

The Depiction of Children in the short stories of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract- Many Indian writers have tried their hands in English to explore Indian themes with Indian sensibility. Mulk Raj Anand occupies an important place among such writers. He explored various themes through various forms- his long fiction as well as short fiction. As a short story writer, he occupies a special place in the Indian writings in English. In his short stories, he has dealt with child characters with great skill. The way he depicts these children is marvelous. Through the depiction of child characters, Anand is successful in bringing various shades of child psychology to the fore. At the same time, he also deals with the exploitation of children in the hands of so called sophisticated Indian society. Various malpractices prevalent in the Indian society have been dealt with through the depiction of these child characters. It is not a matter of depiction simply, but it leaves a message behind, an indelible impression. An effort has been made to decode this message in the upcoming full write up.

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A short story is trans-cultural and trans-historical. No culture is indifferent to it. No period of history is devoid of it. The short story is universal. It is omnipresent. Every man is a short story on the move and not in a hurry to be concluded. Much that we say or see or hear is a short story. A house is a short story, so is a bed sheet. A book is as much a story as a cat. When children come home from school they have quite a few stories to tell. Its appeal is universal. One possible reason is that while other forms of literature like poetry and drama demand a special ability on the part of the reader or the listener, but we acquire the ability to appreciate a short story quite early. We can't cheat even a child of three. What is written is also a story.

The oldest form of fiction is a short story which has its origin in oral literature. It may be in the form of epics, scriptures, folk tales, fables, fairy-tales, myths and grandmother tales. Usually the main theme of the earlier or ancient short stories was religious, moral and reformatory and the mode of presentation was fantastic. However, with the passage of time the short story tended to be more realistic. A good story is an organic whole. It should have a beginning, middle and an end and all these three should merge into one another.

A story always signifies something different to different readers. It is like an altar of which the value varies from devotee to devotee. A story never means to a reader exactly what the writer intended to mean. It is easy enough to tell the story but it is not easy to tell what exactly the story is about. It is always an evolution. It is liable to multiple interpretations. Nothing can be said with an air of finality about it. In most of these short stories the child characters are at the center. And this is what prompted me to explore the child characters in the short stories of Mulk Raj Anand. The history of Indo-Anglian literature is not terribly long. Many Indian writers have tried their hands in this alien language during this period. They have exploited this language to explore Indian themes through various forms. With the great efforts of some of the eminent Indian writers, the Indian themes with Indian sensibility have achieved uncalculated success in the world literature. Whatever were motives behind the introduction of English language and literature, it certainly imparted a whole set of new ideas to India for intellectual, literary and general uplift. The enlightening or the creative impulse found a new medium of expression to their inner urges. A great section of the Indian intellectuals was fascinated by the magic of the English language. Therefore, the fashion for writing in English began to flourish fast in India. A few writers have attained even international fame. This has been made possible due to the vitality and sincerity of Indo-Anglian literature. During the last four decades Indian writing in English has attracted much critical attention.

Mulk Raj Anand, a celebrated Indo-Anglian novelist and short story writer occupies a special place in the Indian writings in English. Though less popular than RK Narayan, yet an exciting figure in the Indian writings in English. There is beautiful depiction of child psychology in his short stories. His stories like "The Lost Child", "The Barber's Trade Union", "Lullaby", "The Liar", "The cobbler and the Machine" etc. depict this child psychology. Here is an attempt to analyze these short stories which give an insight into child psychology.

"The Lost Child" is one of the most memorable of Anand's short stories. Based on personal experience, this story arouses pity and fear among the readers. The readers become sympathetic to the child-parent relationship by virtue of

the delicacy of this relationship. The way he has dealt with the lives of the children in his short stories is simply marvelous. He imparts his child characters excitement, struggle and rebellion. This could be possible because of his own similar life. Dr. GS Balrama Gupta comments:

He is man of varied interests and achievements, and his life reads like an exciting romantic tale full of struggle, quest and achievement.¹

The history of storytelling in India is fairly long. To narrate a story or to write a story is an art. It requires a skill. Many Indian writers in English have tried this genre. But none has achieved such a success as Mulk Raj Anand and RK Narayan achieved. No one is equal to these two literary figures. They have modified the ancient art of storytelling and made it suitable to the needs of twentieth century. With the efforts of these writers, the Indo-Anglian short story has acquired a new glory as a specified and established genre in India. Mulk Raj Anand has touched various themes in his short stories. Besides the other issues in his short stories, he has brilliantly dealt with child psychology through the depiction of children in his short stories. He has brought to the fore the conscious and sub-conscious mind of the children. His stories are the stories of protest. Through the depiction of children in his short stories he has highlighted many social ethos prevalent in the society. He is a social reformer. Besides the depiction of children, his stories deal with the theme of hunger, poverty, human degradation and social injustice which the underdogs of the society undergo.

Mulk Raj Anand is a deep rooted writer. He has deep understanding of the social problems. He is a master in art of characterization. This is evident from his writings. He gives his child characters simplicity, innocence and enlightenment. It is notable how Chandu, a child character in his short story "The Barber's Trade Union" rises to the occasion. He tries to reach the level of dignity which is denied to him by the so called sophisticated society. The methods, the little boy adopts to attain his mission, seem ludicrous but the little boy does so with a sense of gravity. Here the writer has been successful in his mission to highlight various shades of child psychology as well as the society through the depiction of this child. He imparts rebellion to the child. He controls the character; he holds the character with a great artistic skill. Again the credit goes to the writer that he deals with so serious a theme in such a light vein that the reader is forced to stick to story. Not for a minute he is separated from the core of the text. And this has been possible only because of the presence of Chandu, the child character. The way he reacts to the situation, the way he adapts to the situation, everything is deeply impressive. Anand gives his child a sense of freedom. He struggles to liberate himself from the old shackles of the society.

As in long fiction, Anand is committed in humanism and socialism in his short fiction. His short stories are full of realism, pathos, humour and satire. In the treatment of his child characters in his short stories he has dealt with these traits with great skill and authority. Human feelings do exist in his short stories. The stories which deal with the child characters illustrate this quality. They reflect compassion. For instance, his story, "The Lost Child" highlights human feelings along with other themes. How the child is lost in the fair. The feelings of the child before and after he is lost have been brilliantly brought to the fore. And it goes to the credit of the author that he is able to depict intellectual or spiritual loss along with the actual loss. The world, of course, is a fair where people come and get lost for want of the fulfillment of their desires. The child in the story is neither satisfied before nor satisfied after his loss. This reminds us of an aphorism of Guru Nanak Dev that:

We are all children lost in the world fair.²

Mulk Raj Anand is a master in the portrayal of child characters. This is true of his long fiction as well as his short fiction. Take any character, Anand is matchless. His child characters are over ambitious. There is a struggle between an individual and the society. The so called gentlemen of the upper class of society are not ready to give equal status to these small suffering souls and which becomes sometimes struggle for survival for these children. Anand has been able to bring out the inner urge of these child characters sometimes in a tragic way and sometimes in a humorous way. Chandu, a child character has irresistible will. Even after his insult, he is not ready to let it go by easily, but is prepared to struggle with the society with a new trick and new strategy. It shows how child psychology works. How he forms a barber's trade union and himself becomes the leader of the union to take revenge upon the society. Anand has used child characters in his short stories with varied themes. He has different motives behind the introduction of these child characters. It is important to know who exactly Anand's child characters in his short stories are. Answer to this question is obvious. Below the age of eighteen a person may be called a child. So, it is clear that below eighteen is the age of childhood. Anand has viewed the lives of these child characters from multiple angles. In most of the stories he himself has appeared as a child character, mostly the narrator. Sometimes as the narrator, he is able to convey his multiple viewpoint of childhood. Sometimes he is philosophical, sometimes realistic, sometimes practical, sometimes Gandhian and sometimes he is Rousseauistic in his treatment of childhood. But this goes to his credit that he skillfully blends these viewpoints and presents the ultimate story with essential Indian sensibility. He feels a sense of identification by virtue of the simplicity of language. Anand has done literal translation of some common Indian words and phrases, especially the Punjabi ones. And this has been possible due to Anand's acquaintance with various cultures and local languages. There is abundance of expletives in his short stories. In this regard, he has understood

the pulse of the Indian society. An average reader feels at home while reading his short stories and this is possible because he feels a sense of identification with these stories. Everything happens in the story naturally. Nothing is artificial. Nothing seems superficial in these stories. Every incident or happening seems probable and realistic. What happens in the stories can be expected even in the real life. Through the child characters in his short stories, Anand has been able to portray the true picture of the younger Indian society.

“The Lost Child” is based on the dilemma of a small lost child. No doubt, it can be read at another level. But the obvious theme is quite simple and understandable. Loss of a child is a natural phenomenon in any society, particularly in the Indian society. The background of the story is realistic. The presentation of the story is utterly realistic. It goes to the credit of the writer the way he handles this theme. An average reader enjoys the story by virtue of its simplicity and realism. The author presents the story in such a way that nothing is left to the imagination of the reader. While reading, it seems as if everything happens before his eyes. It is a video typed presentation.

Other stories of Anand which portray child characters are not devoid of realism. For instance, “The Barber’s Trade Union” and “Lullaby” are highly realistic. Nothing seems an exaggeration in these stories. Chandu, the barber boy in the story reflects certain qualities which are to be found commonly in average boy. Like every average child, he is ambitious. He is notorious and even impertinent. But he is also a boy with a sense of commitment. In this story, Anand continues his exploration of the Indian society. He brings out certain traits of Indian society through the depiction of Chandu, the barber boy in the society. It is because of the sheer presence of this child character that the story gets momentum. Though the formation of union is at the core, but the story can be read at different levels. However, the story remains true to its realistic approach at all such levels. Saros Cowasjee says:

Anand’s main forte has been to awaken us to the realities of life in India, which we already know but to which we have turned a blind eye.³

Children are quite innocent. They are pure at heart. They are never artificial in their behavior. Whatever they do, they do naturally. Edna St. Vincent Millay says in *Wine From These Grapes*:

Childhood is the kingdom where no one dies.⁴ And Mark Twain in *Letter to Annie Webster* says:

A baby is an estimable blessing and bother.⁵

Anand’s short stories about child characters can also be studied in the light of Rousseau’s childhood viewpoint. According to Rousseau, education begins at birth. But at the same time this education should be free. According to him, restrained education makes a child wicked. He says:

As long as children find resistance only in things and never in wills, they will become neither rebellious nor irascible and will preserve their health better.⁶

He is against any sermon on the part of parent or teacher. He is against bookish knowledge in any form. He considers experience a better teacher for the children. Children do have memory but they are devoid of true memory. They are incapable of judgment.

In the light of Rousseau’s childhood viewpoint, a fine elaboration of Anand’s child characters can be made. His child characters do reflect certain traits which are generalized by Rousseau. These child characters sometimes show rebellion and sometimes they reflect suppression. But in both the cases a common factor is at work. This common factor is education, the children receive. But this education does not mean the bookish education or the education they receive from some institution. Here education means what the children receive right from their birth or from their social environment. But one thing is very clear that their education is restrained one. They try to come out of this restrained circle, but perhaps are unable to do so. For instance, the lost child in the story, the child is under suppression and this suppression is because of his parents’ extreme restraint over him. Because of this sheer control, he is unable to express his desires. Though a little child, yet he knows in advance that his parents won’t allow him what he desires. There is an absence of freedom. Had this freedom been there, the loss of the child could have been possibly averted. This might be exaggeration but a flicker of hope remains there.

Similarly, Rousseau’s viewpoint applies to Chandu, the child character in the story, “The Barber’s Trade Union”. He receives his initial education in some school. But he has to face social restrictions and bindings in the society. The society never allows him to live a life of his own. He tries to break these shackles. Because of these social restrictions, Chandu becomes rebellious. He is forced to form a barber’s trade union to oppose the social bindings. He is never ready to accept any restraint from the society or even at home. At home, he is not happy to observe financial restraints as put by the mother. He is a boy of strong will power and never gives way to despair. He never lets hope. He hopes against hope. The children never do anything against their will.

Mulk Raj Anand remained in close association with Mahatma Gandhi. So, it was natural that his writings should reflect Gandhian ideology. His short stories dealing with child characters are not without the Gandhian viewpoint. According to this viewpoint, some useful manual vocation is a must for the young children. The children do take some pleasure in some activity. They want to remain busy in some activity. According to Gandhiji, children take in much more and with less labour through their ears than through their eyes. Also, in his opinion spiritual training is a

must for the young children though it is much more difficult than their physical and mental training. He is against any corporal punishment to the young children. Keeping in with the spirit of Gandhiji, Anand presents Chandu, the child character in “The Barber’s Trade Union” as an expert in hair cutting. It is his hereditary profession. It is the source of his earning. He takes delight in performing various activities, though sometimes they appear ludicrous. He does not want to sit idle. In such a short span of life he acquires maturity which is the result of his dependence on ears rather than on eyes. But on the whole, innocence among the child characters is at the core.

And this maybe one of the reasons that Anand introduces child characters in many of his writings. He is able to exploit the innocence of his child characters to give a realistic touch to his writings. Innocence leads to realism. Being innocent, the children are the true mirror of society. There is no room for unnatural occurrence in the childhood. With the help of these child characters, Anand is completely successful to portray a realistic image of society, particularly the younger Indian society. His writings provoke a sense of optimism and a belief in the basic human values. Man himself is responsible for his happiness. Through the depiction of these child characters, he is against suppression of human beings in any form. His writings lead to a sense of individual identity. Everybody has the right to live his own life. He is a great supporter of the dignity of man as man. In his opinion, man is the storehouse of possibilities.

Mulk Raj Anand is a master story writer. It is often believed that he is not a pure artist but a writer with a commitment. Also that he does not belong to the class of Charles Lamb and Jane Austen, but he partly belongs to school of Sartre. The objective of his writing like the objective of all the great literature is at once delight and light. “The Lost Child” belongs to the first category- art for art’s sake and “The Barber’s Trade Union” belongs to the both. “Lullaby” surely celebrates the wedding of the two worlds of delight and light, and more light than delight. Anand’s subtle depiction of the child characters is realistic indeed. A time will come, sooner or later, sooner than later, when all our children will attend schools and there will be no child labour and no discrimination, no exploitation of any kind. The lot of children will be a lot better than the lot of the child characters in Anand’s short fiction. We shall, perhaps, do better then to remember that Anand’s work was partly responsible for a change for the better.

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