

## The Theme of Humour in the Select Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand

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### Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the greatest Indian English short story writers. He was a great novelist of his time, and he has written many world-famous novels such as *The Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *The Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), etc. But his short stories have no less value than his novels. He is a great writer in the field of short story writing, too. He has written many short story collections in his literary career that are wide-ranging in mood and tone, with multiple themes of freedom struggle, love, hate, humour, country and city life, the exploitation of the poor and oppressed, religious hypocrisy, feudal power, Indian culture, modernity and tradition, superstition, child psychology, nostalgia for the past, etc. The present paper will focus on his four selected short stories: 'A Pair of Mustachios', 'The Signature', 'The Two Lady Rams', and 'The Liar'. All these short stories have been written in a very comic style. This piece of writing will attempt to identify the overarching theme of humor that each of these short stories has.

**Keywords:** Humour, Friendship, Feudalism, Superstition, Psychology, Culture, Class and Caste.

### Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), was associated with 20th-century progressive writer's movement, and was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's lifestyle. He describes the social realities of British India in his works. He is a big name in Indian English literature and is basically known for his great novels. We find the theme of politics, the sculpture of Indian English literature, and most importantly, the freedom movement started by Gandhiji. He got the Sahitya Academy Award for his work *Morning Face* (1971), Padam Bhusan in 1968, and many other prestigious awards, including some fellowships, which gave him an opportunity to study abroad. Except for his tremendous success in the field of fiction writing, he was the great master of story-telling, so he has secured a great place in this field as well. He has written many short story collections in his literary career. Generally, he is considered a great novelist, but he has done great work in the field of short stories as well. The popularity of his stories is no less than that of his novels. R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao were his contemporaries who also gained popularity in these two fields.

‘A Pair of Mustachios’ by Mulk Raj Anand gives a great sense of humour, the simplicity of rural people, the boundaries between classes, conventions, pride and prejudices, distinction between high and low castes. It deals with the clash between Ramanand, the money lender, and Khan Azam Khan over a trivial thing like the style of having mustachios. An unknown narrator tells the story in the third person. Despite not being affluent, Khan hails from a wealthy family and feels that Ramanand has no right to have a moustache like his. Khan believes that Ramanand is below him so he has no right to imitate him.

The pattern of wearing a moustache defines the class of Indian orthodox people, and nobody is allowed to adopt the pattern of one class that is associated with a particular class. Khan is so adherence to his style of mustache that he cannot tolerate anyone copying his style. The shape of a man's mustache defines his ancestry. A person's position in society is determined by the style of his moustache. Here Anand is showing the ignorance of Khan because Khan regards himself superior to Ramanand based only on his personal preference for a particular mustache style. Khan is so ingrained in tradition that he is willing to lose everything he owns so that Ramanand might alter the look of his moustache.

The money lender ignites a kind of flame in Khan when he sees Ramanand's lion-like moustache upturned. He orders him to turn his tips of mustache down appropriate to his class, which is goat-like, a pattern that is adopted by most of the money lenders and others like his race. Khan Azam Khan claims to have been born into a long-standing Afghan dynasty that served as advisors and noblemen in the Mughal court. So he has only the right to wear a lion-like moustache. Khan abuses Ramanand as a lentil-eating shopkeeper when the latter adopts the pattern of mustache of the former. Being angry at the money lender, Khan says:

"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 airs of the banyas nowadays!" (Anand 176)

This story presents a comic picture of Indian society in which conventional and traditional people think themselves superior to others on the basis of their lineage. The manner in which Khan abuses Ramanand is very humorous and funny when he orders the money lender not to copy his style of tiger-like moustache. The Khan is so adhered to his lineage of noble men that he accepts to become a pauper instead of letting other low castes adopt the style of his descent, which is not acceptable at any cost.

‘The Signature’ is a well-known short story by Mulk Raj Anand that deals with the importance of a signature that makes a document genuine and valid. He gives a long description of signatures and their importance in official works. The signature has great importance in banking. The signature is almost omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and supreme for the officials of banking. And for them, Mulk Raj Anand comically says, the signature is all in all. Although the signature plays a very important role in every official work, there are two kinds of people who have not yet realized the value of the signature. These are, respectively, some of the feudal gentry and the poor who do not have bank accounts. This story deals with the amazing illustrations between Nawab Luqman Ali Khan Bahadur, a nobleman and dignitary of Aliabad

State, and the director and manager named Mr. C. Subramaniam of the India and Commonwealth Bank Ltd. The latter goes to get the signature of the former on account of the banking formalities, but the manager is trapped in so many invitations and visits with noblemen and dignitaries that he is not able to get an opportunity to get the signature of Ali Khan Bahadur, so he gets irritated and returns without getting any signature. But later on, the banking manager just copies the signature of the nobleman, which he has put somewhere only in one place, to make the documents valid.

The narrator beautifully describes the journey made by Subramaniam and the many problems that he had to face during a trip from Mumbai to Aliabad to get Nawab's, the young entrepreneur who got a loan on good interest, signature on all the documents. While on the way from Mumbai to Aliabad, the assistant manager, who was not very habitual about traveling, so his digestion revolted at the very first bite of biscuits served by the air hostess. All the incidents that happened during the journey are comically described by the narrator. While reaching his destination, Zeenat Mahal, the palace of Nawab Saheb Bahadur, he gets a very warm welcome, which he had not expected in such remote village areas. Mr Subramaniam says to Ali Khan that he has come to get his signature, but instead of putting his signature on the documents, Nawab Ali promises to make him visit with the Home Minister, the Education Minister, and the Finance Minister at Aliabad Club. While shaking hands with dignitaries, Nawab Wajid Mohammed instructs Mr Subramaniam in the art of shaking hands and further adds that a handshake is a symbol of affection and goodwill.

Mr Subramaniam after wasting three days having grand dinners and breakfasts, lets out an involuntary shriek of horror. His body becomes hot with anger, resentment, and forced ingratitude. When he fails to get his work done, he decides to return after taking the documents without a signature. On his return, the bank manager was not angry with Mr Subramaniam and instead he had a rubber stamp made of the first and only signature of Nawab Luqman Ali Khan on one document and sanctioned the loan to the entrepreneur.

Mulk Raj Anand's short story '**The Two Lady Rams**' is well known for its comic themes. It talks about Lalla Jhinda Ram, who has been conferred the title of knighthood for his excellent service to the British Empire. It is a pride moment for Jhinda Ram, but it creates a lot of confusion between his wives, the young Shakuntala and the old Sukhi. The former is twenty-five years old, and the latter is fifty-five years old. They both insist on being referred to as Lady Ram. Because of the continuous squirreling and bitterness between the two wives, Jinda Ram segregates them into two different parts of his house. The invitation from Government House to Jhinda and Lady Ram on the occasion of the ceremony of investiture of all those dignitaries who have been granted titles and medals adds fuel to the fire in the quarrel between the two wives.

Shakuntala and Sukhi quarrel a lot over the right to go for the invitation as Lady Ram. The hot discussion between the two wives has been comically presented in the story. The quarrelsome nature of the ladies over trivial things is clearly visible in this story. Seeing the verbal fighting between husband and wife is a great pleasure for Indian people. To pacify the quarrel and to avoid the question of who is to be called Lady Ram Lalla Jhinda Ram takes both of his wives to the party.

The title of the story 'The Two Lady Rams' is appropriately named here, as both of the wives are entitled to be called Lady Rams.

When Sukhi and Shakuntala are at dagger's drawn, Anand beautifully visualizes the ill-will that is between the two wives over the matter of Lady Ram. See the exaggerated comic style in this passage:

"Perhaps, however, trouble is too mild a word for what happened. For it was a veritable war that broke out in the comparatively peaceful house of Sir Jhinda, and trenches were dug, or rather, barricades raised, and if there was no gun powder used, it was only because women in India have not yet learnt all the tricks of Al Capone as the men have through the Talkies." (Anand 198)

We can see a glimpse of the dowry system that prevails in Indian society. Sukhi, who had brought a good dowry, rebukes Shakuntala for not bringing enough dowries with her except for her fair and beautiful complexion. Jhinda Lal requests Sukhi go to her room to pacify the quarrel, but she is not ready to go. She angrily says:

"I will stay here if I like,' said the loud Sukhi. 'I am the owner of the whole of this house. You had nothing before I brought a lakh of rupees in my dowry!...What did this bitch bring with her—nothing but a fair complexion and a snub nose.'" (Anand 200)

When Sukhi does not stop and keeps on abusing, Sir Jhinda Ram ultimately becomes angry:

"Taking Sukhi by the hair, tried to drag her away to her part of the house. Strangely enough the old woman did not respect her lord and master any more, for she resisted like a tiger and overturning the table in the living room, barricaded herself there and waxed eloquent about the misdeeds of Sir Jhinda and Lady Ram all day." (Anand 201)

And Shakuntala, the younger wife of Jhinda Ram, defends herself in this way:

"Go, go, gentle women!" protested Shakuntala meekly. 'Go to your own part of the house and don't eat my life.'" (Anand 200)

This story has a lot of fun for the readers, who take a lot of pleasure in the hot discussion and verbal fighting between the husband and the two wives. Although the fight between wives over trivial issues is serious, readers take it comically. The comic style in which the story is written enthralls readers very much.

'**The Liar**' by Mulk Raj Anand deals with themes of storytelling, humour, friendship, innocence, respect and jealousy. Acha, a young boy, narrates the story in the first person; and he has a good

friendship with Labhu, the eponymous liar and the great storyteller. It has been observed that the liars are the best storytellers, as is the ability of Labhu to take the mundane and turn it into an adventurous tale. The narrator knows very well that Labhu befools everybody with his unbelievable and fanciful stories.

The friendship between the narrator and Labhu is very deep. They forget their disagreement when Labhu returns from his hunting trip. The title of the story is also interesting, as there is no doubt that Labhu is a liar. Labhu has a vivid willingness to share his imagination with others to entertain and enchant those who listen to his stories. In reality, every storyteller could be called a liar, and every story may be a lie.

The concocted cock and bull stories by Labhu are so fanciful that everyone believes them to be true. The false story of a terrible apparition is greatly exaggerated by Labhu, in which he talks about the large figure of a ghost-like creature. After listening to this story, Acha tells Labhu that he is a great liar. Acha says:

"Oh you are a fool, Labhu," I said. "And you are a liar. Everybody says so. And I don't believe you at all. My mother says I am silly to believe your tails." (Anand 208)

On this remark, Labhu says that if he does not believe in his stories, he won't be able to listen to them, and he will not accompany him anymore. And after this incident, Labhu goes on a trip across the Himalayas to Nepal with Kuldeep Singh, Subedar Deep Singh's eldest son, who works as a lieutenant in the army. Labhu is a boaster and a liar who claims to kill a beast, but in reality, he is so incompetent that he is not able to kill even a hare. When Labhu comes back from hunting, he becomes ill and limp. Acha has pity on Labhu, so he goes to him and asks about his broken leg. Then the liar again tells a long, concocted story about how his leg has been broken and boasts of his false mastery of shooting. He says that he has killed twelve tigers with his gun, fifteen panthers in the course of seven days, and many stags. This boasting of killing so many wild beats provides a great pleasure to the readers.

Labhu again tells the false story of a princess and his pursuit of her. He accuses his friends Kuldeep Singh and Sahib of creating a hindrance to getting the beautiful princess. While pursuing her, the magician, the guard of the beauty, throws a mountain at him; that's why his leg has been broken. After hearing this false story, Acha becomes aware of his lies. He states:

"And as you landed the side of the Mountains you sprained your foot," I said." (Anand 212)

"Labhu lifted his eyebrows funnily in the manner of the old age and, laughing, said: 'Have I told you this story before, then?'" (Anand 212)

## Conclusion

The style in which all these four short stories have been written is really very comic, and readers get great pleasure from reading them. The hot discussion between Khan and the money lender in 'The Pair of Mustachios' is very interesting and humorous. The manner in which Khan abuses Ramanand

for copying his style of mustache is really interesting and gives a lot of amusement. The importance of a signature in the story 'The Signature' is highly recommended, and it is written in an exaggerated manner. Mulk Raj Anand gives a long description of the importance of the signature, even saying that it is omniscient, omnipresent, and all in all in every official document. A long trip made by Mr Subramaniam from Bombay to Aliabad only to get the signature of the entrepreneur, his enforced welcome, and his irritation at waiting there for three days are also interesting. 'The Signature' expresses farcical humour due to feudal attitudes. The fight between the husband and his two wives in the story 'The Two Lady Rams' is very funny and pleasurable. Indian society, which is famous in the world for the quarrel between husbands and wives, takes readers to a world of merriment and laughter. The quarrel between Sukhi and Shakuntala on account of calling 'Lady Ram' is really interesting. The short story 'The Liar' has been written in a comic vein. Labhu, who is a great storyteller, is a great liar, and it is clear that nobody can be a great storyteller until and unless he is a liar. So everybody knows that Labhu is a liar. In this way, it is evident that although Mulk Raj Anand's short stories portray a picture of Indian society where there are many problems for the marginalized, on the other hand, he can also write very humorous and comic stories. By reading all these stories, it is clear that he could write on any topic and on anything because he was a great writer of short stories. He was the true master in this art. We may experience almost every kind of flavor with multiple varieties in his short stories. And society also likes the variety, whether it is in any area of literature.

### References

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