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Social Vision in the Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand and Manoj Das

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand and Manoj Das, who are often compared to O' Henry, have always exhibited a deep sense of responsibility towards the society. The short story, as an art form, is used by them to represent the social values and visions so that there would be an awakening among the mass. The short stories of these two writers represent the mass psychology through individual cases. Each individual in these stories is a representative figure of the society. They try to show a large picture of the society through the small canvas of their short stories. This paper purports to study the social vision in the selected short stories of these two great story tellers.

Key words: Manoj Das, Mulk Raj Anand, social vision, short story.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), a great exponent of short story writing, was extensively influenced by western writers like Guy de Maupassant, O' Henry and Anton Chekov. Though he is mainly regarded as a great Indo-Anglian writer for his great novels like *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), his short stories represent various social concerns of his time. It is sometimes felt that Anand's short stories have not received their due scholarly attention. Like his novels they also have high literary value and social vision. His short stories display a blend of Indian story telling method and western narrative technique. As a celebrated Indo-Anglian writer he had mastery over both fictional and non-fictional writing. His candid rendering of social evils through these short stories made him very famous. A champion for the downtrodden, the untouchables, the working class, the destitute he proved himself a social critic and expressed his anguish towards the organized evils in the society. He was a great observer of the mundane life and insignificant individual identity of the have-nots of the society. He deeply examined the social process and put

forward through his characters these social questions in front of his readers. He questioned the social norms and tradition that made the outcastes and the women vulnerable creature.

Manoj Das, a prolific bilingual writer in Odia and English, was born in a small coastal village of Odisha in 1934.His childhood experience is often reflected in his short stories which are great commentary on the society of his time. Born in the pre-independent India, he has minutely observed the transition of India from a British colony to a democratic society. While evaluating the stories of the author, P.Raja rightly quotes a few lines from his short story *Mystery of Missing Cap* to prove that Manoj Das has 'artistically and convincingly' portrayed the transition of India to a new type democracy.

> As is well-known, the ancient land of India has had four major castes since time immemorial. But during the days immediately preceding independence a new caste was emerging all over the country -- that of patriots. The 15th of August 1947 gave a big boost to their growth. In almost every village, besides the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras, a couple of patriots came into being.
> (qtd. by Raja,56)

Manoj Das, like Anand, wants to portray the 'ruthless exploitation, moral depravity, fanaticism, spiritual sterility, pretence and superstitions' and this is precisely done by using satire and humour in his short stories. Both the writers try to focus on the social issues such as untouchability, moral pretence, gender discrimination, woman education, feudalism and superstition. Even though they are the great social critics in Indian English Writings, they are not pessimistic. One can easily notice the humanitarian approach reflected in the short stories of these two writers.

Mulk Anand did a pioneering work by focusing his writing on these issues, and he broke a ground by dismissing the fictional writing based on romance and history. He never tried to behave as an escapist, but in fact, he wanted to encounter social evils such as untouchability and caste system. He was from a Kshatriya family. His strong zeal to highlight the predicament of these neglected creatures of the society made him a messiah of the downtrodden. In addition to several awards and recognitions, he became friend to many world famous writers of his time. The list includes T.S Eliot, Virginia Woolf, E M Forster, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and many others.

> Anand has all along written novels and short stories with a view of teaching men the fundamental principles of human living and exercise vigilance in regard to the real enemies and socialism. It has been a life time apostolate for him (which he

> still continues) to help raise the untouchables, the peasants, the serfs, the coolies and the other suppressed member of the society to fight for human dignity deliberately denied to them by the privileged section of the society. (George, 6-7)

Anand always believed in the awakening of the social conscience of the mass. He was 'a humanist, a proletarian'. He employed various narrative modes in his short stories to highlight these concerns. Displaying various shades and colors of social surrounding these stories expressed the reformative zeal of the writer. He wrote short story collections like *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), *Reflections on the Golden Bed and other stories* (1944), *The Power of Darkness and other stories* (1959), *Lajwanti and other stories* (1966), *Between Tears and Laughter* (1973), and *Folktales of Punjab* (1974). His depiction of social problems with a touch of humour makes these stories more alluring. His characters in these stories have mainly found in a rural atmosphere. These characters are often the downtrodden who try to free themselves from the shackles of orthodox social values.

Some of Mulk Raj Anand's stories expose the male chauvinistic attitude and also depict the sufferings of women in our society. In the story collection *Lajwanti and other stories* Anand describes the helplessness of a woman through a symbol of a caged bird in the title story Lajwanti. This is the painful story of Lajwanti - a young village girl. She had to face harassment at the hands of her brother-in-law Jaswant. Her husband was not staying in the house as he was doing his BA in a college. In spite of her strong opposition she cannot protect herself from the lustful eyes of Jaswant. Anand shows her helplessness in the following way.

> And in the panic of this premonition, she felt the chords of guilt choke her dry throat. She might have borne the humiliation. She might have given in to Jaswant. She could have closed her eyes. Her husband Balwant was away at college. Her benevolent father-in-law would not have known. And the mother-in-law who wanted her son's more than anything else, would not have worried, even if she had come to know, because she favoured Jaswant, who worked on the land and not Balwant who wanted to be a clerk.(Lajwanti,11)

She wanted to run away to her parents' house but she was not allowed and her brother-in-law used all filthy language to rebuke her. She was addressed as a 'prostitute! Bad woman!' (Lajwanti,13). She was even slapped on the head and physically tortured. She 'gave in to the torment and sat dumbly, suppressing even her sobs.' (Lajwanti, 13) After getting help from Engineer Dayal's wife

she returned to her parent's house but she was treated as an unwelcome guest in the house. Her father didn't see it proper 'because a daughter coming back home without due ceremony, was inauspicious.' (Lajwanti, 17) He echoed the same attitude like her brother-in-law who said Lajwanti disgraced their family by running away. Ultimately her father sent her back to her in-laws. She felt herself as a condemned creature and tried to end her life by jumping into a well. After the failed attempt of suicide Lajwanti at the end expresses, "'Alas' she said in wordless words, above the ache of the head and thumping of the heart, 'there is no way for me...I am...condemned to live....! (Lajwanti, 27).

Similar is the title story of the The Barber's Trade Union and other stories collection. Chandu is the young protagonist in this story The Barber's Trade Union who loved to recite poetry though he was not good in Mathematics. He was attending school and simultaneously helping his father in their hereditary profession as the son of the village barber. After the death of his father he had to work as a full-fledged barber discarding his education. Everything was fine until one day Chandu started wearing a dress similar to a doctor Kalan Khan. Actually he saw this attire when he went to Taluka and he was immediately attracted to this. He wanted to dress himself in that style. The new look of Chandu infuriated the upper castes of his village and he was humiliated. He became the target of the egoist members of the society who could not tolerate the boy for his dress up like a doctor. The landlord used foul languages when he saw him in this attire. He called Chandu 'The Son of Pig!' the village sahukar addressed him 'you little swine'. Chandu, unlike the submissive Bakha or Munoo in Anand's novels, revolted against this inhuman treatment. He stopped working for them and went to town for his earning. Meanwhile he succeeded in convincing his fellow barbers in that area not to tolerate harassment at the hands of these upper castes. He transformed himself from an ordinary village boy to a clever union leader. This non-cooperation created a visible discomfort in the village. The victory of Chandu in this heralded the upcoming trade unionism in India. The writer perhaps observed this sentiment in the hearts of many disillusioned workers in different sectors in India. He became the writer's symbol for modern ideas and a revolting mass. Mulk Raj Anand, as a Marxist, gave a call to all the proletariats who were suffering at the hands of the ruthless powers of the society to raise their voice and revolt.

Another story in this *The Cobbler and the Machine* narrates the 'race for machination'. Initially when the narrator of the story tells about the sewing machine to Uncle Saudagar, a cobbler by profession, the latter thought 'God would curse my fingers and those of my pupils, make them incapable of sewing at all, if I began to use this machine.' (The Cobbler.72) He even feared that

people would target him for this as he was an outcaste. The old cobbler's low self esteem is evident here when he says 'what use is to show a man the likens of a bunch of grapes when he will never be able to eat the fruit.' (The Cobbler,73) Finally the narrator convinced him and the old cobbler bought a sewing machine by taking loan but he could not repay the loan and for this he had to suffer and die at the end. This story and other stories in this collection like 'Boots', 'The story of Anna' depict social injustice and injustices perpetrated on the underprivileged.

Anand presents the pathetic condition of a poor peasant woman Parvati in the short story *Birth.* This story highlights the helplessness of a woman who does not get any sympathy even during her critical time. Prejudice for a male child, negligence of women in traditional Indian family are some of the issues that are portrayed through the character of Parvati. She works for the whole family but does not get any support or appreciation for her work. On the contrary she is blamed for the bad situation of the family. Even Parvati's husband is not sympathetic to her. She is physically and psychologically pressurized when she should get best care and support. Nobody is with her during the delivery time of the baby when she needs emotional support. Her story reminds us how a female in Indian society is considered as a child delivering machine.

Old Bapu in *The Power of Darkness and other stories* describes the predicament of an untouchable who walks seven miles to earn a living but he fails to get any work. It has setting of mid 1930s. Bapu is an orphan and he stays for some time in his uncle's house. But one day he is thrown out the house. In the story he looks older than his age because of poverty. His ordeal of walking is realistically described as 'The city was still miles away, and the flesh in his feet burnt where it touched the new hot metalled road through the holes of the shoes.' He was profusely sweating under the unrelenting scorching Sun. The story of Old Bapu reminds the horrible saga of poverty. *Duty* another story satirizes the corrupt police system of the British Raj. Mangal Singh, a policeman, is rebuked and beaten for his negligence of duty by his officer, who in turn shows his anger on the innocent hapless villagers. *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts* exposes the orthodox and inhuman social customs of the feudal society. It also expresses the power of patriarchy, child marriage and cruelty in education. The struggle for existence is told in the story collection *Between Tears and Laughter*. Here the story *The last song of Raghu the Bard* is a very heart wrenching tale of a blind beggar who is beaten to death by three young hooligans. Similarly stories like *The Cobbler and the Machine, The Gold Watch* are examples of social criticism.

Manoj Das started writing in a very early age. He published his first short story collection entitled *Samudra Kshudha* (1951) in Odia. His first collection of English short stories *A Song for Sunday*

and Other Stories was published in (1967). His famous short story collection includes *Short stories of Manoj Das* (1969), *The Submerged valley and other stories* (1986), *Mystery of Missing Cap and Other stories* (1989), *The lady who died One and Half times and Other Fantasies* (2003).Though his stories are mainly set in the rural Odisha , they represent the issues of traditional Indian society. His short stories are unique for the social message in the post independent Indian English literature. These stories present the social issues and we find both satire and humour in these narratives. His presentation of human helplessness is heart touching.

While analyzing the stories of Manoj Das,we again find the same social issues that are reflected in the stories of Mulk Raj Anand. For example, *Kuturi Nani*, an early Odia short story by Manoj Das, reflects a serious but neglected social issue which is often missed due to our lackadaisical attitude. We find many women in our society who lead a similar life like Kuturi Nani in spite of a lot of hardships in their life. Kuturi Nani, who used come the narrator's house to supply milk, is a symbol for millions of women who are often the backbone of a family. She has a drunken husband who abuses her but she still loves him. This we come to know when she expresses her feelings to the narrator. Kuturi Nani never appears sad due to her condition. This reminds us about many Indian women who work for their family but they are ill-treated. At times they are physically and psychologically attacked for no fault of their own. These women don't have any claim on their income as most of their income is used or misused by their husbands or in-laws. They even don't have a voice in their family. Though simple, this story, narrates a very common but serious social malady of our society since long days.

Another famous short story *The Mystery of Missing Cap* depicts the false impression that the common folk develop regarding the so called patriots of our country after independence. The socio-political scene is clearly marked in the following lines of the story.

> Came the independence. As is well-known, the hoary land of India has had four major castes from time immemorial. But during the days immediately preceding independence a new caste was emerging all over the country, the caste of patriots. 15th August, 1947, gave a big boost to their growth. Almost in every village, beside the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras were seen cropping up a couple or so of patriots. (Das,1)

This class of patriots includes people like Mr. Moharana Babu who always aspires to be member of the state legislative and Babu Virkishore, Minister of Fishes and Fine Arts, who is a minister in

a state in post-independent India. Manoj Das narrates the hypocrisy of these people through a very humorous incident. Mr. Moharana Babu is described as a rich man who has a very good ancestral pukka house which is an attraction of that area. He belongs to those people of new India who dream to become political leaders due to their property and not because of any real devotion or duty towards the nation. They pretend many things which are not true due to the ignorance of common people. A simple incident of a missing cap, which is presented as something a big incident by Mr. Maharana, is only to get the sympathy and popularity from the simple minded common mass who always look at the politicians with awe and devotion. The depiction of the lifestyle of the minister is contrary to the oath undertaken in the name of Mother India to lead a simple Gandhian lifestyle by serving the nation. Similarly the treatment that is extended to these ministers by some people like Maharana Babu is nothing but to get the support of common mass to fulfill their personal dream of becoming a leader. The minister is treated like a God in the village and a devotional song is sung in his glory. He is served the most sumptuous food with about twenty dishes around the sweetened, ghee-baked rice and all arrangements are made for his mid-summer noon rest. It is very strange that this tradition that we see in the present day during the visit of some political leaders has actually begun in the early days of this country after independence. Through the narrator's voice, the author presents many false impressions that we build regarding our politicians: We the rustic children wrangled over several questions: What does a minister eat? What does he think? Does he sleep or not? Does he ever suffer from colic or cold? etc. (Das, 3) Mr. Maharana's ambition of becoming a politician is thwarted due to the mischievous deed of Jhandu, the monkey. It exposes the pseudo patriotism of our political leaders through the character of the minister. Not only the story, as a whole, presents the true picture of the aspiring political leaders in the post-independent India, but it also describes the lifestyle, feelings and attitudes of the established politicians of that time.

Similarly another story *The Tree* presents the deep rooted traditional Indian belief in our society. Here we notice how the villagers have come together to save a tree which ultimately expresses our social bonding, fraternity and universal brotherhood. The story deals with a strong social belief of Indian people who unite at the time of distress or a common problem. A simple Banyan Tree has become a cause of their coming together as they believe it as God. Though it may be a superstition for a modern man but it is the reason of our strong unity in our society. Of course this is not the only cause of sympathy and reverence for the tree. People have used the place under the tree as a meeting place and sometimes this place is also used as a market place. This tree is also home to

many birds and animals. Though it sounds funny to some people, it reminds our deep sense of respect to nature and our strong commitment to save at the time of natural calamities. The fear of a flood has brought all and sundry together and they vow to save the banyan tree. Villagers like Srikant Das, an elderly person, asks everyone to take a vow to shorten their hair if the tree is saved from the mighty flood. This is an example of love of nature. A. Russell, a famous British poet and critic describes Manoj Das as:

> … a great story-teller of the sub-continent and he has too few peers, no matter what yardstick is applied to measure his ability as an artist…He shows how powerfully all artifices of storytelling can be used to write a story in realist genre without any attempt at being faithful to the photographic details of facts. (qtd. in www.worldofmanojdas.in)

A story like *A Farewell to a Ghost* represents the collective consciousness of villagers towards a ghost who is believed to be an illegitimate child of a Sahib. The faith of the existence of a ghost and the sympathy they express towards her is an honest rendering of some of Indian social system. The villagers even arrange a ceremony and offer rice, banana, coconut etc. to satisfy the ghost so that it leaves the place and move to a safer place. Finally the ghost leaves the village when the village priest summons it towards a palm tree. The priest recites various incantations and at last restricts her in that tree. The villagers feel secured after this. The story is a commentary about the superstitions that are prevalent in our society. Interestingly it is both fear and love of the villagers that is presented in a simple way. The villagers are afraid of the ghost but they don't want to harm it. In the story *The Strategy*, Manoj Das, tells the lost status of a retired-midwife Gauri who was earlier given a lot of importance for her role in the society. She feels neglected though she has worked for many as a silent servant. She has been sidelined by the society. Most of Manoj Das's characters are from different walk of life and these stories are set in rural background. His stories like *The Love Letter, The Concubine, The Naked and The Tryst* highlight social issues like the decline of feudalism. A story like The Crocodile's Lady deals with an interesting tale of an old lady who is believed by many villagers as the mistress of a crocodile. His characters are mostly rooted in the Indian soil and they are truly Indian.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of short stories suggests that both, Mulk Raj Anand and Manoj Das, have strong commitment towards the society and they have wonderfully presented these issues through

story telling. This exemplifies their strong social vision and their sincere effort to expose the social evils. Both the story tellers have tried to depict these tales as social reformers. They always try to focus on various social stigmas like caste system, untouachability, unequal hierarchal social division and economic exploitation. They not only express sympathy towards the victims but also raise voice, through their writings, powerfully to defend the rights of these innocent people. For this they are sometimes accused as propagandists. But as true Marxists, they narrate these issues to bring to the fore the plight of the oppressed section of the society.

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