

Major Themes in the Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze several of Mulk Raj Anand's renowned short stories to uncover the primary themes he addresses. Mulk Raj Anand, a significant figure in Indian English literature, is known for his deep exploration of human struggles, especially those of the marginalized and oppressed. His extensive body of work vividly illustrates the ways in which societal actions and attitudes contribute to human suffering. Anand's short stories encapsulate the essence of his broader literary pursuits, revealing a rich tapestry of significant themes.

One predominant theme in Anand's work is religious hypocrisy. He critically examines the disparity between religious ideals and the actual behavior of followers, shedding light on moral and ethical inconsistencies. Social injustice is another recurring theme, with Anand exposing systemic inequalities and the exploitation of marginalized communities. He portrays the harsh realities faced by the economically disadvantaged with stark realism, highlighting their struggles against oppression.

Anand also explores the conflict between tradition and modernity, a theme that resonates strongly in the context of a rapidly evolving Indian society. He delves into the tensions that arise when traditional values clash with modern ideals. Another critical theme in his work is the position of women in traditional Indian society. Anand reveals the patriarchal structures that restrict and oppress women, offering a critique of these societal norms.

Through these varied themes, Mulk Raj Anand's short stories provide a poignant commentary on the socio-cultural dynamics of his time. His work remains timeless and profoundly relevant, offering deep insights into the human condition and the societal factors that influence it.

Keywords: Modernity, Critique, Traditions, Exploitation, Injustice, Marginalised

Mulk Raj Anand is unquestionably one of the pillars of Indian English fiction. A prolific author, he penned around fifteen novels, including notable works such as *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939). Additionally, Anand 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), and *Lajwanti and Other Stories* (1973). His repertoire also includes collections like *Indian Fairy Tales* (1946) and *More Indian Fairy Tales* (1961).

Mulk Raj Anand's versatility is evident in his engagement with a broad range of subjects including education, art, music, dance, painting, and sculpture. This multifaceted interest is reflected in the depth and variety of his literary works. Anand's early life was profoundly influenced by his mother, who, despite

her lack of formal education, was an adept storyteller. She regaled young Anand with fables and folk tales, instilling in him a love for narrative and a deep appreciation for the cultural heritage of India. Additionally, his cousin Kaushalaya played a significant role in his formative years, becoming a close confidant and intellectual companion.

As Anand grew older, the teachings and ideology of Mahatma Gandhi had a profound impact on his worldview. Gandhi's emphasis on social justice, non-violence, and the upliftment of the oppressed resonated deeply with Anand and is evident in his literary themes. Anand's academic pursuits took him to Europe, where he encountered a vibrant literary community and interacted with both emerging and established writers. This exposure broadened his perspectives and enriched his writing style. The philosophies of Karl Marx, Leo Tolstoy, and John Ruskin further shaped his intellectual development, providing him with a framework to critique social inequalities and advocate for progressive change. These influences collectively contributed to Anand's distinctive voice and enduring legacy in Indian literature. Although strongly influenced by various thinkers and ideologies, Mulk Raj Anand did not confine himself to any particular system or belief. Instead, he synthesized these influences to develop a comprehensive historical humanism. His sensitive and precocious nature led him to be enraged by widespread social evils such as untouchability, the caste system, religious hypocrisy, exploitation of the poor, women's issues, and bureaucratic corruption. The Indian stories Anand heard as a child deeply influenced him, shaping his worldview and inspiring his literary endeavors. As a result, his short stories serve as a vehicle for propagating his ideas and raising awareness about social injustices.

Anand sought to enlighten his readers about the detrimental effects of these oppressive systems, which hinder societal progress and civilization. One prominent theme in Anand's work is 'religious hypocrisy,' where he critiques how religious customs, traditions, and rituals often serve as tools of exploitation. By highlighting these issues, Anand aimed to challenge and dismantle the social structures that perpetuated inequality and injustice. His writings reflect a commitment to social reform and human dignity, encouraging readers to question and resist the oppressive practices that mar human society. Through his stories, Anand not only entertained but also educated, fostering a spirit of critical thinking and empathy among his audience.

Mulk Raj Anand explores the theme of religious hypocrisy from various perspectives. In "The Maharaja and the Tortoise," a story from the collection *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories*, he delves into this theme through the character of Maharaja Ganga Singh Bahadur. The Maharaja, believing that he can secure a place in heaven, spends a staggering one hundred and eighty lakh rupees to bring water from the river Ganga to Udhampur via pipelines. He hopes to perform daily oblations to the Sun, whom he believes is the progenitor of his clan. At the age of forty, he begins to grasp the importance of religious rituals and consults his Prime Minister, Pandit Ram Prasad, about his chances of reaching heaven easily.

Pandit Ram Prasad, both the High Priest and Prime Minister of Udhampur, is portrayed as a Brahmin and a profound hypocrite. Seizing the opportunity to exert more control over the Maharaja, he devises a manipulative plan. He advises the Maharaja to donate his weight in gold to priests and to worship the Sun daily on the banks of the Ganga. Ram Prasad's counsel is laden with threats of dire consequences if the rituals are not performed meticulously. He tells the Maharaja that failure to adhere to the rituals would not only bar his access to heaven but also result in prolonged illness due to the adverse alignment of Saturn and Venus in his horoscope.

"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, hypocritical and shrewd, suggests elaborate and costly rituals. According to the holy books, on every full moon, the Maharaja should donate his weight in gold, host a feast for seven hundred priests, and chant the name of God three hundred and seventy-five times on the rosary after offering oblations to the Sun each morning. Failure to perform these rituals, the Pandit warns, would bring grave danger, including prolonged illness, due to the cosmic clashes in the Maharaja’s horoscope.

Anand uses this narrative to critique the exploitation embedded within religious traditions. The Maharaja’s gullibility and Pandit Ram Prasad’s manipulation highlight how religious rituals are often used as tools of control and exploitation, rather than genuine spiritual practices. Through this story, Anand underscores the hollowness of ritualistic practices devoid of true spiritual essence and the ease with which religious authorities exploit the devout for their own gain. This narrative reflects Anand’s broader critique of the social and religious systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

Priests and religious institutions often perpetuate religious hypocrisy, demanding significant sums of money for performing rituals. In “A Cock and Bull Story” from *The Reflections on the Golden Bed and Other Stories*, Amru, a Brahmin from the dhobi caste, exploits his religious status. He conducts rituals and insists on monetary compensation. Amru also takes advantage of his disciple, Chetu, by demanding more gifts and heavily starching his clothes, especially when the prices of rice and other essentials are high. As the protagonist, Amru sees himself as superior, believing he is a descendant of the holy bull that supports the world with its horns. This story exemplifies how religious leaders use their positions to exploit others for personal gain, highlighting the hypocrisy within religious practices where the true essence of spirituality is often overshadowed by greed and exploitation.

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.

People often have an unwavering faith in religion, following its practices and customs blindly. In the story “Savitri,” the titular character is forced to commit Sati with her deceased husband. Despite being educated and modern, Savitri is compelled to adhere to this archaic tradition in the name of religion. Anand frequently illustrates in his short stories that corrupt and absurd religious practices, devoted to a non-existent God, fail to alleviate human suffering and instead create new problems. Anand firmly believes in the inherent goodness of people.

The recurring theme of “The Feudal Attitude” in Anand’s works highlights the oppression of poor farmers and lower-caste individuals by the feudal lords. This class of feudal lords forms an upper nobility, perceiving themselves as vastly superior to common folk. Consequently, they exploit and arrogate whatever they desire from those working under them. Anand portrays this feudal tendency through characters like Nawab Zaffar Ullah 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,” among others.

Anand delves into the feudal lifestyle, highlighting its inherent cruelty and capriciousness. Feudal lords often see it as their divine right to exploit and abuse the less fortunate. Among these lords are figures like Raja Rajeshwer Rao and Khan Azam Khan, who squander their wealth on superficial pride. Anand

exposes how these feudal lords' whims and cruelties create an inhumane atmosphere, forcing the poor and downtrodden to live in misery.

The story "A Kashmir Idyll" from the collection *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories* portrays the harsh treatment of tenants by their officials. Nawab Zaffar Ullah, a courtier of the Maharaja of Kashmir, embodies the tendencies of a feudal landlord. He exploits a young man on his way to attend his mother's funeral. Despite the young man's persistent pleas for mercy, the Nawab dismisses him harshly, accusing him of lying. The young man, desperate and weary from a long journey, explains:

"No, Nawab Sahib," said the man, joining his hands. "You are like a god in mercy and goodness. Please forgive me, I am footsore and weary after a twenty-mile march in the mountains where I went to fetch my uncle's donkey. And now my mother has died, and I must see the Mullah about securing a place for her burial".

When the boy respectfully refuses to serve due to his genuine need, he is coerced into submission by the Nawab's whims. Eventually, he is forced to kneel and plead for forgiveness, performing an act of penance: "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".

Through such vivid depictions, Anand illustrates the severe and often absurd control feudal lords exert over the lives of the impoverished, emphasizing the deep-rooted injustices and suffering perpetuated by the feudal system.

Anand empathetically addresses the theme of 'Treatment of Women,' highlighting the position of women in traditional Hindu society. As an advocate for women's emancipation, Anand exposes numerous social evils, including 'Sati Pratha,' 'Purdah Pratha,' female infanticide, child marriage, the dowry system, and educational restrictions. He portrays a male-dominated society where women are considered commodities of pleasure, honour-bound servants, and childbearing instruments.

In the story "Lajwanti," the titular character suffers maltreatment at the hands of her in-laws. With her husband away at college, Lajwanti is forced to endure the whims of Jaswant, who harbors ill intentions towards her. When she refuses to submit to his demands, he beats her, while her mother-in-law overlooks his actions, favoring Jaswant for his work on the land over Lajwanti's husband, Balwant, who aspires to be a clerk. Lajwanti, a young and motherless village girl, finds herself isolated and uneasy in her in-laws' home, with only her pet bird, Maina, to confide in. When Jaswant's abuse becomes unbearable, Lajwanti attempts to flee to her father's house, but Jaswant intercepts her, beats her, and forcibly drags her back home:

"Let me go — I want to go to my father's house," Lajwanti pleaded, without lifting her gaze to Jaswant. "No, you are returning to your husband's home!" Jaswant barked, twisting her wrist as she tried to escape his grip. "Brute!" she cried, sobbing without tears, "Leave me alone!" Jaswant's violent anger gripped her young body as he shouted hoarsely, "Prostitute! Bad woman! Running away! What will our brotherhood think? — You disgrace us like this..." Lajwanti collapsed at his feet, and he struck her with his right foot.

In "The Promoter of Quarrels," Basanto and Hiro are deceived by the shopkeeper Lala Nanak Chand, who also harbors lecherous intentions. Through such stories, Anand reveals the harsh realities faced by women and critiques a society that subjugates and dehumanizes them. His work serves as a powerful commentary on the need for social reform and gender equality.

Hiro's worth is valued in monetary terms, yet she is exploited and paid far less than she deserves. Despite their hardships, societal customs and the fear of elders silence many women, preventing them from even speaking freely with their husbands. In "The Tamarind Tree," Roopa longs for tamarind fruit but feels unable to express her desire. Similarly, in "Hiccup," Arti is falsely accused of having an improper relationship with her father-in-law by her mother-in-law, who is more concerned with family prestige than Arti's well-being. Women like Gobindi, Sohini, and Sobha also face mistreatment by the wealthy in other stories.

Anand's portrayal of women in his short fiction reveals a tale of social degradation and deprivation. Women are frequently targeted without reason, often by men but also by other women. They are not seen as integral members of the social fabric; their roles are confined to serving their in-laws or fulfilling maternal duties.

The theme of 'Tradition versus Modernity' explores the changing landscape of India and the evolving mindsets of its people. Anand highlights the impact of modernization on Indian traditions, depicting the clash between old customs and new ideas. His aim has always been to address and overcome the obstacles hindering human progress, without any nostalgic attachment to traditional ways.

In "The Power of Darkness," the villagers of Kamli resist a modern proposal to construct a dam that would prevent floods and generate electricity. This resistance showcases the tension between age-old traditions and modern innovations. The villagers' opposition to the dam, which would benefit them significantly, stems from their deep-seated belief in 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."

Anand vividly captures the societal upheavals during his youth, presenting a clear picture of the confrontations between tradition and modernity. His stories reflect the challenges faced by individuals in a rapidly changing society and emphasize the need to embrace progress for the betterment of all.

In the story "The Tractor and the Corn Goddess," the introduction of a tractor throws the entire village into disarray. A progressive young landlord brings the tractor to modernize the old farming methods, but the villagers view it as haunted by supernatural forces. This modern approach to agriculture is thus rejected. Similarly, Chandu in "The Barbers' Trade Union" is a dynamic and energetic young boy who faces criticism for dressing like the Sahibs.

In "Silver Bangles," Sajani is mistreated for wearing silver bangles by the lady of the house, highlighting the belief that the poor have no right to adorn themselves with nice clothes or precious metals. Anand underscores the oppressive customs and beliefs that contribute to such social evils, drawing attention to the miseries caused by traditional conservatism. These age-old traditions exacerbate the hardships of people rather than alleviating their sufferings.

Anand's short fiction, whether viewed as derivatives or offshoots of his novels or vice versa, possesses its own merits and charm. His stories broadly address issues that resonate with everyone and engage the reader's mind. Anand presents a starkly realistic depiction of the unjust social order prevalent in Indian society. He fervently rejects religious fanaticism and false pride, demonstrating a deep sympathy for the people's sufferings. The overarching theme of exploitation permeates all his stories, highlighting the pervasive plight of the poor and helpless. The root causes of their suffering include casteism, feudalism, the suppression of women, modernization, and religious oppression.

In summary, Anand's short stories provide a compelling critique of societal injustices. They vividly illustrate the struggles faced by the marginalized and offer a poignant commentary on the need for social

reform. His empathetic portrayal of human suffering and his call for progress and equality remain central to his literary legacy.

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