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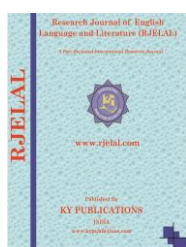
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CLASH OF CHARACTERS IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S *A PAIR OF MUSTACHIOS*

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ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand is a great short story writer of the Gandhian era in Indian English writing. Anand's short stories are fuelled with the freshness of reality. In the writing of his short stories he was influenced by the Indian tradition of short story especially *Kathasaritsagar* and the *Jataka* tales. One of his major short stories is "A Pair of Mustachio." This story narrates the story of Seth Ramanand, a Hindu *bania* who is contrasted to Khan Azam Khan. They are contrasted on the basis of their chief possession. While Khan Azam Khan boasts of his Afghan ancestry, Set Ramanand boasts of nothing but his ill-gotten wealth.

Key Words: Gandhian era; *Kathasaritsagar* and *Jataka* tales; contrast; *nouveau riche*

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the three most prolific writers from amongst the founding fathers of Indian English fiction, the other two being R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. They are known as Fathers of Indian English fiction. There are certain similarities between these three. All bear the mantle of beginning the Indian English fiction. It was the Gandhian Period in Indian politics. With the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi literatures in India languages became an echo of Gandhian principles and philosophy. This impact was visible on Indian writing in English as well. Among these founding fathers Mulk Raj Anand was most deeply impressed by Mahatma Gandhi and his ways of life. His *Untouchable* is the most vivid and touching portrayal of the Indian untouchables; this novel was directly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. There was another similarity amongst these great writers. Though all are better known as novelists yet they also wrote some memorable short stories.

Mulk Raj Anand took his idea of short story from Indian classics. *Kathasaritsagar* (based on the

Brihatkatha of Gunadhyaya) is one of the sources from which Anand took his idea of the short story. After reading this volume Mulk Raj Anand said, "A symbol of highly finished art of story-telling in India." (Preface page. 5) The other influences on Mulk Raj Anand were those of Panchtantra, *Jataka* tales and Aesop's fables. Through these works Anand informed about the harsh realities of life. Another source for the short stories of Anand are the folk tales. Anand inherited his love of the folk tales and the rustics from his family, especially his mother. As an impressionable child, he was nourished on the folk tales and he was never tired of listening to them time and time again. In fact, the folk tale form has seemed to me the most perfect form of short story to him. One of his favourite folk tales was the story of Raja Rasalu and he would request his mother to tell him this again and again. The humorous anecdotes imagined by one of our teachers, Master Shah Nawaz, based on the incidents in the life of Raja Birbal and Akbar the Great, impressed him with the gift of laughter that one could bring to bear on human foibles.

Discussion

Mulk Raj Anand put this story at Number 1 when he collected his short stories in a volume *A Pair of Mustachios and Other Stories* (2002). This shows the importance Anand attached to this short story. It is in reality a superb narration. It is among Mulk Raj Anand's most valued, most read and commented upon and anthologized short stories. This story brought Anand great popularity. In the present article the aim is to highlight the particular society of pre-Independence India and the social, economic and cultural factors that governed and conditioned that society. As a young boy Mulk Raj Anand interacted with boys hailing from different communities and this impacted "A Pair of Mustachios" as well. In India we come across people of different religions and different castes living cheek by bowl with one another. Such differences do not matter to people.

It is the story of a Hindu *baniya* (businessman) Seth Ramanand and Khan Azam Khan, a Muslim, who claimed descent from an ancient Afghan family which migrated to India in very ancient times along with Muslim invaders. Many members of this old family were noblemen and councillors in the court of the Moghul kings. Seth Ramanand is a *nouveau riche* grocer and money-lender who amassed wealth and money out of the recent fall in prices of wheat. This richness brought airs to the grocer. He got an idea that he should twist his goat mustache a bit so that it looked like a tiger mustache. This was not the way he was supposed to twist his mustache, according to the custom of those days; the goat mustache was in order for this class. The poor mouse-moustached farmers and peasants did not mind or rather care about it a bit as most of them had been beholden to Seth Ramanand either because they owed "him interest on a loan, or an installment on a mortgage of jewellery or land. Then, the Seth had been careful enough to twist his moustache so that it seemed nearly, though not quite, like a tiger moustache." (the story available on the internet) In this position Seth Ramanand lived in peace and happiness with his neighbours.

In a nearby village lived a *mussulman* named Khan Azam Khan, a tall and middle-aged

man. He lived in an old dilapidated Moghul style house. He himself descended from an old renowned Afghan family whose which boasted of noblemen and councillors with Mughal kings. He had a handsome personality. He proudly bore a tiger moustache. He usually wore a gold-brocaded waistcoat, though he hasn't even a patch of land left. There were many doubters in the neighbourhood who used to call Azam Khan an imposter. Many other people, especially the priest of the temple, maliciously said that his ancestors were connected with the Mughal kings not as noblemen and councillors but as sweepers.

Thus, Seth Ramanand and Khan Azam Khan are projected by Mulk Raj Anand as contrasting characters. Mulk Raj Anand has portrayed characters that are the victims of the circumstances in which they live. In an Indian village, during very old times, the bania was the pivot of the village community. Seth Ramanand is certainly the hero of the short story, but Khan Azam Khan is the foil who contrasts with the hero. The later's survival depends upon the goodwill of Seth Ramanand. On the one extreme was Azam Khan who boasted of his past ancestry though he had no money or land at present; even the ornaments etc. were being sold by him to make both ends meet. On the other hand, there was Seth Ramanand who had no ancestry to boast of though he was rich and naturally influential today in the village and its neighbourhood. Khan Azam Khan naturally wore a tiger moustache; but Seth Ramanand who arrogated to himself greatness, wore a moustache that looked like a tiger moustache. Anand asserts,

The landlord, the moneylender and the priest are manifestly jealous of anyone's long ancestry, however, because they have all risen from nothing—and it is obvious from the stately ruins around Khan Azam Khan what grace was once his and his forefathers. Only Khan Azam Khan's pride is greatly in excess of his present possessions and he is inordinately jealous of his old privileges and rather foolish and headstrong in safeguarding every sacred brick of his tottering house against vandalism.

One day Khan Azam Khan went to the moneylender Seth Ramananda's shop to pawn his wife's gold nose-ring when he noticed the upturning tendency of the hair on Ramanand's upper lip. Thus up turning made the moneylender's goat moustache look almost like his own tiger moustache. He abused Seth Ramanand by calling him a "lentil-eating shopkeeper", "swine" and "seed of a donkey.". He asked him not to bear the moustache like than of an aristocrat. Khan Azam Khan then said, "Look at the way you have turned the tips of your moustache upwards. It almost looks like my tiger moustache. Turn the tips down to the style proper to the goat that you are! Fancy the airs of people nowadays!" (From internet)

Seth Ramanand dutifully lowered down the tips of his moustache as he was very amiable. He knew he prospered at the goodwill of his customers and he did not want to anger Khan Azam Khan. Very promptly his moustache came down "like a dead fly." The anger of Khan Azam Khan at once vanished. But only one end of his moustache came down. Khan did not want his moustache being aped by the bania. But the transaction was over and Set Ramananda very meekly said: "I humbled myself because you are doing business with me. You can't expect me to become a mere worm just because you have pawned a trinket with me. If you were pledging some more expensive jewellery I might consider obliging you a little more. Anyhow, my humble milk-skimmer doesn't look a bit like your valiant tiger moustache." Anyhow Khana Azam Khana controlled his anger and went away. Seth Ramanand said that he pawned all his belongings included property he would consider to lower the other tip of his moustache. Soon an agreement was signed between the two and Khan walked away, "And they (people) laughed to see the Khan give a special twist to his moustache as he walked away maintaining the valiant uprightness to the symbol of his ancient and noble family, though he had become a pauper."

This story, narrated in third person, also deliberates on the various types of moustache. This part of the story is narrated in a satirical manner. One can say that satire is never absent from the short stores of Mulk Raj Anand. It must be

remembered that various kinds of mustachios have been worn in India to mark the boundaries between the various classes of people. It was certainly so in British India. Mulk Raj Anand remarks that moustache are a matter of pride for average Indian as they are for the nationals of many other countries like, Americans and Englishmen. Moustache in India are like poetic symbols. People wear them with pride as they signify the class to which a brearer of the moustache belongs. It has been so since times immemorial. A bania is not expected to don the insignia of a soldier. Anand says that people wear their mustache as if it had been patented by the Central government or they have been proclaimed by some notification of the British King or Queen. Mulk Raj Anand says, "And any poaching on the style of one class by members of another is resented, and the rising ratio of murders in my country is interpreted by certain authorities as being indicative of the increasing jealousy with which each class is guarding its rights and privileges in regard to the mark of the mustachio."

Conclusion

The short story "A Pair of mustachios' thus deals with the fortunes of two characters, the protagonist, Seth Ramanand and his foil, Khan Azam Khan. While Khan wears the moustache proper to his class, but Seth Ramanand approximates his moustache to that of Khan. Thus he is a usurper. Both the characters have been treated with satire – one because he wears a moustache to which now he is not accredited (having gone poor and penniless), while the other approximates his moustache to another class, for which he is not entitled. In his characterization Anand has shown great brevity and economy in the use of words to evoke the atmosphere vividly.

References

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