leisurely and comfortable life. As the story begins, he is showering abuse on the coolie for no reason. The Seth calls the coolie 'blind' and the coolie addresses the Seth as 'huzoor'. The rich taking the respect given to them by the poor for granted and still hurling abuses on them seems to be an accepted normal behaviour. The privileged class which is insensitive to the feelings of the deprived, is conscious, mindful, and sensitive to their own respect in the society. The Seth in the story 'The Price of Bananas' feels uneasy and embarrassed when a monkey takes his cap away. He became nervous and uncomfortable when he was stripped off the cap, the symbol of his dignity, and faced the mocking glances of the crowd with difficulty.

A fruit vendor comes to the rescue of the Seth and starts dangling a couple of bananas in front of the monkey and is successful in securing the cap back for the Seth. The fruit vendor's initiative was appreciated by the crowd but the Seth little recognized his favour of restoring his dignity. Not to talk of his ungratefulness, he shouted bitterly at the fruit vendor when the latter demanded two annas for the bananas that he offered to the monkey.

'Are wah! what impudence! Two annas if you please! For What?.... (The Price,167)

The coolie who carried the luggage of the Seth was also underpaid and was disappointed and protested that four annas was not a justified amount for his labour. But he also met the unsympathetic and hateful behaviour of the Seth. Although the other passengers in the railway compartment entreated the Seth to give reasonable wages to them, the Seth was not ready to budge from the amount that he had finalized for both of them and paid an anna to the fruit vendor and four annas to the coolie.

'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 Price,168)

The coolie resigned to the will of the Seth and went away but the fruit vendor persisted to press for more amount and the Seth threw one Anna towards him on the platform. The fruit vendor looking in the window continued to entreat the Seth with folded hands.

'Sethji, do not rob the poor! I tried to....'

'Ja Ja! Take rest! do your work!' the Sethji spat fire, while the frown on his face twisted his face twisted his visage into an ugly, unhappy scowl.

'Give, him one anna more, Sethji.' I said with a straight face.

'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!'(The Price,168)

The calculating behaviour of the Seth seemed ridiculous and outrageous to the writer and other passengers. The fruit vendor tried to persuade the Seth with pleadings and even threats to pay one anna more but the Seth remained defiant and unyielding. At last, he ran after the moving train and hurled abuses spitefully at the Seth. Later the Seth tried to justify himself and asserted his self-righteousness to the other travellers, they tried to shame him by staring at him in the eyes and speaking to him with an undercurrent of irony. The writer also drew a caricature of him as he had seen him standing under the neem tree and begging for his cap and passed it to the other passengers. The Seth half understood the meaning in the mocking glances of the onlookers of the whole episode.

The saga of exploitation runs parallel in both the stories 'A Kashmir Idyll' and 'The Price of Bananas' in which privileged exploits the underprivileged though the stories vary on the degree of exploitation met to the exploited. 'A Kashmir Idyll' is a grim and serious narrative of the horror of crude exploitation and 'The Price of Bananas' is a light-hearted narrative of exploitation depicted in subtle ways. The former exploits the poor slave labourer emotionally as he is indifferent to his pitiful plea that he has to arrange for his mother's funeral and the latter robs the poor vendor financially by not paying a reasonable amount for the bananas and blaming him for having a conspiracy with the monkeys. The retribution and punishment met to them correspond to the degree of exploitation met to them. The Nawab in 'A Kashmir Idyll' dies by choking from the laughter arising out of the pride of his accomplishment of forced obligation whereas the Seth hears ironic remarks and is made fun of for his calculative and mean nature. The other thing that is common in both stories is that the villains of the stories that is the Nawab in 'A Kashmir Idyll' and the Seth in 'The Price of Bananas' humiliate and exploit their 'saviours'. It was the 'begari' who got ready to take charge of the Nawab's boat in the risky weather and it was the fruit vendor who restored Seth's cap the symbol of his dignity without which he was feeling nervous and embarrassed. Thus the stories criticize the cruelty of the rich and affluent on the poor and the impoverished on the one hand and the submissiveness, passivity and subservience of the downtrodden on the other.

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