CHAPTER – FOURTH
SOCIAL VISION IN
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Mulk Raj Anand is one of India's most popular short story writers. He has seven collections of short stories: (1) 'The Lost Child and Other Stories' (1934), (2) 'The Barbers's Trade Union and Other Stories' (1944), (3) 'The Tractor and the Corn Goddess and Other Stories' (1947), (4) 'The Reflections on the Golden Bed and Other Stories' (1953), (5) 'The Power of Darkness and Other Stories' (1959), (6) Lajwanti and Other Stories' (1966), (7) Between Tears and Laughter and Other Stories (1973), one of Selections, and four of his retelling of ancient stories and folk tales to his credit. In his preface to Indian Fairy Tales, he observes:

Only by going back to the form of these stories, told by mother to son and son to son, could we evolve a new pattern for the contemporary short story. Of course, the modern short story is a highly developed fold tale, if it is a folk tale at all. But a revival of the short story form, like the present, seemed to be a fit occasion to relate it to its more primitive antecedents which, surprisingly enough, seem to lie in the source of the sheaf of tales which I have gleaned ... Although I have taken in much new psychology into my own writing of the short story, I have always
tried to approximate to the technique of the folk tale and the influence of these fairy stories has always been very deep on my short fiction.¹

The preface to Selected Stories contains an even fuller statement. Characterizing the ancient Indian Ocean of Stories as "a symbol of the highly finished art of storytelling in India", he adds:

"I read it at an early age and was inspired by it to read and hear many of the folk tales told in my country ... I wanted to write stories as finished in form and as rich in content as the stories told among my people. In fact, the folk tale form has seemed to me the most perfect form of short story ... The folk tales of India ... interpret the joys and sorrows of a peasant people of the long eras of Indian feudal life. And in spite of wit, wisdom and morality which they present, they are not typical of modern sensibility. Therefore, while accepting the form of the folk tale, specially in its fabulas character, I took in the individual and group psychology of the European cante and tried to synthesise the two style. And thus I sought to create a new kind of fable which

extends the old Indian story form into a new age, without the moral lessons of Indian story, but embodying its nerve and vitality and including the psychological understanding of the contemporary period. 2

Another possible and obviously allied influence was that of his mother. Anand once "described his mother 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 talk to her, but young Anand, getting impatient, hurried her long. 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? " 3

Anand has also indicated other possible influences on his short stories:

One of my favourite folk tales was Adventures of Raja Rasalu and I would pester my mother to tell me this over and over again. The humours anecdotes concocted by one of our teachers. Master Shah Nawaz, based on the legendary incidents in the life

of Raja Birbal and Akbar the Great, impressed me with the gift of laughter that one could bring to bear on human foibles. When I read some of stories of Tolstoy in his Sevestopol Sketches as well as Gorky's stories, Creatures That Once Were Men, I began to conceive the short story as I would write it, by combining the framework of the folk tales with concentration on character and situation of contemporary life. Then I read the Fables of Theodore Powys in London and tried to apply the Indian Fables of ... the Panchtantra to my human beings ... I adopted the prose poems of Turgenev, the allegory, the fables, the lyric short story, the satire and the long short story, in my hand, are all, in a peculiar style of my own evolved under various influences, typical of the neo-folk tale, which is my ideal of the short story. The whole concept was built on the hunch that the old Indian short story remains the deepest reference back to various layers of consciousness. 4

In addition to these, Anand's short stories reveal strong social satire. The story, "The Lost Child" is one of the most memorable of Anand's short stories. It is a fable in which the traumatic experience of a child also symbolizes the eternal varieties of the human condition. The child which

has gone to the fair along with its parents wants a toy and a sweatmeat and many more things and keeps up a chorus of "I want". Then it gets lost, and though friendly hands now offer to it the very things it coveted only a few hours ago, it rejects all of them, all the while crying, "I want my mother. I want my Father." The story is utterly realistic it is based upon Anand's own childhood experience.

The scene is set in a paradise. Spring is in the air. The little child visits a fair in the company of his parents. He is enchanted by the spectacle of shops, displaying various items on sale. His excitement runs high as he wants to buy the toy, the garland, and the sweets. He also wants to ride the merry-go-round, which has a special appeal to the child-mind. He strays into the garden and collects the blossoms. He runs after the dragonflies as they flutter by. All of a sudden, he realizes that he has been separated from his parents:

A full, deep cry rose within his dry throat and with a sudden jerk of his body he ran from where he stood, crying in red fear, "Mother, father?" Tears rolled down from his eyes, hot and fierce; his flushed face convulsed with fear. Panic-stricken, he ran to one side first, then to the other, hither and thither in all directions, knowing not where to go.5

A man from the crowd tries to quiet him. He even offers to buy him a toy, garland, and sweets, and he wants to take him on a joy ride. The child, however, will have nothing to do with him. He keeps repeating: "I want my father. I want my mother." 6

The story centers around the loss of the paradisiacal state of man. The child may be taken to represent human consciousness in the early stages of purity and innocence. It is only when he comes in contact with reality that he becomes really susceptible to experience. And experience is not always pleasant or wholesome. His separation from his parents implies fall from grace and banishment from Eden. He strays into the hell of his own making because he cannot resist temptations. His fall, like Adam's, is the result of his inordinate cravings and desires. The fact that he renounces the once-cherished pleasures gives promise of return to grace.

"The Lost Child" is satisfying, autonomous, and complete as a work of art. Anand rightly calls it a "prose poem", for it emanates from a basic poetic impulse - the song of innocence and experience in the mind of man. An exploration of child psychology, the story takes us in the presence of illuminations, mapping out new dimensions of reality. But most of all, the power of orchestrating

different themes and motives into a fused harmony gives it its incomparable excellence.

The Conqueror is another pretty piece dealing with child psychology. The hero here is a five year-old child, who wants to be accepted by his playmates who are older. The children of varying ages assemble at a foothill to play the game of moek-warfare. They have very good reasons to exclude the little child from their game:

... though there were a great many of them, they all seemed of one mind, if not with regard to all things, yet with regard to two; one, that the highest rock before them was the fort about which they were to range themselves in opposing parties to fight and conquer; two that the new arrival, the little child of five who was coming with them, was not to be allowed to take part in the battle, because he was too small, hand no bow and arrow, might get hurt and thus cause them to be reprimanded by their parents.7

The little child, however, is not to be daunted. As the other children recede to the foot of the hill, he shouts at the top of his voice: "Wait, I am coming", Soon, he realizes the treachery of the grown-up boys and knows that they are intent on bypassing him. Determined, he runs toward the hill, but the stumbles against a rock in the process. A

7. Ibid, p. 68
little cry rises from his throat, "rich with pain, bringing dewy tears to his eyes." For a moment, he looks at the turquoise blue sky, and then he makes a momentous decision: to rush headlong toward the top of the hill, unmindful of the consequence:

His gait was full of power now and the small mounds seemed to aid his progress by their slow rises and falls; at each incline his feet moved with the force derived from the last decline.

"Go back, go back!" the boys shouted as he approached the foot of the hill. He still kept running and did not answer.

"Go back, go back!" they called with weak, disapproving, cautious voices.

But in the darkness of the swiftly approaching night to ran up the hill, his bright face showing to his fellows the torchlight of the conqueror.  

The success of the story lies in the assertion of the human will which the boy represents. He is simple, innocent, and brave, reaching out for love and fellowship; but when he is rejected by his companions, he makes a new resolve and becomes strong, determined and manly. He is a Gulliver among

8. Ibid, p. 70
Lilliputians; yet in a different sense, he is merely childish and his ascent to the hill an exercise in self-deception. The other boys are fully justified in rejecting him. In the light of their wisdom, the comic act of the child seems absurd. Apparently, there are two scales of values: one is represented by the hero; the other, by his companions. The clash between the two constitutes the basic tension in the story, leading to the final act of assertion and conquest. The story achieves an effective and, at times, powerful dramatization of child consciousness.

Other short story "Lullaby", is a fine evocation of a young working mother's state of mind as she sits rocking her dying Child in her lap and recalling memories of her lover, while she feeds the machine with handfuls of jute, in a factory. Her persistent lullaby, "Sleep/oh sleep/My baby, sleep" has for its background music all the harsh sounds in the factory. Both the human song and the machine jazz are repeated in the story, at the end, the lullaby stops when the child dies, but the machine jazz goes on uninterrupted. The machine has ultimately triumphed over the human being, needless of human hopes and frustrations.

"Birth" shows another working mother in a crisis in our cruel society, but this time far more fortunate in the upshot of her ordeal 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 work alone; but, in this hour of trial, she refuses to panic. Her native rustic ruggedness is reinforced by an inner strength derived from her deep-seated, simple peasant faith in the gods. As she lies writhing on the ground, she sees a vision of Goddess Kali in the sky above. This gives her so much courage that when the child arrives she is even able to manage the necessary midwifery herself, and, at the end, she is putting the baby in the basket and going to break stones again. Like Gauri in Anand's novel, Old Woman and the Cow, Parvati too is sustained by her traditional faith in her hour of need. The imaginative description of Parvati's ordeal lifts the entire narrative to a higher plane where the supernatural touch of her vision of Kali blends harmoniously with the emotionally charged atmosphere. Apart from this, the story also demonstrates how Anand's best work reveals a deep apprehension of what is enduring in the Indian folk tradition. Parvati is a representative figure; she is traditional rustic Indian Womanhood at its very best.

"Lajwanti" is the story of a young, motherless rustic girl, whose husband is away at college. She finds herself an easy target of the amorous attentions of her lascivious, pock-marked brother in law; discovers to her horror that her
mother-in-law connives at his doings; runs away to her father's house but is sent back; and in the end, tries unsuccessfully to drown herself in a well. As she is fished out, her plaintive cry is, "There is no way for me ... I am ... condemned to live." The caged mania which she carries with her in her flight is evidently symbolic. Equally realistic is the portrayal in "The Parrot in the Cage" of Rukmani, an old woman who has lost her all in the holocaust of the partition of India and whose sole companion during the migration from Lahore to Amritsar is a pet parrot. Like the maina in the previous story, the parrot here carries a symbolic suggestion; it perhaps shows how the old woman's deprivation is so total that her nearest and dearest now is not a human being but a bird. "The Gold Watch" presents an Indian clerk working in a British firm, who is forced to retire prematurely because a better connected replacement has been found for the job. On his retirement, he receives from his British boss a gold watch which he drops and breaks while receiving. This little mishap is symbolic of all that has gone wrong in the twenty-year long relationship between Sharma and his British superiors, with the Indian's pathetic inferiority complex, being complemented by the white man's superiority complex. The breaking of the watch is perhaps also symbolic of the protagonist's unconscious desire that time should stop, so that the future, so painful to contemplate, should never materialize "Old Bapu" and "the
"Cobbler and the Machine" are stories of tub aged outcasts. Bapu, a weakling with a shrivelled leg, has been deprived of his land by his uncle, he comes to a city in search of a livelihood, but since he looks as old as seventy (while he is only fifty), he cannot find work and is condemned to starve.

"The Cobbler and the Machine" weaves around the central figure of Saudagar, an old cobbler. The story is narrated by a child, who has much to do with the inescapable flow of events that culminate in tragedy. In fact, it is he who successfully persuades the cobbler to buy a shoemaking machine to increase his trade. In so doing, Saudagar incurs a heavy debt, and the strain to pay off the debt by working day and night breaks him completely. He oscillates between hope and despair until he dies. His promise to prepare an English shoe for the child-narrator remains unfulfilled:

"But that day never came, for, worn out by fatigue of producing many more shoes than he had ever sewn to pay off the debt, drained his life blood by the sweat that was always pouring of his body, he fell stone dead one evening." The apparent casualness with which the event is described heightens the tragic effect. The narrator's own sense of guilt, his deep attachment to the cobbler, and his innocent daydreaming about having a supple English shoe lend

9. Ibid, p. 80
poignance to the story. It would be unfair to dismiss the story as simply an indictment of the credit system. The emotional appeal is far too rich, complex, and varied to justify such a limited view. A tender, wistful melancholy pervades the atmosphere, suggesting the disorganization of life and the imminence of death. The pervasive gloom is relieved, to some extent, by the warm naturalness of the relation between Saudagar and the child.

These tales of pathos are full of overtones of social criticism. *"Lajwanti's"* tale is representative of the helplessness of the Indian woman in the traditional rustic joint family. Rukmani's tale is typical of countless similar tragedies which were the legacy of the partition of India. *"The Gold Watch"*, as already suggested, is a revealing comment on race-relations, and while old Bapu's plight is a slap in the face of an economy which denies the citizen the fundamental right to work, *"The Cobbler and the Machine"* can also be regarded as a perceptive gloss on the seamy side of industrialism. Nevertheless, the dominant impression produced by these stories is not that of a social criticism which remains subordinated to the pathos of the human situation of the protagonists.

This strain of social awareness is central to the group of stories led by *"The Power of Darkness"*. In these tales Anand's acute understanding of the complex social
forces at work in modern India finds effective expression. "The Power of Darkness" illustrates how the India of today is a battle-ground where tradition clashes with modernity. When a huge dam is being expeditiously constructed in the Punjab, a little hamlet named after Goddess Kamli is about to be submerged. The villagers with their deep-rooted suspicions about anything modern consider the giant monster of cement and steel as an insult to the goddess, and pertinently ask: "How can your electricity vie with Kamli, the Mother?" When this confrontation between obstinate orthodoxy and impatient modernity leads to an impasse, Bali provides a happy solution by a virtual stroke of genius. An electrician, who can also play the role of the village bard, Bali is himself an excellent example of a synthesis of the old and the new. By means of a rousing bardic ritual he convinces the villagers that the very goddess who had incarnated herself in their village as Kamli, has now re-incarnated herself as electricity in the new dam.

"Death of a Lady" carries the theme of cupidity to the furthest limit of ingenuity. Lady Bhandari, the central character, is at the point of death, but all she can think of is her buried treasure. She alternates between reverie and hallucination, suspended between life and death. Her favorite dog, Pluto, appears to her in two different lights—

10. Anand, Mulk Raj: The Power of Darkness
as her beloved son and as messenger from death's dark kingdom: "Pluto ... Plootie ... Ploot ... Putar, my only son", and "Ja, ja, ja go from here ... dog ... Dure, dure, kutia ... You and your master Yama, who have come to fetch me. She desperately clings to life even in the face of death: "Not yet, I have not revised my will". This is her only regret. The images of hell terrify her:

Under the pupils of her eyes, the loud drum strokes of the sinking heart, spread the confusion of her drowning soul, the swish of the waters of hell surging up to her ears ... The dark gutter of the nether-world was full of blood. And the snakes and scorpions of punishment were floating alongside her. And through the blackness of the horizon, toward which she was being borne along, she could see the doots, maces in hand, all waiting to drag her to the court of Yama, for the trial, the final reckoning.

She would atone for her sins if she could, but that is not to be, as the sands of time are running out. Death is around the corner:

Lustflame of life in her half-closed eyes, muffled pain of the body struggling to be well, the tom tom of the heart reverberating across the soul, almost like an incantation, congealing the flesh into rhythms of fever, she

12. Ibid, p. 84
looked upward, among the cornices of the ceiling, as though searching far something, the last straw she could hang on to in order to keep a float in the ocean of existence.  

But her self-pity and remorse are fleeting emotions. She would rather lose her life than part with her wealth. When the hour of death approaches, she shows signs of relent ign but soon relapses into her old, familiar stance:

Colonel Passricha felt her pulse. Then, slowly, deliberately he took the stethoscope to her heart. There was a sudden gurgle from Lady Bhandari's stomach and she spoke, filling Miss Rose with hope: "I have put it all ... han ... the money ... in cash ... there!"

"But where have you put it Lady Sahiba?" Miss Rose asked. But there only came the final death rattle. And it issued, like a muffled breath, dribbling and saying, "Give Doctor, only forty not sixty ..."  

Lady Bhandari merits a special place in the gallery of characters in modern fiction. She symbolizes cupidity, one of the Seven Deadly Sins, but she is also sullen, mean, and selfish. In her dark descent to the valley of death, the only redeeming feature is her love for her dog. But he, too,

13. Ibid, p. 84
fails her, and becomes her tormentor in a different guise. Her blood congeals with the fear of death, prompting her to make revisions and decisions, but her intractable, demonic nature asserts itself. Unlike Faustus, she is left untouched by the turmoils of the soul. Her thoughts center on the closet and the moneybox, and her dying words suggest the level of dehumanization to which she has sunk. "Death of a Lady" is truly a masterpiece of satiric art.

In "The Tractor and the Corn Goddess" a similar problem is tackled, but a different solution is indicated. The arrival of a Tractor brought by a progressive-minded young landlord creates panic in a village. The giant machine is severally accused of having desecrated Mother Earth; of violating the Corn Goddess; of containing jinns, bhuts and Shiv-Shakti; and of being a weapon of destruction with concealed guns to be used to shoot the peasants down. The clever landlord then has the tractor dismantled in the presence of the villagers, who are finally convinced that the thing is after all only so much of "iron and steel, so tempered as to plough the land quickly." 15 The peasant's down-to-earth commonsense ultimately triumphs over superstition. The story is also a satire on the weight of convention in a feudalistic society. When the radical young

landlord, who has newly succeeded to the estate, remits taxes and refuses to accept nazrana, his tenants, instead of being delighted are shocked at this lapse from feudalistic propriety.

Feudalism is also the object of Anand's satire in "A Kashmir Idyll" with its most ironic title. Here, what starts as a pleasure trip in Kashmir ends as a tragedy of exploitation and retribution. A petty state nobleman compels a young tenant to row his pleasure-boat, ignoring the poor man's pitiful plea that he has to attend to the funeral of his mother who is just dead. The protesting young tenant is, however, himself shocked at having annoyed his lord and master by so gross an act of disobedience, and grovels in the dust, in atonement. The Fat Nawab driven to hysterical glee at this conclusive demonstration of his feudal power, is chocked to death by his fit of laughter. The theme of how unjustly the have-tos treat the havenotes is handled in a more restrained manner in "The Price of Bananas", in which a well-to-do businessman not only makes niggardly recompense for a service done to him by a fruit-vendor but also unjustly accuses him of having a hand in his discomfiture.

"The Price of Bananas" is about a monkey's capacity for having fun at the cost of a petty-minded trader. The comedy is enacted on the platform of a railway terminal. A monkey leaps across the top of carriages to snatch the embroidered cap of the trader, making him an object of
laughter. The passengers, porters, and the miscellaneous crowd assembled on the platform apparently sympathize with him, though they secretly relish the fun. Ultimately, a fruit vendor succeeds in rescuing the cap from the clutches of the monkey by offerign him a piece of banana as a bribe. He demands from the trader a sum of two annas, the going price of bananas. The trader, however, throws him one anna and will not pay more at any cost. Meanwhile, the train steams away. The other passengers fully enjoy the fun, and one of them goes to the extent of drawing a cartoon of the trader, to his great discomfiture. The story, thus, is unalloyed comedy, the beginning setting the tone:

One can see thousands of monekys, performing miracles or tricks, just as you prefer to call their antics, almost with the agiltiy that General Hanumant Singh brought to his noble task helping Rama. Of course, as succeeding ages have brought more and more highly organized armies and improved weapons, the fighting skill of the monkeys has diminished through lack of regular training until only the daring plans of the Pentagon for training gorillas and monekys to fight in new wars, can revive their historic prowess. But the monkeys have lost none of their capacity for fun; and their instinctiveability to spot a demon, whom they can fight or amuse themselves with, has remained as sharp and uncanny as of yore. 16

The key pattern is decidedly comic. The monkey's antics are as much pure fun as the behavior and gestures of the trader on having lost his cap are comic:

He was unnerved completely, not by any default of the coolie, but by the adroit skill of the monkey, who leapt down from the top of our compartment, snatched away the fine embroidered cap of the businessman, and got up to the neem tree.

"Are! Are! Father of fathers! What have you done, monkey, brother-in-law!" the businessman shouted in utter confusion. And his face which had been round and smung, was covered with perspiration.\(^{17}\)

In all these stories of social criticism there is a clear under current of comedy. The ignorance of the villagers in "The Power of Darkness" and "The Tractor and the Corn Goddess" and the discomfiture of the rich businessman at the hands of the monkey in "The Price of Bananas" are obviously diverting; but the comedy here is evidently secondary to satire on social modes. In "A Pair of Mustachias", "The Signature" and "Two Lady Rams", however, comedy holds the stage, relegating social criticism to the background, while in "The Liar" we have unalloyed laughter. "A Pair of Mustachios" presents Khan Azam Khan, who claims

\(^{17}\) Ibid, p. 14
descent from an ancient noble Afghan family. Now reduced to poverty, he still retains all his feudal haueteur of which his up-turned "tiger moustache" is a concrete symbol. When he finds the village shop-keeper turning the tips of his moustaches upward until they resemble the aristocratic "tiger moustache", he is so profoundly disturbed that he enters into a strange deal with the law-born, shop-keeper, according to which the Khan will transfer all his household that both the tips of the moustaches of the upstart come down permanently and are kept glued in the "goat style" appropriate to his station in life. For the feudal "downstart", the world is indeed well lost for a bunch of hair on the upper lip of an upstart. Feudalism is equally the source of farcical humour in "The Signature". Subramaniam, a dark official, who arrives at Aliabad to take the signature of the Nawab on an important document, finds a business which should normally take not more than a couple of minutes dragging for days together, since feudal etiquette demands that a guest be properly and elaborately entertained before any business is transacted. It is difficult to decide which is the more comic of the two - Subramaniam's plight in the feudal world in which he finds himself "a stranger and afraid or the Nawab's refusal to realize the futility of obstinately clinging to traditional feudal ways in the modern age.
The Comedy in "Two Lady Rams" arises out of the complications of bigamy which, in the pre-Independence days in India, was far from uncommon - Lalla Jahinda Ram receives a knighthood, the glory and joy of which are clouded by the fact that he has two wives (the first fifty and second half her age) and insists on attending the investiture ceremony as Lady Ram. He finally cuts the Gordian Knot by taking both of them to the ceremony, where the appearance of the two Lady Rams creates quite a sensation.

"The Lion" is a highly diverting account of Labhu, an old village shikari whose tall tales of shikar are garnished with monsters, magicians and damsels.

The last three stories to be considered "The Tamarind Tree", "The Silver Bangles" and "The Thief" have one feature in common. They are all primarily studies in human psychology. Though other elements such as social criticism, and humanitarian compassion, which are almost ubiquitous in Anand's work are also present. In "The Tamarind Tree", Roopa a young wife and an expectant mother, cannot satisfy her longing to eat tamarind from her neighbour's tree, but a far greater disappointment of her is the said realization that the fear of the elders and the weight of convention have made it impossible for her to communicate satisfactorily with her husband, for her pligh is that her inner impulses have always remained where they were incommunicable even to
her man. This invests the story with obvious psychological interest, though ostensibly Roopa's tale would appear to be another variation on Anand's favourite theme, viz, the position of woman in traditional Hindu society.

In a similar way, superficially viewed, "The Silver Bangles" would appear to be a story on the usual theme of caste distinction, but, on closer scrutiny, is revealed to be a study in sexual jealousy. Here a good-looking sweeper girl who sports the silver bangles given to her on the occasion of her betrothal by her mother, is unjustly accused by the lady of the house of having stolen them. The poor girl also admonished that untouchables in the South are not supposed to wear silver at all. As the ending of the story makes clear, the higher caste lady of the house, who is sexually frigid, is actually jealous of the attraction her husband feels for the sweeper girl, and is only seeking refuge in her caste superiority to hide her inferiority vis-a-vis the untouchable beauty.

"The Thief", is also far more than a presentation of the theme of humanitarian compassion as it would at first sight appear to be.

"The Thief" is more complex and varied in theme and treatment. But the mood and tone do not synchronize with its dominant theme. The denouement, when it comes, does not appear natural; it gives the impression of being forced. The
narrative technique, too, seems to be at variance with the artistic intention of the author. The counterpointing of the elevated poetic utterance in most parts of the story and the close matter-of-factness of its concluding part creates the effect of pastiche.

The very opening suggests a certain magnification of effect:

The "hoom" of the summer months in India is inexplicable, except in terms of an airlessness which seems to dissolve everything about one slowly and surely into a vague nothingness. Perhaps, only a graph could illustrate it, because it is as much a sound effect as sense data, and sound can be drawn. Or, maybe, one could dispose certain daubs of paint in such a way as to break the exact symbolism of the Wheel of Life in a Tibetan scroll, and show all the concrete objects falling away, crumbling like the edges of the earth on judgement day, the stars breaking, the comets shaking, the seas full of fire and the sun alone standing there on high, a magnificent orb of brightness; a cruel blood-sucking demon, scorching all the sentient things as in some pre-historic war of the elements.18

The Ganesh, touched by the summer heat, makes it a point to come out to the terrace of his ancestral house with

unfailing regularity. But he has another more important reason for doing so. A beggar maid, belonging to the group of beggars near the statue of King George V, has attracted his attention, and has even aroused his desire. But the erotic impulse is mixed with a feeling of tenderness and disgust:

On another day, Ganesh had seen the beggar woman feeding her child on a bared breast. And that had aroused a feeling of unbearable tenderness in him, a tenderness, however, which gnawed at his vitals and aroused a lust of which the nether point was fixed somewhere in the memories of his own childhood.

And, later, all these feelings had mixed yet with another - with a disgust he had suddenly felt on imagining her unwashed, dishevelled body in his arms, the putrid sore of her mouth touching his, the mouth which had eaten dirt and the filth of the rubbish bin, which had drunk the slime of the drains.¹⁹

Watching the beggar woman day in and day out, Ganesh comes to acquire a philosophical attitude toward life and all created things. He even ruminates on the nature of the universe:

The whole thing was a joke, he had sought to tell

¹⁹. Ibid, p. 97
himself, the whole world was a joke and nothing was really stable. He, himself inheriting half the wealth of his dead father, was yet a slave to all the inhibitions and prohibitions of his elder brother and sister-in-law, living a confined, conventional life, contrary to everything he had learnt at college and in full view of the disintegration, death and disease about him. And if it was all a joke, then this woman was a leer, an abject, worthless nothing, an ignorant, illiterate and dumb creature except that she possessed a pair of hips like boulders, the swaying of which excited him and from which he might get the pleasure of the moment, a mere particle of time in the long eons of eternity where nothing counted or mattered.20

But, in spite of his prolonged philosophical meditation, he cannot stifle the flame of lust shimmering within him. The very sight of the bare breasts of the beggar maid inflames his body "like a slow forest fire, which comes creeping up from the root like smoke but becomes a wild, red blaze suddenly in one crucial moment".21. He feels the rustling "of a strange song in his ears, the loam song of dizzy desire mounting to the crescendo of a titanic choir."22 His hopeless passion - composed of pity, desire,

20. Ibid, p. 98
22. Ibid.
and disgust keeps tormenting him until he decides upon a course of action which might bring him closer to the woman. He steals a bag of grain from the store while his sister-in-law is in the bathroom. He has already sent Biju, the boy-servant, to fetch razor blades from the market. As he is carrying the bag of grain toward the beggar woman, Biju returns. Embarrassed by his act, he makes Biju an accomplice, asking him to carry the bag. At the same time, he cautions, Biju not to disclose his secret. In the meantime, his sister-in-law emerges from the bathroom and starts looking for the storeroom key. She makes queries. Unable to give any satisfactory answer, Ganesh blames Biju for stealing the grain. The poor boy is beaten and dismissed from service. Eventually, he becomes one of the beggars and sits at the first removal from the beggar woman. Ganesh has the mortification of seeing them together: "His neck twitched more furiously, and his heavy lidded eyes blinked, as if someone were digging pins into them, especially because he saw the servant-boy, Biju, seated by her almost as though he had taken complete charge of her."23

The image of the thief is closely woven into the very fabric of the story. Ganesh, the hero, is a thief in more ways than one. The beauty of the beggar maid, whom he watches persistently, is an object of his thievery. He also steals the bag of grain from the storeroom of his sister-in-law.

sister-in-law. What is more, he tells a number of lies to cover up his act of thieving. But, by the strange logic of circumstance, the whole thing recoils on him, and he is caught in the coils of his own inhibited passions.

The story also implies a contrast in values. While Ganesh has no qualms of conscience in framing Biju on the charge of theft, causing his immediate dismissal and his reduction to the status of pauper, Biju remains true to his word. He could have cleared himself by revealing the truth, but he values loyalty above anything else. Thus, the clash between two contradictory scales of value lends an ironic overtone to the story.

The title story, "The Barber's Trade Union" tells the story of Chandu, the barber boy, who blazes a new trail for his profession. The point of interest lies in the manner in which he achieves this rare feat. He moves from sterile existence to a new kind of freedom. Chandu, who occasionally visits the neighboring town, has developed new fangled ideas about his trade. He dresses himself up in a white turban, white tunic, and pumps, and he carries a leather bag in the manner of the town physician. In his borrowed plumes, he goes on his daily round of shaving. He is snubbed by the village landlord and by the moneylender for wearing funny clothes and for being avant-garde. Chandu retaliates by
refusing to shave them in the future. He manages to buy a bicycle and henceforth does all his shaving business in the town. In the meantime, the elders of the village must go without being shaved; their unkempt and shabby looks provoking amusement in the village. Chandu enjoys the fun most of all and has the last laugh. Later, he organizes the barber's trade union and starts a salon, the first of its kind in the area.

The story's center of gravity lies in the characterization of Chandu. He is sprightly, resourceful, and witty; it is no wonder that he is held in high esteem by the child narrator. Chandu is an ardent advocate of the new order of things. He stands firmly against caste, custom, and convention, and when the occasion arises, he pays back the tyrannical village elders in their own coin. He is sincere as well as advanced in his profession, and therefore he wins admiration for his craft.

As for the technique employed by the author, the first person narration solves the two-fold purpose of dramatizing the incidents from a distance and of throwing the hero's character into sharp relief. The comic method may seem at variance with the serious intention, but it actually helps to intensify the total effect. The beginning of the story is mock-heroic:
Among the makers of modern India, Chandu, the barber boy of our village, has a place, which will be denied him unless I press for the recognition of his contribution to history. Chandu's peculiar claim to recognition rested, to tell the truth, on an exploit of which he did not know the full significance. But, then, unlike most great men of India today, he had no very exaggerated notion of his own importance, though he shared with them a certain native egotism which was sometimes rather charming.²⁴

The mock-heroic vein continues throughout the story. When the village landlord sees Chandu in a new rig, he bursts into torrents of speech, the effect of which is almost ludicrous: "The son of a pig! He is bringing a leather bag of cowhide into our house and a coat of the marrow of, I don't know, some other animal, and those evil black Angrezi boots. Get out! Get out! You will defile my religion. I suppose you have no fear of anyone"²⁵. The scene in which the village elders are exposed to ridicule in the presence of a congregation of peasants is a masterpiece of comic construction:

"Ha! Ha!" I shouted hilariously, struck by the contradiction of the big thick moustache (which I knew the landlord dyed) with the prickly white bush on his jowls. "Ha! ha!" I roared, "a sick lion! He looks seedy!"

²⁵. Ibid, p. 5
"Sh!" warned Chandu, "Don't make a row! But look at the Sahukar. He looks like a leper with the brown tinge of tobacco on his walrus moustache which I once used to trim. Now you run past the shop and call 'Beavers, Beavers'. They can't say anything to you!"

I was too impetuous a disciple of the impish Chandu to wait to deliberate.

"Beavers! Beavers!" I shouted.²⁶

Anand has amply demonstrated his mastery of the grotesque. The description of the shabby appearance of the elders and the mirth it provokes is an instance in point:

The rumour about the barber boy's strike spread, and jokes about the unkempt beards of the elders of the village became current in every home. Even those who were of high castes, even the members of the families of elders, began to giggle with laughter at the shabby appearance of the great ones and made rude remarks about their persons. And it was seaid that at least the landlord's wife threatened to run away with somebody, because, being younger than her husband by twenty years, she had borne with him as long as he kept himself trim, but was now disgusted with him beyond the limits of reconciliation.²⁷

²⁶. Ibid, p. 8
²⁷. Ibid, p. 8-9
In fact, irony is central to Anand’s method, which unites the two opposite poles of levity and seriousness. The story is a fine example of the ironic treatment of a fairly serious theme.

"A Dark Night" is about the tragedy of a young woman. Her husband is out in the city, in the grip of communal frenzy. She waits, tense and apprehensive, while her infant sleeps peacefully in the cradle. She alternates between hope and despair, as the dread hour of waiting lengthened. There is no sign of her husband’s return, and she suffers a partial anesthesia of feeling. At last, she hears a knock at the door.

"Who is it!? She shouted, her heart jumping and her body all a tremble.

"We have brought your husband!" a voice answered, Suddenly, a piercing cry rose from her throat, an involuntary ejaculation of pain.

But then she could not speak nor shout, nor cry, nor think.

And yet she understood what had happened.28

The drift of the story is toward dark despair. The agony of waiting, the darkness of the night, the sleeping child, the mutilated corpse and above all, the turmoil in

the mind reinforce the relentless pattern of tragedy. The poetic treatment of the theme sustains the tragic mood to a large extent, and the atmosphere is suffused with pathos.

The title story, "The Reflections on the Golden Bed", describes the career of Lalla Ram Narain in his steady and expansive pursuit of wealth. Rising from a commoner's state to the dizzy heights of fortune, he cannot keep his felicity forever. In the course of his business career, he has been, successively, a cloth merchant, banker, and contractor. Every time he faces bankruptcy, he manages to rise like the phoenix from the ashes. However, at times he is burdened by the qualms of conscience, and wants to do something about it. Hoping to appease his tormented mind, he sees an astrologer. The astrologer pronounces his judgment that lust for gold is his real curse. It is the fear of losing money that is at the root of his sorrow. He is advised to invest his entire fortune in the making of a golden bed, studded with costly jewels. The work accomplished, keeping a watch on the golden bed becomes his only preoccupation: "The jewels glistened, the diamonds shone, and the rubies filled his heart with new red corpuscles of blood. There was an incomprehensible change for the better in his whole orientation toward existence." Thieves, however, steal a ruby out of the embossed bed, and his assurance about preserving his wealth dwindles. Intensifying his vigil, he

29. Ibid, p. 126
cuts himself adrift from the mainstream of life:

What was he to do? Was there no way by which he could ensure the safety to the indescribably beautiful monument to his industry and pain, his golden bed in which all his wealth lay concentrated? Surely, it could be kept safe in the vaults of a Bank ... but what if the Bank failed, or the atom bomb fell heralding the new war that was threatened! It could of course, be ensured; but which Insurance Company in the world would take the risk involved, and how large would be the premium! No, it was impossible. The only thing to do was to keep it under stricter control, to be more vigilant... So he began to spend longer hours in bed. 30

This arrangement continues for a while, but soon his health fails, and he is confined to his bed. Eventually, he goes under, meeting inglorious death. The curse is lifted; there is no more fear of losing money.

The events in the story have been described in a neat, compact manner from the authorial point of view. The satiric intention is only family disguised in the narrative texture. The cupidity of the old miser, his fears and torments, and his ignominious death make his a tragicomic figure. But at the same time, he is immensely believable as a person. His lust for gold in the face of all that is normal accounts for his uniqueness as a living human being. He is truly a modern

30. Ibid.
version of King Midas - a symbol of unashamed materialism in the modern world.

"A True Story" is an attempt to fuse folklore with the realities of village life. Udho, the simple unheroic hero, performs the supreme act of sacrifice for the sake of love. While engaged in the daily tedium of grazing cattle, he takes time out to tease the village girls, especially Roopa, whom he secretly desires. A fair is taking place in a nearby village, but he is not permitted by his father to go there. He goes to his favorite haunt, the top of a bounder hallowed by the memory of Lord Shiva and his consort, Parvati. He sits on the top and plays on his flute. When Roopa, who has given him no encouragement, passes by the rock, he tells her how much he loves her. She casually demands proof of his ardor, and he instantly gives the proof, unheard-of and unimaginable:

"Roopa, listen, mad woman!"

"If you have such love for me, prove it by jumping down from the boulder", she said airily to dismiss his ardor.

"Look, I will show you", shouted the lovelorn youth. And, impulsively, he matched his word with the deed, jumping from the boulder toward her.31

Moved by this death-defying proof of his devotion, Rooopa feels a terrible need to reciprocate. She climbs up to the top of the boulder in the momentum of her urge and flings herself down. The boulder, the mute witness of the tragic event, becomes a shrine for future lovers to worship.

"A True Story" weaves religious symbolism and folk imagination into meaningful unity. The wedding night of Lord Shiva and Parvati provides the clue to the pattern of action. The union of the two lovers is to be solemnized not here but hereafter. Separated in life, they become one in death. Dying in love, they achieve sanctification. Thus, a simple and sentimental tale has been raised to the level of a classic. Although the setting is realistic and the dialogue retains an earthy flavor, the thrust of the story is toward a romanticism, suffused with tender, poignant, and sublime feelings.

"The Bridegroom" describes a casual episode leading to the comedy of the grotesque. A marriage party is on its way to Gujranwala in Lahore. The bridegroom, Mela Ram, usually lazy and indolent, is tense with excitement, and his behavior on the occasion is strange and exotic. He gets drunk in the second-class compartment of the train at the instigation of his friends, and he begins to recite love poems and droll stories. He plays bridge with his friends for a while and then goes to the lavatory, laughing
and singing and making all kinds of grimaces. His friends, unmindful of the absence of the bridegroom, continue with the game. Stopping at stations, the trains finally reaches Lahore, where the bride's party waits to receive the bridegroom with pomp and flourish. But, to the great dismay of everyone, the bridegroom is nowhere to be found. The lavatory is empty. A frantic search is made, but there is no trace of Mela Ram. It is suspected that he has flung himself down the river from across the window of the lavatory in his drunken stupor. Anxious queries are made, but everyone remains helpless. Mela Ram's friends hang their heads in shame for having offered him the drinks which had apparently led to the crisis. The happy and eager hosts put on mournful expressions, and their womenfolk burst into loud lament. An atmosphere of gloom prevails, and the marriage party moves dejectedly toward the yard. There, to their great surprise and relief, they find Mela Ram alighting from a bus, no other explanation for his escapade "I thought I could get down at Shah Dara and walk to Lahore, so that I could decide on the way whether I should go in for this marriage at all."

Obviously, the story contains implicit comment on family arranged marriages so common in India. The beginning of the story strikes the keynote:

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Marriage in our country is a very auspicious occasion. Though made and planted in heaven, through the intercession of the priests who can get access to God by way of calendars and horoscopes, it is actually arranged by the holy barber, the official go-between, who interprets the divine will and all the high spiritual conceits elaborated by the Brahmins, the terms of the dowry, the shape, size and complexion of the bride and the bridegroom, and other such considerations... Somewhere in the course of all the intricate rituals, the bridegroom actually sees the face of the bride for the first time, and then they live happily ever afterward or so they say, for divorce is unknown in the law of the Hindu. 33

The character of Mela Ram, the bridegroom, is drawn with deft, humorous touches. He gets buoyant as soon as he is made to drink wine; from then on, his action and behavior become casual and funny in the extreme. His escape from the lavatory of the train while his companions are engaged in the bridge game, is very illogical indeed, at least from the point of view of propriety. But his return at the right moment to join the wedding party, even though he has given some anxious moments to everyone, comes as a fitting finale to the story. And yet, there is logic in whatever he does. The central focus of the story consists in the human comedy the free, unrepressed behavior of the bridegroom, the embarrassment and anxiety of the guests and the hosts, and

33. Ibid, p. 89
the shift of perspective from joy to gloom, and back to joy again, all providing a rich fare of fun.

"The Prodigal Son" as the title suggests, bears analogy to the biblical tale of the return of the wayward son, but it explores altogether new and tragic dimensions. Old, illiterate Gobindi, who has received two letters from her son, Sher Singh, wants to find someone to read them. She goes to the village moneylender and asks him to read the letters. The moneylender, however, declines to read, for he has a grudge against Sher Singh, whom he holds responsible for spoiling his son, Trilok Chand. He even rebukes the old woman for wasting his precious time. But all his remonstrances and rebukes mean nothing to the mother, who is full of love for her absent son, now serving in the army. Finally, she has her way with the moneylender, who reluctantly reads the letters. The contents of the letter, written in Hindi, fill her heart with pride as it tells her of her son's safe journey, of his welfare, and of his promotion to the rank of Havildar. The second letter, written in English and bearing the seal of His Majesty's government, requires another reader, for the moneylender has no knowledge of English. The old woman looks about frantically for someone who can read English. She meets Trilok Chand and asks him to read the letter:

May I be a sacrifice for you ... He has written,
actually written! Two letters instead of one. He won't rain, he will come like a storm. One is in Hindustani which your father has read for me; and the other is in Angrezi God bless you, son, read it for me. He is your friend, after all. Do you remember how you used to be inseparable! You know him better than anyone, son. And whatever the others may say, you know he was an angel.  

To this request, Trilok Chand, after reading the letter, says: "Whether he was ever an angel or not, he has become an angel now." The old woman bursts into a hysterical wail as the meaning of his words dawns upon her:

"Oh, what curse against my love has prospered in your death, son! Oh, what ever leeds did you do to cause your death!"

The pallor on her face and evaporated; instead, the withered root of her visage burnt like red hot cinders even as it secreted tears; while the dead air blistered on her neck with the fury of the angry sun.

The leisurely folk, who were enjoying their siesta awoke and rushed toward her, while she fell to beating her breasts, her forehead, her cheeks and her thighs, even as she intoned the dirge: "Hai, Hai, Shera, Hai! Hai!"

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34. Ibid, p. 110
35. Ibid, p. 111
The tragic finale moves us with tremendous, cumulative force, the effect of which is not less profound for the dramatic and detached presentation. The author at no point identifies with the old woman. He treats her like a wasted human heart, first rising to the dizzy heights of hope and joy, then sinking to the nadir of despair. The feelings in her heart describe a graph - with abrupt rise and fall in the nature of musical scale of crescendo and diminuendo. The power and the beauty of the story depend on the way the author contemplates and creates characters. Seizing a human situation with uncanny insight, he presents a valid commentary on the nature of life itself.

It may be noted that the figure of the prodigal son is kept deliberately in the background. His character and background are presented obliquely through the old woman's dialogue with others and through his letters, but mainly through the mother's emotional responses. Yet, his credibility as a human being is crucial to the story. He is important because he is the object of the old woman's adoration, and the thus functions as the prime mover in the story. The tragedy of the old woman is "too deep for tears", and even the detached villagers are moved by it. The prodigal son returns home symbolically, not in actuality returning to his origin rather than to his earthly parent.
The desolate mother can do nothing but cry. The Stoic calm with which Michael in Wordsworth's poem bears the calamity of his son's loss is not for her. She is much too frail and womanly to take up the stance of male courage.

An important aspect of Anand's short stories is its concern with the reality of organised evil. In all his short stories he appears as a social critic. The society he has seen and observed in the field of his work. His writings probe deeply into the social process, for him "literature is an expression of society" and the large majority of the questions raised by him are social questions: questions of tradition and convention, norms and genres, symbols and myth.