

M.R. Anand's 'The Barber's Trade Union': A Note

Dr. Shashidhar G. Vaidya
Dept. of English
B.E.S.M. Arts and Commerce College
Byadgi, Karnataka, India.

Abstract: The paper deals with the important aspects of the genius of M.R. Anand's personality as a prolific writer of short stories in English. It also underscores Anand's deep understanding of Indian social problems and his power of depicting the life of the down trodden in the light of social realism.

Keywords: Social realism, down trodden, short story, narrative technique, Indianness, problem of language.

Mulk Raj Anand's reputation as a novelist and art critic has obscured an interesting and equally important aspect of his genius, viz.: a prolific short story writer. His stories reveal glaringly his deep understanding of our social problems and his subtle sense of humour. His characters usually emerge from the Indian rural atmosphere. One often finds Anand attaching importance to the characters belonging totally to the down-trodden section of the society and their struggle to free from the fetters of order of yesterday.

'*The Barber's Trade Union*' - published in 1944 has almost become a sexagenarian and has offered enough entertainment and instruction to readers. It upholds Anand's conviction to delineate the human predicament and problems especially of the man "deliberately kept at a level of subhumanity" Chandu, a barber boy, is the protagonist of the story. He is a close childhood friend of the story teller. The latter calls him one of the makers of modern india' Chandu being senior by about six months, to the narrator, takes 'lead in all matters' He is very alert, agile and active in the boyish pranks like catching wasps, squeezing the poison out of their tails and making them fly by tying their legs with a thread. He is also dexterous in preparing kites of various designs. Alas! In spite of these talents he is a duffer in learning.

Nevertheless, he reveals a laudable memory. The narrator's mother does not like his mixing up with Chandu, because he belongs to a lowcaste. The narrator envies, the freedom, enjoyed by Chandu, which the fate had sanctioned to him by pulling a final curtain to the action of his father's role in the drama of life. He takes the hereditary profession of shaving and hair-cutting. After finishing his day's work he goes to the town in the buggy of Lala Hukam Chand.

While coming back from the town he brings some gift to the narrator. It is in the town that he develops an irresistible fascination for the English dress. One day he even asks the advice of the narrator as to the question of wearing one. The narrator's response is enthusiastically affirmative. So he dresses up as a doctor in fine looking clothes 'and a pair of pumps and a leather bag in his hand' (p.12) it is in this dress that he goes to the Zamindar's house whom he shaved every morning. The Zamindar is angry to see this low-caste barber wearing the dress of the doctor and his defiling his house by entering. And therefore, he asks him to return in the formal dress of a barber. Then Chandu becomes the victim of the swearing tongue of the Sahukar Thanu Ram. A shopkeeper. He is scolded by Pandit Paramanand also very harshly.

Later one sees Chandu going to the town and earning money by shaving people on road side. Slow is his professional progress and prosperity. One day he proposes an idea of buying 'a bicycle from the gambling son of Lala Hukam Chand' (p.15) before the story-teller, who seconds the plan with all the cheerful feelings. He does purchase the one and learns to ride with the help of the narrator after a little difficulty. Then he makes the town a full-time field of work leaving the villager's heads and beards grow without fear of brush and blade, once he even hints at before the narrator taking the revenge on the village folks and making them the laughing stocks. One day he says to the story teller to shout 'Beavers: Beavers: Beavers:' (p.18) while the elderly people gather in the Sahukar's shop. On hearing it they all become angry and chase to catch him. But he evades them. Further one witnesses the attempt of the villagers threatening to punish him for his offences by committing him to the police pen. They even think of getting the barber from Verka, a neighbouring village to attend them and are ready to pay even an 'anna instead of 'two paise' which they actually paid to Chandu. Chandu turns their plan upside down by the "gift of his gab". He succeeds in establishing Barber's Trade

Union with consent and contribution of his cousin Dhunoo and consensus of the barbers within a range of seven miles from his village.

The fabric of the story, it seems, is intentionally woven to subsist the adage, “Unity is strength” That no force, however, powerful can stand the spans of unity and ultimately falls flat, is a universally acknowledged fact. Chandu, like other characters of the Anandian world of fiction, is a person who stands against oppression and ostentatiously caste conscious ambience. As a great lover of freedom of man, it seems, Anand has a strong belief in the mettle of man and his innate power to face the predicament and efface the element of oppression. Chandu in the story reveals an indomitable infatuation for the clothes which are after the British fashion and aspires to dress himself in them. And simply for that reason he is censured by the society – a society dominated by the uppercaste people, the village dwellers. This goads his inner self and individual respect. Ultimately he leaves the village for town. The town life fans the spark of revenge in him. He becomes the architect of ‘The barber’s trade Union’ by establishing the one he makes the parochial villagers come to him and wait before the hair cutting saloon on the rickety benches for their turn instead of cringing before them at their houses.

The essential element in the narrative technique of the story is in the flow of fun, humour and also irony which is yoked to the theme of struggle to free man from the shackles of old order of vainglory. The funny moments, found amply, in the story. Keep the interest and the curiosity of the reader alive till the end. When Chandu stands before the Zamindar in the dress of a doctor, he looks very much laughter-evoking. When reader comes across the description, “He was dressed up in a white turban, a white rubber coat, a pair of pumps, in which I could see my face reflected...” (P-12) his prim mouth slowly blooms into a smile. No reader can compromise with laughter when he reads of Chandu’s learning bicycle-ride. There are wobbling, tottering, shivering and falls in the middle of street. Reader becomes one of the crowds before the shop that laughs at Chandu’s ride. Still more irrepressible becomes the impulse of laughter when Chandu describes the unshaved faces of the villagites their scummy, long jawed, Valrus-moustached appearances. There is an undercurrent of motifs like adventure, protest, caste-consciousness and sense of vengeance vibrant in the mind of the down trodden, etc, which is however, made subservient to the overriding theme of emancipation of working class/man from the iron grip of the old order. It is not only the story of enfranchisement of Chandu but of all working men on whose services the men of higher caste must depend. Herein one sees Anand’s desire to see the transformed set up or scene Dr. Venugopal’s assement of Anand’s stories is quite apt “The stories of Anand present him as one who determined to do his bit in bringing about a transformed scene where decency and understanding prevail expose the existing situation with merciless clarity that should generate righteous anger in any reader who has any feeling in him.”

The setting and atmosphere are quite appropriated to the texture and theme of the story. It is important that always Chandu meets narrator in the morning only. It is to suggest that he is in the morning of his life. Morning is suggestive of beginning. Morning heralds dream as well as duty. But to Chandu duty becomes the urgent call and he responds to it attentively. Any type of free movements is hardly possible in village life. The setting of the village life which impedes the movements of Chandu when he wears the dress of a doctor hints at this. The narrator’s comment “I alone witnessed the glory of Chandu,... as he strutted up the street, carefully avoiding the taints of cow-dung cakes which the village women had stuck to the walls. And the dirty water which flowed through the drains” (p-12) affirms this Further the preponderous element to obstruct the onward movement of the down trodden is looked with askance and decision by the Land lord who says “Do not come near or we will have to treat the whole house with sacred cow-dung to purify it” (p-13).

The characters delineated by Anand are the pearls torn from the lace of his experience of life from the closest quarters. The character of Chandu is very catchy in more than one way. He is the very incarnation of poverty as the reader sees him in the beginning of the story. This is evident in the description of his dress. “Chandu wore a pair of Khaki shorts which the subedar had given him, a frayed black velvet waist-coat decorated all over with shell buttons and a round felt cap which had once belonged to Lala Hukam Chand the lawyer of the village”. (P-10) When his father dies of plague the responsibility of pulling the family on fall on the tender shoulders of Chandu. His schooling comes to an end. In spite of his poverty and helplessness his love of freedom and protest against oppression are always inflexible. He is inventive, adventurous, hard working and audacious. Hence the narrator’s calling him “my leader” and “maker of modern India Despite his being threatened by the villagers he remains undaunted and even proceeds to the extent of discarding their domain. Another set of characters, zamindar Bijay Chand, Priest Paramanand, Village jury Hukam Chand, shop owner Thanu Ram are all “orthodox idiots”. They all represent the old order and caste consciousness. Even the narrator’s mother who dislikes her son meeting andseeing Chandu forms a tributary to this

mainstream consisting of male characters of malicious nature. As much they try to suppress and grind the feelings of Chandu and impede his attempt to outgrow the cramping contrabands of old order, so much he grows stiff, hard and stubborn. But unlike these characters, the story teller/ the narrator, though a branch of the old banyan tree of caste-consciousness, stands singularly separate, like the newly grafted part with an altogether different colour and odour and stoops to sympathise with the predicament of Chandu, all the while standing by him in support and seconding his schemes.

There are innumerable problems that wait the threshold of Indian English Writer. Some of them like the search for suitable language for his characters, “the fusion of form with content, of texture with structure”, above all these the “problem of contrivance of dialogue”, as C Paul Verghese puts it. “He (Indian English Writer) should employ his skill in contriving a dialogue that is at once natural and living, supple and functional. He may even catch the speech rhythms and the turns of phrases used by all kinds of people in the village and translate some of the abuses. Curses imprecations and proverbs to advantages.”

Mulk Raj Anand, the doyen of Indian fiction longer as well as shorter, very skillfully overcomes these problems. The style of both narration and dialogue in the story are deftly Indian Anand’s dexterity in forging and handling English is enviously and especially noteworthy. For instance here is Chanduspeaking to the narrator while learning the bicycle-ride. “Your father is a top-heavy baboon and your brother is a long legged spider, I was born, my mother tells me, upside down.” (P-16).

A regular feature of Anand’s style is the interpolation of idioms and phrases from the vernacular, expressive of Indian ethos, into English. This serves his purpose of splattering a realistic colour over the canvas. The following citations serve to show this. “Ram! Ram! Ram! Said Bijay Chand” (p-12) (expressive of surprise and Contempt)”... Bursting myself with enthusiastic shahabases “(p-17) (expressive of admiration).

Professor K.R.Shinivasa Iyengar’s remark, “the language too, with its load of swear-words and expressions literally translated from the vernacular idiom often produces a crude or ludicrous effect”, is not altogether unjust. For instance “Son of Iron Age | Break your bones and die you upstart | You won’t come your senses otherwise” (p-17).

Another common but important feature of Anand’s style is his use of Hindi and Urdu words. For example one may see the words like ‘chaprasi’, Sahukar, Saheb, etc. in fact many such words have found a secure place in the pages of lexicons of the language in our times by their frequent use.

One may also witness Anand’s love for jingle of words and alliterative elements in the story. The following serve some examples.

“And I willingly followed because truly he was a genius at catching wasps, and at pressing the poison out of their tails, at trying their tiny legs to cotton thread and flying them.” (P-9).

“But I am going to teach these orthodox idiots a lesson, I am going on strike. I shall not go to their houses to attend to them”. (P-15).

The Indianness of Indian society is that “The individual, to a very large extent, is subordinated to the group. His functions and duties are determined by the caste to which he belongs”. It seems its Anand’s conviction, as in many other stories, to show this Indianness of Indian society and individual’s predicament in it. He attaches importance to the ordinary unlettered Indian in the story. It has enjoyed enough popularity and has continued to provide entertainment to the readers. But at the same time it seems that shorter fiction of M. R. Anand needs still more critical attention, dexterous interpretation and revaluation than it has gained at present. That would be the right way of honouring and recognizing the raconteur.

REFERENCES

1. Anand, Mulk Raj,:"The barber's Trade Union": *Short Stories for Colleges* : Ed. Prof. R. Sundara Raj. (Madras: OUP. 1975). All references to the stort are to this edition. Numbers in parentheses indicate page noumbers.
2. Venugopal, C. V. *The Indian Short Story in English (A Servey)*: (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot) p-53.
3. Rao, Ramchandra. B.: *The Novels of Mrs Anita Desai-a Study*: (New Delhi Kalyani Publishers: 1977) p.62.
4. Quated by Rao, Ramchandra. B. *op. cit.* p. 64.
5. Iyengar, Srinivasa, K. R.: *Indian Writing in English* : (New Delhi Sterling: 1985) pp 356-57
6. Rao, Ramchandra. B. *op. cit.* p. 4.
7. Sethi, Vijay Mohan,: *Mulk Raj Anand – The Short Story Writer*. (New Delhi Ashish Publishing House: 1990.)

I am thankful to my colleague, Sri. S. D. Balagi Rao for his discussional assistance in preparing this article

