CHAPTER VI

THE SHORT STORIES

“The short story as a form owes its best advance to Dr. Anand, who has tried to bring about a synthesis of the Indian mode with their didactic folk tales and fable and the Western tradition and interplay of situation and character.”[1] Mulk Raj Anand’s early life was full of poverty, slavery, and despair. He was hurt by the tyranny of the British rulers and for the open rebellion against them he was sent to prison. Anand wanted to show the society in which he lived and the various activities of Indian feudal lords which left a deep impact on his mind, through his characters in the novels and short stories. In fact like Anand, his characters in his works want their identity in the existing system. But they fail to recognize them with their fellow brethren. Bakha in Untouchable feels alienated when slapped only due to his belonging to the low caste. Munoo in Coolie wanders from one place to other in search of identity with the existing system of society he makes struggle for survival through harsh realities of life. The life of Gangu in Two Leaves and a Bud is an example of struggle for existence and identity in the cruel world inhabited by the powerful Indian land lords and the equally cruel and tyrant British rulers. Similarly Bhikhoo in The Road and Maqbool in Death of a Hero also face the crises of identity for their graceful existence in the society.

The low caste people in the short stories of Mulk Raj Anand have been seen struggling for honor, self respect, equality and identity in their life. Even the female characters of the upper class houses do not hesitate in insulting, torturing, humiliating and putting below dignity the poor, honest, sincere and meek women from low caste families. The superiority complex of honor among the higher,
powerful and rich class people have forced the weak, poor and the downtrodden class to struggle for their identity in the democratic structure of India. Mulk Raj Anand has drawn his characters from every section of society but the crisis for identity is seen among those drawn from the low and downtrodden class. These poor creatures though they deserve equal place and right with every class of society, cannot think of love, affection and regard from the upper class people. They are always treated as the second rate creation and slaves.

“The short stories of Mulk Raj Anand evince the same fecundity which characterizes his longer fiction. His output comprises more than three score and ten short stories, in half a dozen collections: *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* (1953); *The power of Darkness and other Stories* (1959) and *Lajwanti and Other Stories* (1966). In addition to these, his re-telling of traditional Indian tales in *Indian Fairy Tales* (1946) and *More Indian Fairy tales* (1961) not only indicate his deep interest in the form but also suggest a possible source of his inspiration. Anand himself makes this clear at more than one place. In his preface to *Indian Fairy Tales*, he sees in the folk stories of our country “the only links with our broken tradition.”[2] In a private conversation Anand indicated another possible influence. He described his mother as an “illiterate but highly skilled story-teller who could feel a situation passionately.” He recalled an incident. Once, as a boy he was accompanying her, when they met a woman who had just lost her son. Mother stopped to tell to her, but young Anand, getting impatient, hurried her along. When they reached home, she said to him: “Why did you rush me like that? Didn’t you see the dead son of that woman in her eyes?”
The favorite folk tales of the adventures of Raja Rasalu were more interesting to Anand. The humorous anecdotes, based on the legendary incidents in the life of Birbal and Akbar the Great, impressed Anand with the gift of laughter that one could bring to bear on human foibles. The stories of Tolstoy and Gorky impressed Mulk Raj Anand and he began to conceive the short story as he would write it, by combining the framework of the folk tales with concentration on character and situations of contemporary life. The Indian fables of *Panchatantra* had also much influence on Anand. The whole concept was built on the hunch that the old Indian short story remains the deepest reference back to various layers of consciousness. Only it had to take in the disintegration of mind and body of the present age and bring flashes of illumination into the dark to reveal layers and under layers of suppressed feelings.

In Anand’s stories, we observe a deep awareness of both the strength and the limitations of the traditional Indian way of life and a rich understanding of the impact of modernity on it. The locale for most of his stories is India. Anand is acutely conscious of these twin forces at work in modern Indian life. In exposing the limitations of tradition, Anand’s mood is in turn compassionate, indignant, ironic and satirical, as the subject and the situation demand. Religious bigotry, hypocrisy and formalism and the degeneration of institutionalized religion into an instrument of exploitation is the chief theme in at least half a dozen stories of Mulk Raj Anand.

In the *Priest and the Pigeons* Pandit Parmanand, the temple priest is so much irritated by the cooing of mating pigeons inside the temple that he even tries to shoot them. *The Maharaja and the Tortoise* is an uproariously funny story ridiculing blind faith. His Highness Maharaja Dhiraj Sir Ganga Singh Bahadur, Knight commander of the Star of India, spends a hundred and eighty lash to bring
holy Ganga water by means of a pipe line to his place situated and hundred and fifty miles away; and his subjects willingly work day and night sweating and straining, with the thousand names of God on their thirsty lips and the roots of wild plants in their bellies, to complete the work. When Maharaja begins to offer oblation to the Sun on the edge of the holy tank, a tortoise bites off his big toe. This is interpreted as a highly auspicious omen, since the tortoise is the second avatar of Lord Vishnu, and thus, the God is now supposed to have become incarnate in the Maharaja!

No less strong than the hold of institutionalized religion on the Indian mind is that of age-old political and social practices and attitudes which, having lost all their rational in the modern world, now prove a source of both tragedy and comedy to an observer. ‘A Kashmir Idyll’ and ‘A Pair of Mustachios’ provide two glimpses of feudal society. There is savage irony in the title of the first story. What starts as a pleasure trip ends as a tragedy of feudal exploitation and retribution. Nawab Zaffar Ullah, well-entrenched to his feudal rights compels a young tenant to row his pleasure-boat, ignoring the poor man’s pitiful plea that he is footsore and weary after a twenty-mile march in the mountains to attend to the funeral of his mother, who is just dead. The young man protests for a second, but he is shocked at having annoyed his lord and master by so gross an act of disobedience. “A Pair of Mustachios” is a story in a lighter vein. It presents the life of Azam Khan, who claims descent from an ancient Afghan family, the heads of which were noblemen and councilors in the court of the Great Moguls. He has lost most of his possessions but still retains all his feudal hauteur, of which his upturned “tiger mustache” is a symbol. When he finds the village shopkeeper Ramanand turning the tip of his moustaches upward until they resemble the aristocratic “tiger mustache, he is so profoundly disturbed that he enters into a strange deal with the
low born shopkeeper according to which, the Khan will transfer all his house hold 
goods and cattle to the baniya on condition that both the tips of the moustaches of 
the upstart come down permanently and are kept glued in the “goat style” 
appropriate to his position in life.

Anand makes the caste system as the target of attack in the stories like, A 
Cock and Bull story, The Silver Bangles and Torrents of Wrath. He then goes on to 
narrate how a bull-caste Brahmin and a cock caste Kshatriya who are at daggers 
drawn, encounter each other at a stream in spate and resuming their old quarrel, are 
carried away by the swirling waters. In Silver Bangles, Sajani an untouchable 
sweeper girl who wears silver bangles presented to her on the occasion of her 
betrothbal by her mother is accused of having stolen them by the lady of the house- 
Gopi Goel. As the ending of the story makes clear, the high caste lady of the house, 
who is sexually frigid, is actually jealous of the attraction her husband feels 
towards the young sweeper girl, and is only seeking refuge in her caste superiority 
to hide her inferiority. The position of woman in traditional Hindu society is a 
recurring theme in Anand’s fiction and quite a few of his short stories are devoted 
to it, bringing out both the tears and the laughter latent in the subject. Among these 
Lajwanti is perhaps the most memorable. In The Hiccup, young Arati, who is 
allergic to fried parathas, is compelled by her unfeeling mother-in-law to eat the 
stuff, with the result that it chokes her throat to death. The real tragedy, according 
to the mother-in-law is not the death of the young bride, but the loss of family 
prestige as she cries, “Hai! The cursed one, she had to bring disgrace to our 
household. What will people say—that she died of a hiccup! In The Tamarind 
Tree, a young wife who is an expectant mother cannot satisfy her longing to eat 
tamarind fruit, but a greater disappointment to her is the realization that the fear of
the elders and the weight of convention have made it impossible for her to communicate satisfactorily with her husband.

The stories dealing with unwelcome aspects of traditional Indian society are complemented by those that portray the impact of modernism on traditional Indian life. Here also, Anand reveals both the seamy and the lighter sides of the picture. A Rumour sets forth the plight of Dhandu, a village carpenter who has lost his home and implements through the working of fate. He comes to a city, drawn by a rumor of possible employment in a mill which is, at the moment, actually convulsed with workers’ strike. Too simple to understand the implications of this, he is puzzled and frustrated and is, in the end, run over by a speeding lorry. Dhandu, like Munoo in Coolie and Gangu in Two Leaves and a Bud, represents an Indian rustic uprooted from his traditional world and thrown into the maelstrom of modern industrialism, which destroys him.

The stories, The Barber’s Trade Union and The Man who Loves Monkeys More than Human Beings, illustrate two contrasting reactions to modernity. Chandu, the enterprising rustic barber boy who is bitten by the bug of modernity does wear the clothes of a doctor and is threatened with dire consequences for this act of impudence by the village elders. In the end, it is Chandu who wins, when he goes on a strike, organizes a barbers’ trade union and is successful in breaking the age-old custom of the barber’s dancing attendance on the village elders. Unlike Chandu’s, the modernism of Raja Rajeshwar Rao, the protagonist in the second story, is hardly constructive. In fact, this scion of an ancient noble family manages to combine the worst in both what he understands of tradition and what he considers to be modernity. According to tradition, he is a direct decedent of the monkey god Hanuman, while his scientific education generates in him an
enthusiasm for Darwinism; and this combines in his mind the Hinduism in a very peculiar manner.

Though Anand is a severe critic of the crippling stranglehold of tradition and the limitations of modern Indian society, he is at the same time keenly aware of the latent strength in the worthwhile aspects of tradition and in the power that is generated when the best in Indian tradition mingles with what is welcome in modernity. His *Birth* is one of the most memorable stories. Parvati, a poor peasant woman in an advanced state of pregnancy is compelled to work at breaking stones, owing to the straitened circumstances of the family. The birth pangs start as she is proceeding to her place of work alone in this hour of trial, she refuses to panic. Her native, rustic ruggedness is reinforced by an inner strength derived from her simple peasant faith. As she lies writhing on the ground, she sees a vision of Goddess Kali in the clouds above. This gives her courage and when the child arrives, she is even able to manage the necessary midwifery, and at the end we find her putting the baby in her basket and going to break stones again. Like Gauri in *Old Woman and the Cow*, Parvati is sustained by her traditional faith in her hour of need.

Another theme which recurs in many of the short stories is the exploitation of the poor and the helpless, the down-trodden and the oppressed—a theme with which so much of Anand’s longer fiction is preoccupied. In this case the agents of exploitation are either traditional forces like casteism, communalism, feudalism, the suppression of woman or modern phenomena like urbanization and industrialization. In the present study three popular stories of Mulk Raj Anand—*Lajwanti, The Silver Bangles* and *Torrents of Wrath*—have been taken. The following paragraphs contain an analysis of the above stories. The noteworthy point here is that Anand has taken woman character in the centre of each story.
Lajwanti is a heart-rending portrait of a woman who tries to flee to her father’s home in order to escape the brutal and sexual advances of her brother-in-law in her husband’s house. She is caught mid-way by Jaswant, her brother-in-law, who forces her to return back to her husband’s house. However, she is briefly rescued by a woman passing by in a jeep who helps her go to her father’s house. Lajwanti’s only moment of glory comes when the rich woman delivers a resounding slap on Jaswant’s face. On arriving at her childhood home, Lajwanti quickly realizes that she is not welcome here too. Her father refuses to acknowledge her as a member of the family and tells her that she must return to her husband’s house. With absolutely no support from her father or her in-laws, Lajwanti’s only source of strength, comfort and hope is her caged Bulbul (Maina).

Lajwanti, a popular story of Mulk Raj Anand, depicts the plight of a woman, Lajo (Lajwanti). Here Lajo, the wife in a poor family longs for all those things which a woman wants and deserves in a democratic society of India. The misery of her life can be seen when we see “the torn soles of her chappals exposed her flesh.” It was the month of May; the loo flew into Lajwanti’s face like flames from the hearth of heaven. The sweat moistened her hands, she tightened her grip on the handle of the cage in which her Maina bird sat, docile and dumb, under the oppression of the heat. She persisted in her determination to trudge along to Gurgaon, where she hoped to catch the bus to her father’s house in Pataudi. Lajwanti said to Maina bird ‘talk to me Maina - say something! I will give you water as soon as I get to the bus stop’ but it only fluttered its wings in the cage, perhaps to indicate to Lajwanti that she is alive.

Lajo’s husband Balwant is at college to pursue his studies for becoming a clerk. Jaswant, her brother-in-law works in the fields and is supported by her ambitious mother- in-law. Her father- in- law is kind and benevolent. Jaswant, in
the absence of his brother, has his eyes on Lajo and he always tries to attract her way or that. Like other women, who in absence of their husband’s get care, love and affection of their in laws, Lajo also longs for the same. Lajo’s mother-in-law wants a son from her, but Lajo’s husband is away from home. Jaswant is in search of the occasion when he could press Lajo for the satisfaction of his lust. Sometimes Lajo feels helpless to think: “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.”[3]

Lajwanti wants to go to her father’s house but Jaswant’s lustful moves stops her from going there. Lajwanti is a graceful character of self respect and she keeps safe her chastity against the lustful brute, Jaswant. Lajwanti wants to go her father’s house. Urged by the heat spots on her feet where the torn soles of her chappals exposed her flesh, she was in a hurry towards the shade of a solitary mango tree which stood a little way away from the Mehrauli-Gurgaon road. She becomes an easy target of the amorous advances of her lascivious brother-in-law, Jaswant. Jaswant is already married but his wife is not able to protest her husband towards Ljawanti. The latter has tried her best to escape Jaswant; even she slapped him when once he tried to approach her. But she finds herself in a helpless situation, because her mother-in-law connives at Jaswant’s doings. Jaswant has the support of his mother. Lajwanti felt the first moment of calm which had come to her during two long years. But immediately she felt the fear of Jaswant’s revenge for the slap he had received on the face. She looked at the Maina and said in speechless speech: “Angel, suppose there is a cool place, somewhere in the world where we two can rest…”

Jaswant asks her to decide, “If she goes to her father’s house, she can never come back to us. If she comes back with me, we might consider sending her for a
little while to her father’s house.” But Lajwanti replied, “I want to go to my father’s house, and never want to come back again.” One other woman Shrimati Dayal just a passerby, takes pity on Lajo and brings her to her own house. Here too Jaswant threatens Lajo not to reveal the actual facts but first time in two years Lajo felt the first moment of calm when Shrimati Dayal, contrary to her mother-in-law identifies Lajo as a needy woman and helps her. Lajo gives Jaswant a daring reply and discloses his real self, “And you want many more wives.” Shrimati Dayal sends back Jaswant and Lajo reaches the home of her father. Lajo knew that her father was very poor and he was not able to bear his daughters stay with him away from her in-laws. Lajwanti could not identify herself even at her father’s house. Her father’s cold response made Lajwanti feel that she is not wanted here. She could get the relief which she had expected with her father as he told her his helplessness, “I will take you back at your parents-in-law’s house. I shall fall at their feet………The disgrace of your widowhood without your becoming a widow is unbearable…. They will only call you ugly names here.”

When Lajwanti arrived at her father’s house, with the cage of the Maina in her hand, she was not welcomed by her father. Her father dared not look at her face, because a daughter coming home without any occasion was inauspicious. She was offered a mat which was given only to guests, indicating that now this was not her home. She was like a guest and was supposed to go back to her husband’s home. Her father took her back to her in-laws’ home. On the way the Maina in the cage looked as if it were dead. The bird seemed still and Lajwanti spoke to her in wordless speech:

My Maina tell me what will happen now? My heart flutters, as you often do when you are frightened of the cat coming to eat you. And I do not know if Jaswant will relent and not pursue me anymore. But
perhaps now that my father has brought me back, I will allow myself to be eaten.

Her father doesn’t want to keep Lajwanti in his house. Her father was gentle as he was, however, he did not ask any questions to Lajwanti. Only he called his young son, “Indu, your eldest sister has come. Wake up, your little sister, Moti…” Indu left in to the chopper and came fast towards her, stick to her legs as though he saw the ghost of his mother standing by the door. To be sure, Lajwanti looked the split image of her mother. Only mother had become sallow with lungs, and gave richness to the small even face, with the fine nose, flawed by a big tattoo mark on her chin. ‘Look at this poor Maina,’ she said. ‘She had come all the way with me from New Delhi.’

Lajwanti was also not well received by the midwife Champa who had expected Lajo with belly. Like Hari Ram, Champa also asks Lajo, “If only for the sake of the soul of your dear mother, go hurry back and come soon with your lap full of a child.” The hope of Lajo fades as her father brings her back to her in-laws and bends his head in the feet of Lajo’s father-in-law. It sent a terrified message into the heart of Lajo. She realizes that now she would accept all that dirty business which she had been refusing for her self-respect and chastity. She feels, “Now that my father has brought me back, I will allow myself to be eaten ……… Oh, if only I had warned to him and not thought of my own man who would never have known! I am really defeated.” Her father said to Lajo,

The children want a mother. And I would have kept you here and not given you away, if people had not begun to talk about you…” he paused after this statement for a long time, and then after a long time he continued: Now I am both father and mother to them… and, as for
you, I will take you back to your parents-in-law’s house. I shall fall at their feet and ask them to forgive you. The discharge of your widowhood without your becoming a widow is unbearable... they will only call you ugly names here... they do not know that you are ‘sensitive plant.

Two days later, a post card came addressed to Shri Hari Ram, father of Lajwanti, written by Jaswant, on behalf of his father, saying that as Lajwanti had run away, without permission from her husband or her parents-in-law, the clothes she had brought on her wedding were being returned and that no one in Delhi was now willing to see her ‘black face’. Lajwanti crouched a little away, with her face covered by her head cloth and averted her gaze from father-in-laws towards the torrid fields. Her heart was in her mouth, lest her brother-in-law, Jaswant, might suddenly appear from the barn, or even her mother-in-law, come on the scene suddenly before the father-in-law had forgiven her. At the same time, she knew that there would be no forgiveness, but only a reluctant nod to indicate that she could stay. The journey had been easier this time, because they had come by bus from Pataudi to Gurgaon and then caught the connection from Gurgaon to the bus stop half a mile away from the little village of her father-in-laws. And as the bird seemed still, she spoke to her in wordless speech:

My Maina tell me what will happen now? My heart flutters, as you often do when you are frightened of the cat coming to eat you. And I do not know if Jaswant will relent and not pursue me anymore. But perhaps now that my father has brought me back, I will allow myself to be eaten. Only the humiliation will be complete now. Oh if only I had warmed to him and not thought of my own man who would never have known! I am really defeated. And even words are no use... And
yet within me there is desire, and there is life—a river of feelings like the ancient Saraswati River which has gone underground and disappeared from the surface... How shall control those feelings, those prisoners, trying to burst out.

‘She is your daughter,’ said old Hari Ram to appease the woman. In his innocence he imagined that the proverbial mother-in-law had become the cause of his daughter’s flight. ‘I have brought her back... the midwife, Champa, said that the girl has made a mistake...’ ‘To be sure,’ answered the mother-in-law. There was no question, since Balwant has not been back from Kalej for more than a few days at a time. Jaswant says he has seen her winking at the visitors on the roadside. ‘We are respectable people,’ said Chaudhri Ganga Ram to his wife.

‘I... what shall I say, Chaudhariji,’ answered Hari Ram quietly. ‘I wish fate had made her not so good looking. But now I have brought her back and you can kill her if she looks at another. Here is a ring for my son Balwant. I could not give much dowry. Now I will make up a little for what the boy did not get.’ From the wearisome acceptance of her destiny, there swirled up incomprehensible violent rage of truth in Lajwanti, so that she shook a little and was on the point of telling them the horrible facts. And she was mad at her father for effacing himself and bowing before her in-laws. But the tremors in her entrails ended in choking her throat. And the lofty fights of anger only befogged her brain. Jaswant! Jaswant! Come over here,’ the mother-in-law called her eldest son. In the silence of doom, Lajwanti quivered as though’ the demons of hell had let loose snakes and scorpions on her body’. And, in a fit of crazy abandon, she felt herself borne from the underworld, on a bed, by her heroic husband, his arms wrapped around her. Actually beneath the trembling flesh, she knew Balwant had lack of courage, he could not even raise his head to look at his elder brother:
She has come back!’ Jaswant ground the words in his mouth, throwing the white radishes away on the ground near the outdoor kitchen. She could not tell you that she wanted to see the midwife,’ old Hari Ram said. It was a false alarm.

‘There are mid-wives here also!’ Jaswant answered. ‘Why there is the Safdarjung Hospital!’ Do not be taken in by her stories, uncle. “She has looked at more than one before her marriage… She is just a bad girl! The way she insulted me when I went to fetch her back… She sat, there, answering back! And allowed that Afsar’s wife to slap me in the face! Prostitute! Lajo’s premonition seemed to turn to reality as she had no option but to surrender her self respect and chastity to the lustful brute Jaswant. To conceal his evil designs, Jaswant pretends to be well behaved which he never had been. Lajwanti smells foul when his mother calls Jaswant.

Jaswant kicked Lajwanti on her back saying ‘Take that for having me beaten!’ Lajwanti quivered, and then direction suddenly changed, almost doubled over, and she uttered a shrill cry before beginning to sob. ‘You deserved a shoe beating!’ Shouted Jaswant, violently over Lajwanti like an eagle, with great delight of power, his arms outstretched as though he was going to hit her again. ‘Come away!’ shouted his father. But Hari Ram, as he did not know the reality, said to Ganga Ram, ‘Let him punish her if he thinks she has done wrong, and let her fall at his feet… My daughter is pure.’ After saying this he felt pain of his own regret and he was caught in the sudden attack of a dry throated cough, and water filled his eyes. ‘Maina, my Maina,’ Lajwanti said under the breath, ‘I cannot bear this deceitful cunning wretch!’ Chaudhary Ganga Ram said, ‘Take her away. We have no use of her here! She has disgraced us before the whole brotherhood.’ ‘You have punished her enough!’ Hari Ram said, ‘I knew you would be merciful… And now
I leave her in your care. Kill her if you like. But don’t let her come to me without her lap full of son. I shall not be able to survive the disgrace if she comes again.’ Lajwanti asked, ‘Maina, my Maina, who will talk to you, if I go away forever? Lajwanti asked the bird in the cage even as she washed her with palms full of water from the bucket. ‘Will you shriek if I drown you in the water, my little one?’

As she was not ready in any case to surrender her body to Jaswant, Lajwanti tried to commit suicide by jumping into a well. But unfortunately she could not identify with death too. She could not die; instead she sbecame limp as her left shoulder hit the stone and she was badly injured. On the cry for help by her mother in law, she was taken out of the well. She found Maina by her side in the cage and felt, “There is no way for me, I am Condemned to die”. There was no way by which Lajwanti could put her head into the water. Perhaps she really did not want to die. Thus a woman of good character does not get proper place and respect both at her in laws and at her own father’s house. Lajo, for the sake of woman, made every effort to get identified with every member whom she thought would help her genuine problems but she fails. Lajwanti’s plight and pathetic condition is highlighted by constantly repeating the symbol of the caged Maina throughout the story.

Anand’s intention in The Silver Bangles is “to criticize caste, and he achieves it through a clear description of Smt. Gopi Goel’s contemptuous treatment of the innocent sweeper girl, Sajani.”[4] In ‘The Silver Bangles, a good looking sweeper girl Sajani who was given silver bangles on her betrothal by her mother, is unjustly accused by the lady of the house, Mrs Goel, of having stolen the bangles. At the end of the story it becomes clear that Mrs Goel who is sexually frigid is actually jealous of the attraction her husband feels for the sweeper girl. Her accusations at Sajani are aimed only to hide her own sense of inferiority
against the ‘untouchable beauty.’ The ending of the story is as effective as is its beginning. It reveals the working of a mind ridden with superstitions. Mrs Goel suspects that she may lose her husband to Sajani. So she refrains from uttering the dreaded words even in her most unguarded moments. *The Silver Bangles* would appear to be a story on the usual theme of caste distinctions, but on closer scrutiny, is revealed to be a study in sexual jealousy of Mrs Goel, when she sees the sweeper girl talking to her husband with smile. When she watched the silver bangles on the hand of Sajani,

> The lines on the corners of her mouth became deeper, the faded texture of her pale face turned livid, and her sleek brows knitted into a frown, as soon as Shrimati Gopi Goel saw the silver bangles on the wrist of the sweeper girl, Sajani.[5]

Mrs Goel drifted away from the kitchen where she was frying sweet bread to please her husband on the first day of the welcome month of rains, Shravan, and she took position by the jellied window of the living room, overlooking the verandah. She wanted to see what effect Sajani’s silver bangles would have on the owner of the house, her own husband. Mulk Raj Anand has brought out the common human weaknesses in this story. In his works, both novels and short stories, Anand has placed woman characters in the middle of the story and most of them are the central figures in the plot. Sajani and Mrs Goel are the two woman characters in this story and if we consider seriously, Sajani plays the leading role in the plot. It is she who gets silver bangles from her mother on the occasion of her betrothal; it is Sajani who becomes the cause of confrontation between husband and wife, it is Sajani again who gets the rewards, gifts, compassion and sympathy of the master of the house, Mr Goel. Thus Sajani stands in the middle of the main action.
The Silver Bangles presents the painful story of Sajani, the sweeper girl, who like other women in the society, wants to live a life of self respect but is thwarted at every step. Sajani is a beautiful, good natured and well behaved sweeper girl. Though she cleans the houses of the upper class people as a sweeper, but due to this she should not be treated as an untouchable, neglected and miserable creature. Shri Ram Goel, the master of the house, greets Sajani on her arrival with kindness and smile but his wife Gopi Goel does not like it for she suspects illicit love between Sajani and Shri Ram Goel. Shrimati Gopi Goel believed that her husband had deposited bits of his poetaster’s soul in her every time he had come near her. And she did not want to allow any of this deposit to be left anywhere else, especially in the body of Sajani, to whom he had already addressed his insinuating love words, in that half-joking, half embarrassed manner of the heart-squanderer, even as he deposited on the palm of the sweeper girl’s hand occasional tips of money.

Mrs Goel had seen, passing on his face, the ghost of a smile every time he had seen Sajani arrive. Sometimes, there had been a light in his eyes which she could not help mistaking for a mischievous twinkle. And, once or twice, she felt, she had caught him because he had looked up to the untouchable girl which the segment of his lascivious lips slavering and wet, even as he had hummed the phrase of the folk song: “Sajani, I wake up in a hot sweat in the night.” As she had supposed, she saw from the window the confirmation of his interest in Sajani quite clearly. A smile brimmed over his face, the eyes lit up, the mouth puckered, and he said with a hearty bluff designed to hide exaltation on seeing the girl: ‘Ao ji, Ao, come, Sajani, you are late this morning.’ Shrimati Gopi Goel tried to explore the young woman’s visage. In the half concealed, half revealed profile, she thought she could detect a radiance, which seemed to rise from the flush of youth, as well as
from the vanity of being admired, and the meaningful exaggeration, the emphasis of near song in his pronunciation of her name.

‘Oh, Mundu, ask, ‘them’ to give Sajani a sweet poora...’ Shri Ram Goel called to the servant boy as he lifted his gaze from the Tribune to caress the trim, small crouching figure of the sweeper girl wielding the broom on the verandah. He will give Sajani everything,’ commented Shrimati Gopi Goel. ‘Bibiji, I am unworthy,’ said Sajani apologetically. ‘Master is king to the poor.’ It is true, Shri Ram Goel is attracted towards the sweeper girl but he also has the feeling of charity and compassion towards the poor in his heart. When Shri Ram Goel puts a coin on the palm of Sajani, Smt. Gopi Goel “felt like upsetting the cauldron of boiling butter on the heads of the two lovers.” Gopi Goel can’t tolerate the good looking Sajani as she comments: “Did you notice the silver bangles on that low woman’s wrist? How she preens herself …… I wish her mother would come to do our house and not this film star.”

One other common aspect of human life has also been shown in this story by Mulk Raj Anand. Jealous nature of one woman towards the other due to some good features particularly the physical beauty is seen in the works of different writers-both Indian and British. Physical beauty is a God gift given to human being irrespective of caste, creed and category. Smt Gopi Goel is not as charming and attractive as the sweeper girl Sajani is endowed with. It is also a common human nature that human beings feel attraction towards the opposite sex. The main thing remarkable here is that in the matters of attraction and love, caste, age and category is not seen. It is due to this that Mr. Shri Ram Goel; the husband of Smt. Gopi Goel is attracted and influenced by the physical charm and good nature of the sweeper girl Sajani. Smt Gopi Goel is a victim of inferiority complex.
But she knew that her husband would stave off any direct words with the evasive calm of the practiced hypocrite in some neat phrase from the poem. To be sure, even without her uttering a sigh, he had scanned her spying figure behind the jailed window and recited a made-up verse: “Ah, between me and this bird here, there stands the shadow of despair.” She further says to her husband, “What are you talking about? I came to say, are you going to get ready to go to office or not?”

Breakfast is ready. It is no use having the pooras cold. The shrillness of her voice compelled Shri Ram Goel to be sweeter still: “In this opaque heart of mine, there is only poetry but no office I hate the outline of that prison…” ‘Poetry will not give us bread!’

Shri Ram Goel said, “You have burnt every second poora for the one you have made and anyhow they are all cold.” She said to Mundu, “Let me make them” as she really wanted to admonish someone just now. And as though this irritation with the servant boy had heightened her devotion to the fictional image of her husband, she burr-burred: ‘I am burning’. Actually, the hot glow of the fire in the earthen chulha had induced heat in her body, which she mistook for the warmth for him. ‘My life,’ she said, ‘do finish dressing up’. You are, standing before the mirror like a bridegroom today…” ‘I would not mind going through a marriage, again!’ He answered lightly “With whom?” She asked, disturbed by the ambiguity of his speech.’ ‘With you’, he said, cornered.

The silver bangles are gifted to Sajani by her mother on her betrothal but Gopi Goel, upper class housewife filled with the feeling of remorse towards the good looking sweeper girl charges her, “Which lover has given them to you?” Sajani tries to convince Gopi Goel of her honesty but the latter is adamant to accuse the sweeper girl. She stirred the hot oil with the perforated spoon and, with a histrionic ability far in excess of her usual placid manner she asserted: “Already,
we are one, my life… Already, you have changed me, from my shyness into a wanton… Like Mira, I am the Gopi of my Krishna…”

‘Oh why, oh why, oh why…’ Shri Ram Goel intoned the words, trying to clothe the atmosphere with the aura of a bluff, because he was waiting for the moment when he could meet Sajani’s eyes just once before going to the office, so that the day should pass happily, poetically, especially in this lover-like weather, when the clouds hovered over the town, spreading the cool of heaven everywhere and making the green parrots fly in groves towards the freedom of the skies. ‘But why?’ She insisted. ‘Why will my devotion bring more pain?’ Because, in one of the two, who have become one, takes into his head to depart, as when you suddenly decide to go to your mother’s home in a sulk, the pain which this causes is the most virulent disturbance. There is emptiness in one’s life. And the partner who is left behind has to try to fill the vessel again with nectar.

Soon after this, she saw Shri Ram Goel pressing a ten paisa coin on the palm of Sajani. Actually, he had merely placed the coin on the sweeper girl’s open hand and not pressed it. But the insensate imagination of Shrimati Goel fancied as though this act of charity had established the connection of love between those two in a final and clear manner. She even thought that she had seen them exchange glances which were like shooting stars. From the hot air of the kitchen, the blue anger of Shrimati Gopi Goel travelled like sparks of fire and thus hung in the atmosphere like festoons of smoke over the trembling figure of Sajani. “My mother brought the silver bangles- they are the first offering for my betrothal!” The untouchable girl tried to explain it to Mrs Gopi Goel. And then she looked up to the mistress with her frank forehead clear, and her eyes filled with tears of innocence accused of guilt by someone. “Lies won’t help to make you people honest,” charged Shrimati Gopi Goel. ‘Let me see if these were not stolen from my
“How can I be sure that this profligate husband of mine, who is so generous to you, has not taken them out of my box of jewels and given them to you.”

‘Bibiji’, protested Sajani. Shrimati Goel answered without listening, “I know the kind of lovers who look separate, but are drawn by the invisible words of mock poems, and who indulge in all the extravagances of connection, without an embrace…”

‘I only like to hear Babuji talk’ the girl said. ‘He is a learned man and speaks so many fine words…’ “Don’t you be familiar with me and talk of his fine words you like to hear? Only take off those silver bangles which he has stolen from my box and given to you!” The perfume of Shri Ram Goel’s words evaporated before the disillusioned gaze of Sajani. She realized that she should never have uttered her admiration for the Master of the house. Their eyes had once met, but she was not guilty. Her head swirled and she crumpled up in a swoon on the floor. But instead of helping the poor girl, Gopi Goel shouted with anger,

Get up and go out and don’t you come into this house again. You have raised your head to the sky- low people, wearing silver bangles!!! Don’t you know that the untouchables in the south are not supposed to wear silver at all…? And you go posing like a cheap film star… Go die!

The orthodox nature of Smt. Gopi Goel is not new and different from the traditional woman of the previous times. Since the ancient age till the modern times, the caste discrimination has been a major issue of the Indian society. The upper caste people whether poor or rich, week or strong, dull or intelligent and active or inactive are not ready to stand with the low caste and downtrodden members of Indian society. They think themselves superior only on the base of
their superior caste. If we see it on human grounds, we cannot make any difference
between castes. Here in this story Smt. Gopi Goel is an example of woman who
feels jealous of the beauty and charm of the servant girl whom her husband likes
and cares much for her. It is due to this that Smt. Gopi Goel is always suspicious of
her husband. Sajani had lost the use of her muscles, but not of her heart. She began
to sob as she huddled in a corner of the verandah. But each movement of her throat
was like a knife jab, bringing more sobs, as though the fainting fit had been
succeeded by hysteria, the sobs welling from the belly where lay years of
humiliations, now thrusting up like daggers on her sides. The sorrow of the
sweeper girl made Shrimati Gopi Goel angrier,

Go, get out and never enter this house again! Thief! You have not
only stolen the bangles, but also my….. She dared not finish her harsh
words, because the acknowledgement of the loss of her husband to
Sajani might turn out to be the confirmation of the fact and that would
be inauspicious because if you say ‘death’, it often comes…..

Thus all the efforts of Sajani to identify herself with the common women of
society fail. The ending of the story is as effective as is its beginning. It reveals the
working of a mind ridden with superstitions. Mrs. Goel suspects that she may lose
her husband to Sajani. So she refrains from uttering the dreaded words even in her
most unguarded moments. Sajani bears the humiliation in silence and lowers her
head “as a dove up dives off the earth to fly across the valley, threatened by a
rough wind…” The Silver Bangles has been considered as a “psycho-analytical
study in character of a sexually frigid house wife.”[6]

In some of his stories, Mulk Raj Anand has presented situations when the
innocent, virtuous and honest persons are accused and humiliated on false charges.
In *Lajwanti*, Jaswant levies false charges on Lajo because in absence of his elder brother Balwant, Jaswant wanted to have illicit relations with Lajo. Lajwanti, though she is honest and belongs to a very low and poor family but she is a woman of strong character and she does not yield to the lustful moves of Jaswant. Here, in this story Sajani, the sweeper girl is honest, good natured and sincere. The only fault of her part is that she is more beautiful, charming and attractive than Smt. Gopi Goel, the mistress of the house. Though she does not make any move towards Shri Ram Goel but she gets sympathy and love of Mr. Goel. Smt Gopi Goel has noticed her husband’s inclination towards Sajani on many occasions therefore she becomes suspicious of the illicit relation between the two. Moreover Mr. Shri Ram Goel, though he has sympathy and attraction towards Sajani, considers much for Sajani as he knows that she is poor, needy and servant girl. He is kind and affectionate towards the servant girl as the master of the house. Thus, Mulk Raj Anand presents in this story the typical features of the contemporary society of his times. The exploitation, torture and humiliation of innocent, honest and virtuous woman by the elder female members of the traditional Indian families are another aspect of Mulk Raj Anand’s short stories.

*torrents of Wrath* is based on “Anand’s criticism of the twin evils of caste and poverty which undermine human dignity and render men cruel and callous, and their victims miserable.”[7]Anand’s *Torrents of Wrath* presents the pitiable condition of a poor, untouchable wretch, Sukhi. The flood due to heavy rains has taken lives of many people and animals. An old woman with few pets survives the tragedy. The heart and soul of the old woman is filled with compassion for the little poor pets. She has lost her son and daughter- in- law in the flood but she could save the poor pets and still she wishes to save their lives even at the cost of her own life. She has a black dog-Kalu; two little colored sparrows in a cage and a
tiny mouse in her purse. One policeman is posted at Rai Village for the safety of the survived people and their belongings from looters. One shopkeeper, Mam Chand Bania also survives with his shop. The poor old woman is worried about the safety of the little pets and she begs pity of Seth Mam Chand Bania:

Give a few grains for my birds, Sethji, and for the little mouse. And now that my dear ones are gone, I want to mortgage the two canals of land and the house, so that I and the dog Kalu… I will work in your house as a maid. [8]

The greedy and selfish Bania did not take heed of the old woman’s request; instead he abuses her: “You are Sukhi, untouchable woman, mother of Shanti Sarup, leather worker……no.” Moreover Mam Chand Bania reminds the old woman of the favorable situation for him: “In a famine year like this made starker by the flood, you ask me for grain for your pets when humans cannot buy enough! Ja, ja, and rest somewhere else…” As the surface of the flood waters soared silently now, since the rains had stopped, the sense of doom sat more heavily on the face of the old woman who crouched by the shop of Mam Chand Bania, on the elevated plinth by the main road, half a furlong away from Rai village.

The main story starts with the flood scene around the village. The old woman is seen much troubled for the existence of her own life as well as for the life of her pets. She is standing before the shop of Mam Chand Bania and there is one policeman posted for the safety of survived people in this area. Mulk Raj Anand shows the superstition prevailed among the people of that age. The old woman says, “The flood had come because the God Indra was angry with the faithless people,” and she requests the God of death, Yama, “forgive my young children and do not let your demons throw snacks on them.” Even the policeman posted
there for the safety of the people comments, “The torrents of wrath of the God were let loose.”

The shopkeeper who survives the floods is very greedy. His greedy nature can be seen when he comments on the night stay of the truck drivers “I wish my shop had been near there. The Sikh drivers are generous in spending.” The inhuman nature of the policeman and the merchant is seen when they wish that she should also have been washed away during the flood. The old woman is still worried about her pets but Mam Chand Bania does not melt for the lives of the poor pets and flatly refuses to give any grain. Moreover he gives false clarification that during famine he cannot give grain for the pets when humans are starving. Love for pet animals is so deep at the heart of the old woman that she urges the shopkeeper, “I m not asking for a loan! Shrilled the old woman, I am offering the mortgage of all I have… My little ones must not die.”

The old woman is supported by her pet dog, Kalu who begins to bark at the shopkeeper as if it is also asking for the grain. The greedy inhuman nature of Mam Chand Bania is frightened by the barking of the dog but the old woman stops Kalu by saying, Na! Na! Bhonk! When the dog looks at the angry policeman it starts barking at him also. The effect of this uproar is clearly seen on the sparrow in the cage flutttering from one end to the other not knowing what was happening. The other pet, the mouse was still alive to survive in the purse of the old woman. When Sukhi did not see any hope of getting grain from Mam Chand Bania she dares to break the law even at the presence of the policeman. Though it was not fair for the old woman but she cared much for the pets than to her own life. She threatened, the shopkeeper, Mam Chand Bania, “I shall pollute your baskets by lifting the gram, if you will not give my little ones…”
In Indian culture telling a lie and breaking the law, though not a crime but is an anti-social and barbarian act. But in such cases the basic intention of the person who commits such acts is judged and not the act he has done. Sukhi though much hungry and almost on the verge of starvation, does not ask anything for herself. It is the real human nature of a living being to help, save and assist the fellow living beings. The old woman, as she is shown, is much worried for the survival of her pets and not for her own life. Her move to get grain from Mam Chand Bania by the way of threatening trick is not at all illegal and crime. She wants to keep her pets at any cost to save their life. It was this intention behind her move. On the other hand the cruel, greedy and inhuman nature of the policeman and the shopkeeper is brought out by Mulk Raj Anand in this story. It is a common duty of man to save and help the suffering and starving human beings in such crucial times like flood and famine. In such circumstances the shopkeeper Mam Chand Bania was supposed to help and save the lives of the dying and ailing people. But on the contrary Mam Chand Bania was looking for profit in such adverse situations.

Mulk Raj Anand has represented the theme of untouchability in this short story also. Mam Chand Bania is frightened at the warning of old Sukhi, the untouchable woman and fears that his shop will be polluted by the hands of untouchable woman. He cries for help from the policeman and throws the kilo weight which struck the right knee of the old woman. She is badly injured and as a reaction to it her pet dog Kalu attacks Mam Chand and policeman, both. Sukhi was much angry when she got injured. The similar anger appeared on the faces of the mouse and sparrow. The pets were not in a position to defend the old woman but they raised uproar so that Sukhi could get rid of the clutches of the shopkeeper and the policeman. The policeman warns Sukhi in his own style, “mad woman I shall throw you in jail.” Sukhi, the untouchable woman, as she was much hurt with the
starving condition of her pets, ignores her pain and the warning of the policeman, “She pounced upon the basket of roasted gram and brought a handful back into the folds of her head clothe before her bosom.”

The policeman was already in favor of the shopkeeper as the latter pleased the former with some undue privileges and hence he not only got hold on the old woman but also struck a blow on the dog with his stave. The poor dog screamed as if helpless and fell back into the agony of surrender. The policeman was not satisfied with one blow on the dog so he struck another one on to the dog which unfortunately fell on Sukhi’s face. As a result the weak skull of the poor woman was broken. The stream of blood gushed from the broken skull of old woman and she fell down on the ground. But still the cruel greedy and selfish shopkeeper did not feel sympathy or pity even for a moment. Instead he shouted, “Die witch die.” The cruel and merciless policeman came in his police role and struck a blow at the cage and the sparrow went almost in a dead position.

Mulk Raj Anand has depicted the brutal and senseless policeman as the symbol of tyranny during those days that instead of providing help and safety to the weak, miserable, needy and the low caste people, favored the rich and powerful members of society. In return he got bribe and other facilities from these powerful members. One such instance is witnessed when at the urge of Mam Chand Bania, the policeman strikes heavy blow on to the injured dog. The helpless poor creature dies with the brutal attack of the policeman. The dog, as a faithful animal to the master turns for shelter as it, “Shouted in a cracked voice with interrupted yelps and then caved his face into the old woman’s blood.” It is a pathetic scene which rouses our pity and heart sympathy towards the poor untouchable woman as well as the faithful but helpless creatures.
Though Mam Chand is blindly supported by the policeman but his inner sense realizes his guilt and he is shocked at the blood scene before his eyes. Earlier he was crying to drag away the old woman and her dog but after her death he is frightened and now he cries to the same policeman, “Save me, save me, Havildar! Save me...” The fearful scene has sent the own lookers into a position of silence. They knew that it was a crime done by the policeman with the help of shopkeeper but they did not dare to utter a single syllable in favor of the old woman and her pets. Even the policeman and the shopkeeper were taken awake at the horrible scene of bloodshed. Mam Chand knew that if the public turns against him, he will suffer in jail with his fellow culprit, the policeman.

The inhuman and barbaric nature of the policeman is shown by Mulk Raj Anand towards the end of the story. We know that each and every human being, whatsoever he has been in his life, gets due respect at the time of his death and he is given good treatment at his last journey from this world. But here in this story, the brutality and animal behavior of the policeman, nearly to hide his criminal act crosses all limits. The policeman fix up the empty sack from the sitting place of Mam Chand in his shop and wraps the dead body of the old woman in it. He roughly catches the four corners and carries it towards the flood water and throws it into the ‘torrents of wrath.’ The dead body of the old woman floats in the sea towards its unknown end; sparrows in the cage flutter from one end to the other as if they were mourning for the souls who had departed them. The story ends with a bitter but true comment of the on lookers. Thought they did not resist and oppose the inhuman acts of the policeman and the shopkeeper but they uttered the ultimate curse on the shopkeeper and the policeman, “You will go the same way... murderers.”
Summing up his views on the various aspects of Mulk Raj Anand’s short stories M. K. Naik says:

As a short story writer, Anand’s forte is his versatility and range. His more than three score stories exhibit an astonishing variety of theme and setting, mood and tone, character and personality….He sketches the village belle and other rustic characters with as much sureness of touch as he can depict to perfection a society lady and other urban types. He is at home both with the aristocrat and the beggar. He dips in his pen in a multitude of colors and can give us in turn, pathos and tragedy, satire and irony, farce and pure fun, lyricism and description, social criticism and the eternal verities. He handles with equal ease reality and fantasy, romance and naturalism. He can both tell a racy tale and probe into human psychology. [9]
References: