

Short stories of Mulk Raj Anand: A Storehouse of Indian Myths and Traditions

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Abstract

Our traditions and beliefs give rise to many myths. Many a times the Indian authors used their knowledge about myths and traditions and made stories based on them. Mulk Raj Anand is also highly traditional author who was impressed by the stories told to him as a child by his grandmother and he uses the mythical tales in his short stories. By reading these short stories, any reader is also acquainted with the traditional myths of our country. This article is an endeavor to bring to notice various myths used by Anand in his various short stories and the effect of these myths on the readers. Anand also tries to show the effect of the traditional beliefs and customs on the Indian women and proclaims the fact that women had to suffer at many places on the name of customs and traditions. In the veil of the beliefs and traditions of the family or castes, women were subjected to many forms of injustices and they too accepted all the torture on the name of custom. Dowry, Sati and harassment to widows are some of the common features he uses in his stories to depict the predicament of Indian women in the 20th century. He has also drawn attention of the readers towards the abusive language used for the women at that time. These stories help us analyze the status of women of India in the 20th century.

Key Words: Mulk Raj Anand, Myths and Traditions

India is a country where myths, legends, beliefs and traditions contribute immensely to cultural history of people. Till recent centuries oral traditions have been carrying forward the rich knowledge with precision to the benefit of all. Myths can be considered as a potent medium that common consciousness adheres to in the rituals as well as oral literature.

Every Indian is introduced to these legendary stories from his or her toddler age. Before young children begin reading on their own, they listen to these tales read by older members of the family or clan through oral narration. Indian life is framed on the beliefs prevalent in India since ages and most people believe these stories as if they were eternally true. It becomes difficult for some to digest that some of these tales, they have always savored, are myths.

Myth

Myth can be defined as a traditional and typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serve as a way to understand the worldview of people. Myth(s) are usually considered as espousing a popular belief or a story that has become associated with a person, institution or occurrence, especially one considered to illustrate a cultural ideal. Myths are usually a fiction or a half-truth, one that forms a part of an ideology. There is a need to understand the differences between tradition, belief, custom and legend and myth. A myth may sometimes give rise to certain beliefs and traditions that people start to follow generation to generation until it becomes a legend. Tradition stands for the passing down of elements of culture from one generation to another, especially by oral communication. A tradition can contribute to thought or behaviour followed by people continuously for generation to generation. These customs or usages viewed as a

coherent body of precedents can influence the present. Thus in a way handing down of the customs, beliefs from generation to generation can be called tradition (Kindersley, 2011).

Myth becomes a legend when an unverified story is handed down from earlier times. A romanticized or a popularized myth of modern times could also be called a legend. Myth is actually a traditional story, an attempt to explain mysteries, supernatural events and/or cultural traditions in a dramatic way. Folklores and folktales help these myths attain a popular standing among a clan or a cultural sector. Thus, in a way, myths, traditions, folklore, legends and beliefs are interrelated and take different forms in different religions or areas following different cultures. This is especially true in India because of its great diversity and a mingling of various cultures when the different cultured people came and settled in India like the Aryans, Muslims etc. Many of their beliefs and myths also became the myths of Indian people. Some customs followed in the native place of these foreigners had a logic reason but they had no relevance in their new abode yet out of practice they continued them and they became the part of customs of Indians too.

Women are considered the carriers of culture of a country. Culture is defined differently by different people. One may say culture is the way one behaves or talks or lives or believes. Edward Burnett Tylor defines culture as, "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Likewise, many of our Indian writers have tried to bring out these cultural aspects of India in their works. (Encyclopedia of Britannica, p. 1152).

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the trios who changed the story of Indian writing in English; other two being R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. He chose to write in English because he felt that Indian people and traditions are misunderstood

and misinterpreted by many outside India and to present the true picture of India it was necessary to present the various Indian characters in their true colours in his works. Anand has depicted representative Indian women in various roles and most of the time the marginalized pattern of their existence. He was asked in an interview by Vijay Mohan Sethi, "In contrast to the men-folk, your women characters are usually less revolting. Is it because you wanted to give a realistic picture of the society?" He answered, "Yes, indeed it is so. The docility of the woman or the acceptance of suffering by her is an important fact of the life...ever since the patriarchal period began, women have been suffering. Naturally, you present the women as they are-constrained on all sides. My own experience in life, and also in art, is that I have always found women weeping" (Sethi, 1990, p. 86).

Anand is considered a writer of the weak and marginalized. When his first novel *Untouchable* was published, people who believed that the common men can never be a topic of good literature were shocked and it was almost a first effort to bring out the poor and helpless condition the *Sudras* were facing in India and the solutions to the problem. From his short stories, we can quote many were the caste system and the myth attached to such custom and tradition is evident. For example, Sukhi, old low caste woman in 'Torrents of Wrath' was not allowed to buy food grains for her pets at the time of flood in town and when she had run out of food to feed her pets. The shopkeeper believed that it is better to keep the food grains stored for the higher caste than to waste it on the pets of the lower caste. When Sukhi got angry on not being able to procure some food for her pets in spite of being ready to pay for it, she threatened the *bania*, "I shall pollute your baskets by lifting the gram, if you will not give my little ones" (Anand, 2008, p. 106)

Women then and now

Indian women have stood beyond the historical definition of home bound Indian woman. She has evolved from the image of a goddess and 'devi' to the projection of her image as a 'sex-symbol'. There was indeed a time when women were worshipped in this country. Our great law-giver Manu gave a high place to women when he said, "Where women are worshipped, gods dwell," yet it is also true that during the later period of classical age, the belief was "The duty of a woman is to remain subject in her infancy to her father, in her youth to her husband and in her old age to her sons, no sacrifice, no penance and no fasting is allowed to women apart from their husbands; to pay obedience to her lord is the only means for a woman to obtain bliss in heaven. A woman is never fit for independence" (Vishnumrti, 25/14, 20).

The tradition and beliefs of a country are kept alive by the womenfolk of the country, true but it happens many times, that while trying to keep these traditions alive, unknowingly, they harm their own gender community and prove their greatest enemies. Some of the myths prevalent since ancient times were meant to keep women entrapped in the four walls of the house and so that they did not raise voice against males because the patriarchal structure of the society felt it comfortable to keep the women folk docile and dependent and their male ego was boosted by keeping the women under their feet. The social pressure of maintaining customs and traditions makes many a learned woman follow them in spite of knowing their uselessness and inapplicability. They have a society to face and in India a family cannot live isolated from a society. Man being a social animal prefers to live in a community as an inseparable part of the society. They consider themselves responsible to not only their kith and kin but also to the leaders of the society and the social group they belong to. And anyone who dares to think different is thrown out of the

societal surrounding and they have to strive to survive everyday life, their life becomes a hell and they are treated as if they are subject to "ex-communication". Many individuals have dared to not follow the rigid customs followed in their societal group since ages, but very few out of them were able to live with the changed ideas, either they had to surrender to the wants of the society or stay a life aloof from the near and dear ones.

There are instances when many girls dare to fall in love with boys of different caste and creed and when the family discovers they are immediately warned to stay away from the matter but if still she dares to start her marital life with him she has to forget the blessings of her elders. She is not included in any family functions; no one visits her house even her mother is not allowed to be with her when she needs her at time of conceiving or other times. Life becomes a punishment for her and these examples work as a standing warning to any other girl who dares to do so in future and many a times she prefers to end her life then to dare to accept a life of isolation and humility from the society.

Today many reformers and elite class proclaim that women have broken the shackles of old beliefs and are now free and have attained great heights of success. But it was just a few days back when two news item on the same page of the newspaper, one with the headline "Father, Uncle booked for honour killing in Jalgaon" and another news with the headline, "Women rule roost in the editorial departments of publishing houses". In the later news Menon, the founder of *Women Unlimited*, an associate of Kali for Women, who has been active in the South Asian women's movement for over 20 years, writes, "The change has come about because of women-owned and run publishing houses" Also Mita Kapur, CEO of *Siyahi*, says publishing in the recent past has seen women at the top and thus it is a less sexist industry in that sense. While it is a matter of rejoice reading such news; the news of case of

honour killing of Manisha Dhangar, who was allegedly strangled by her father, uncle and grandmother in her sleep at their Pathari village in Jalgaon because she was in love with a boy from a different caste fills one with frustration and anger. The questions which come up in the minds of the empathetic people are why women cannot express their feelings while man can openly go and do whatsoever they wishes, why a boy is never murdered for falling in love with a girl of different caste? And why does the grandmother and the women members of the house also render their help in such an evil act? (The Hitavada, 2012, p. 8, 9)

Myths and Tradition in Mulk Raj Anand's stories

While studying the short stories of Anand a reader across many such beliefs and customs and myths which are and were so strongly prevalent in the 20th century India. It is true that a lot has been changed today since then but when will the women gender be free of such horrendous customs altogether is a major question arising in anyone's mind today. A traditional Hindu family is depicted in the short story "Lajwanti" who suffers at the hands of in-laws and especially who is a victim of lust-ridden eyes of her brother-in-law Jaswant Singh. She dares to think different and instead of going on suffering and not protesting, she tries to run away from there to her maternal place. But, just as any Hindu family believes, even her father feels that a daughter should come home with only the due ceremonies or else it is disgraceful and inauspicious for them. He tells his daughter Lajwanti and urges her to go back saying, "the disgrace 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 "Lajwanti"-a sensitive plant." (Anand, 2008, p.20) "If only for the sake of your dear mother, go, hurry back. And come soon with your lap full of a child..." (Anand, 2008, p. 21). He

dared not look at her face, because a daughter coming home without due ceremony "was inauspicious" (Anand, 2008, p. 17) thus here Anand talks about the common tradition and belief in Hindu families who believe that a girl, once married, is unwelcome at her mother's home. If the daughter visits, it is considered inauspicious. However, the daughter is welcomed home after conceiving a child. Otherwise, after marriage, the daughter has no place at her mother's place and cannot rush there for refuge where she has been kept protected all her young life until marriage. She is no more of their family!

The custom of giving dowry by daughter's father at the time of her marriage is followed strictly still in some traditional Indian families. There is news now and then of deaths related to dowry even today. In the 20th century India this custom was so strong that a father or mother of a child disliked her girl child and tried to get rid of her, thinking of the future dowry custom. In this same story "Lajwanti" Anand talks of this custom. When the father goes to the in-laws place of Lajwanti to say sorry and to request to accept her back, he takes with him a ring for her husband and says to Lajwanti's father in law, "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..." (Anand, 2008, p. 23) The father feels that perhaps she is not kept happy at her in-laws place because he could not give enough dowry at time of marriage! He wants to buy happiness for his child by compensating with extra dowry. In another story by Anand, "A Village Wedding" the wedding of Sukheshi is cancelled on the matter that the father-in-law is demanding dowry at the last moment and the father of the daughter has taken a promise that he will not follow the evil social custom of dowry. So he disagrees to give the dowry. But people of the village believed, "According to holy books,

father of the bride must, in his charity of daughter, include gold enough to make the taker of the girl blessed-I don't hold with the custom which has been current in our parts of the bridegroom's father buying a bride. Instead, he, the bride's father, must give dowry as they do in all the Hindu brotherhoods of the Punjab..." (Anand, 2010, p. 20) Thus Anand points out that many a times these ridiculous customs, ones that have become tradition for a long time, are misused and create trouble for some, including those who tend to be different or rather non-traditional. So the situations created by the society make the people go on following the same custom, though irrelevant, for ages.

Hinduism embraces a number of cults which are connected with the early religious doctrines of the Aryanized or Brahmanized India of the past; it recognizes, among other things, the ancient caste system which includes distinct racial types varying from what is known as the Aryan to the pre-Dravidian stocks. In the earlier times Aryans found the need to divide the society into various groups of people so that all facets of working of society may be operated smoothly. The earliest Aryan divisions of society were apparently marked by occupations. At first there were three grades: warriors, priests, and traders, but all classes might engage in agricultural pursuits; even in the Epic period princes counted and branded cattle. In the later Vedic age, however, a rigid system of castes came into existence, the result, apparently, of having to distinguish between Aryans and aborigines at first, and subsequently between the various degrees of Aryans who had intermarried with aliens. Caste (Varna) is signified by colour, and its relation to occupation is apparent in the four divisions—1) *Brahmans*: priests; 2) *Kshatriyas*: the military aristocracy; 3) *Vaisyas*: commoners, workers, and traders, who were freemen; and 4) *Sudras*: slaves and aborigines. In the *Yajurveda*, the third Veda, the caste system is found established on a hereditary

basis. The three upper castes, which were composed of Aryans only, partook in all religious ceremonials, but the members of the Sudra caste were hedged about by severe restrictions. The knowledge of the Vedas was denied to them, and they were not allowed to partake of Soma offerings, and although in the process of time their position improved somewhat in the religious life of the mingled people, their social inferiority was ever emphasized; they might become traders, but never Kshatriyas or Brahmans (Mackenzie, 1919, p. 79).

In another story Anand talks of the belief of some staunch Hindus regarding the low caste untouchables, like Shrimati Gopi Goel of the story "The Silver Bangles" put the blame of robbery of the silver bangles on the servant girl Sajani just because she was an untouchable and yet wearing a silver bangle. Gopi Goel accuses Sajani saying, "Don't you know that untouchables in the south are not supposed to wear silver at all...and you go posing like a cheap film star...go die!" (Anand, 2008, p. 118) Similarly in the story, "The Barber's Trade Union" and other stories, Chandu, the barber is thrown out of house and work just because he dares to dress different and like the higher caste. "The son of a pig! He is bringing a leather bag of cow-hide into our house and a coat of the marrow of, I don't know, some other animal, and those evil black *Angrezi* shoes. Get out! Get out! You son of a devil! You will defile my religion!" (Anand, 2007, p. 32)

"It may be right for you to wear those things because you are going to be a learned man, but what right has that low caste boy to such apparel?" he has got to touch our beards, our heads and our hands. He is defiled enough by god. Why does he want to become more defiled? You are a high-caste boy. And he is a low-caste devil! He is a rogue!" (Anand, 2007, p.33)

In another story of Anand, "A Village Wedding," Sukhesi's marriage is at stake because her father is not ready to pay the dowry the

bridegroom's father is demanding at the last moment and finally the marriage party leaves the marriage place without conducting the marriage creating an embarrassing situation for the bride's family. And Sukhesi's father decided to marry her off to another low caste average boy to save his honour in society because it is considered dishonorable for the bridegroom to leave the marriage place without taking the bride and he was insulted by cancellation of marriage and it would have been very difficult now to find a proper match for his daughter. "Come, come, I will give my daughter in marriage to Kalu, son of Bharty, and save my *izzat*, which this money-lender has dragged into the mud." (Anand, 2010, p. 23) Others in the village believed that it was wrong on the part of bride's father to refuse the demand of dowry because, "According to holy books, father of the bride must, in his charity of daughter, include gold enough to make the taker of the girl blessed-I don't hold with the custom which has been current in our parts of the bridegroom's father buying a bride. Instead, he, bride's father, must give dowry as they do in all the Hindu brotherhoods of the Punjab..." (Anand, 2010, p. 20)

Another interesting myth which Anand deals with in one of his story is about the myth of *Sati*. *Satī* (Devanagari, the feminine of *sat* "true"; (also called *suttee*) was a religious funeral practice among some Indian communities in which a recently widowed woman would have immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The practice had been banned several times, with the current ban dating to 1829 by the British. The term is derived from the original name of the goddess Sati, also known as Dakshayani, who self-immolated because she was unable to bear her father Daksha's humiliation of her (living) husband Shiva. The term may also be used to refer to the widow herself. The term *sati* is now sometimes interpreted as "chaste woman" (Sen, 2001).

Although the myth of the goddess Sati is that of a wife who dies by her own volition on a fire, this is not a case of the practice of *sati*. Though Sati is considered a Hindu custom, the women, known as Sati in Hindu religious literature, did not commit suicide on their dead husband's pyre. The goddess was not widowed, and the myth is quite unconnected with the justifications for the practice. The Puranas have examples of women who commit *sati* and there are suggestions in them that this was considered desirable or praiseworthy: *A wife who dies in the company of her husband shall remain in heaven as many years as there are hairs on his person* (Garuda Puranas, 1.107.29). Those women who committed Sati were highly honored and their families were given lot of respect. It was believed that the woman who committed Sati blessed her family for seven generations after her. Temples or other religious shrines were built to honor the Sati.

Other famous woman in Hindu mythology is Savitri, wife of Satyavan. When Savitri's husband Satyavan died, the Lord of death, Yama arrived to take his soul. Savitri begged Yama to restore Satyavan and take her life instead, which he could not do. So Savitri followed Lord Yama a long way. After a long way in which Yama noticed that Savitri was losing strength but was still following him and her dead husband, Yama offered Savitri a boon, anything other than her husband's life. Savitri asked to have children from Satyavan. In order to give Savitri her boon, Lord Yama had no choice but to restore Satyavan to life and so Savitri gained her husband back.

The two women, Sati and Savitri in Hindu mythology were exceptionally devoted to their husbands and they symbolized the truthful Indian wife who would readily do everything for her husband and hence named "Sati", meaning "righteousness" or "good women". But there is no mention any religious scriptures of these two women burning themselves on the pyre after their husbands. Therefore the custom of burning the

widow on her dead husband's pyre probably did not evolve from a religious background but instead from social background. There are different theories about the origins of Sati. One theory was that Sati was introduced to prevent wives from poisoning their wealthy husbands and marrying their real lovers. Another theory states that Sati began with a jealous queen who heard that dead kings were welcomed in heaven by hundreds of beautiful women, called *Apsaras*. And therefore when her husband died, she demanded to be burnt on her dead husband's pyre and so to arrive with him to heaven and this way to prevent the *Apsaras* from consorting with her husband. There are also other theories about the origins of Sati.

Many mythological stories run to justify the reason for onset of this heinous custom but the fact remains as mentioned by Jennifer Bushaw in her book "Suicide or Sacrifice? An Examination of Sati Ritual in India" (Bushaw, 2007).

Marriage is believed to be a symbol of good fortune, beauty, pleasure and wealth; in turn widowhood is seen as an ugly, tragic, impure and poverty-stricken state devoid of joy. Therefore the act of self-immolation on his funeral pyre was seen as an immediate religious purification of the wretchedness she would accrue living as a widow.

When an attempt is made to trace the history of sati, the custom being followed during the first century BC is evident. The historian Diodorus Siculus writes that the Brahmins were forbidden from the practice by the Padma Purana. "A chapter dated around 10th century indicates that though sati is considered a noble act when committed by a Kshatriya Woman; any women of upper caste Brahmin caught doing self-immolation was found guilty of Brahmicide" (Doniger, 2009, p. 611). Sati also had some fantastic associations with it. Stein (1978) states, "The widow on her way to the pyre was the object (for once) of all public attention...Endowed with the gift of prophecy and the power to cure and bless, she was immolated amid great fanfare, with great

reverence." Only a virtuous and worthy women can be sacrificed was the belief and hence they had only two choices: being a wife who failed to prove her virtuousness and being burned. As time progressed, the custom died out in the South of India and continued mainly in Rajasthan and Bengal. Though there are no comprehensive data or studies based on the incidences of Sati; the recorded facts by the British East India Company puts forward the total figure of occurrences in the period 1813-1828 as 8135; another source gives the number of 7941 from 1815-1828. (Solvyns, 1998)

Sati was more dominant among the warrior communities in north India, especially in Rajasthan and also among the higher castes in Bengal in east India. Jauhar and Saka which refers to the ancient Rajput Hindu tradition of honorable self-immolation of women and subsequent march of men to the battlefield to end their life with respect was followed by many Rajputs to avoid capture enslavement and dishonor at the hands of Muslim invaders. The well known cases of Jauhar are the three occurrences at the fort of Chittaur (Chittaugarh) in Rajasthan, in 1303 A.D., 1535 and in 1568 AD. Jaisalmer also has witnessed two occurrences of Jauhar; one in the year 1304 AD during the reign of Allaudin Khilji and second in the reign of Ferozshah Tuglaq. (Gupta, 2013 p.124) A few rulers of India tried to ban this custom. The Mughals tried to ban it. The British, due to the efforts of Hindu reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy outlawed this custom in 1829.

In the story "The Shadow of Death" by Mulk Raj, he makes use of this myth about Sati and Savitri. He brings alive the horrific scene created when an innocent wife was forced to self immolate herself with her deceased husband in the name of the belief that this will be a blessing for the village The mother in law of Savitri tells her, "You are blessed. Devis are calling you-to be Sati. Savitri went to Yama-to bring back her husband back" (Anand, 2010, p. 109). Again she insists her

to descend the pyre of her deceased son by convincing her, “You were named Savitri, We named our son Satya. Astrologers knew your horoscopes would meet...Savitri of the Satyug faced Yama to fetch Satyavan Back. You go with Satya and bring his soul back...in your new incarnation you will be Devi...who defied death.” (Anand, 2010, p. 111) even the villagers and all the leaders of the village insist that she accepts to become sati not only for Satya’s family but for the benefit of the village. “Han, han, our village will be blessed indeed, the last sati, ten years back, brought us three good harvests...” (Anand, 2010, p. 111). The poor woman, Savitri meets the tragic death in this story in the name of tradition and under the pressure of society which demanded of her life just because they ignorantly were following the tradition and believed in the myth of *Savitri*.

CONCLUSION

In his stories, Mulk Raj has drawn from and utilized many of the Indian traditions and myths which the Indians believed in. His aim was to present India in its true colours and to bring about a reformation in the values of Indians. The picture he created of India and of the rural people of India provides a very apt view on 20th century India. People of India are indebted to him for the vast knowledge of Indian tradition and culture he has presented in his short stories through various realistic characters.

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