Mulk Raj Anand-the writer and an overview of the story: ‘The Two Lady Rams’

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) along with the duo of R.K Narayan and Raja Rao in the nineteen thirties contributed a great force of possibilities in the Indian English novel writing. Mulk Raj was the eldest of the three novelists who wrote prolifically both novels and short stories. Born in Peshawar (now in Pakistan), in a Hindu coppersmith family, he had a simple common life- being able to see the conditions of living of his fellow countrymen from the closest quarter. One needs to read his autobiographical work: “Apology for Heroism” to know all about his life as far it had influences upon his ideals. Two critical illnesses during early years had given the boy a reflective turn of mind. He grew in an atmosphere of Punjabi realism and also participated in the Gandhian movement as a collegiate student. He also experienced a brief stint of imprisonment while being associated with the national movement for independence. In 1924 he went to England for doing research in philosophy. There he developed his interest in Indian art and also came in contact with the left-wing politics. In 1946, he returned home and started editing a magazine: ‘Marg’. He was greatly interested in travelling and wrote numerous works of literature based on his experiences gathered in the process. He also could make numerous cultural associations both in his country and abroad in courses of his travelling.

A few notable short stories written by Anand are: ‘Barber’s Trade Union’, ‘Laajwanthi’, ‘The Tamarind Tree’, ‘The Priest and Pigeons’, ‘Lady Bountiful’, ‘The Hiccup’, ‘The Brothers’, ‘At What Price, Brothers?’ ‘Anjali Hasta’, ‘The Man who was too Honest for his Job’, ‘Mother’, ‘Torrents of Wrath’, ‘The Silver Boughs’, ‘The Lost Child’, ‘The Eternal Way’, ‘Duty’, ‘Confession’, ‘Terrorist’, ‘Interview’, ‘Lullaby’, ‘The Road’, ‘The Bridegroom’, ‘The Prodigal Son’, ‘The thief’, ‘A Village Idyll’, ‘Birth’ and ‘The Two Lady Rams’.

The story of ‘The Two Lady Rams’ in brief:

Lalla Jhinda Ram who is a corrupt contractor, has got two wives and there is difference of age between the wives. One does not like the other. Even their respective servants work in opposite groups. Both women struggle to master Lord Ram in their own ways. A serious quarrel takes place between the two Lady Rams on who between them should accompany Jhinda Ram to the garden party hosted by the ‘Sarkar’ on the occasion of Jhinda Ram’s being knighted in recognition of his service to Her Majesty the Queen of England. The quarrel took the form a battle also. Jhinda Ram himself was greatly perturbed over the subject and he had been unsure about who between the Lady Rams he should take to the award giving party. At last the driver of his car learning about the predicament of his master gave him a simple solution of taking along both the ladies to the party. Jhinda Ram decides to take both of his wives to the party and when he appeared in the party with both his wife by his sides, the spectacle could raise curious eyebrows of a number of onlookers (they all in their minds enjoyed the awkward situation of Lord Ram in front of the Queen with a feeling of suppressed mockery) including the butler who announced, “Sir Jhinda and the two Lady Rams”. Later Jhinda Ram continued to take his both wives to all parties, horse races, cricket matches etc. and that was a great matter of amusement to the people.

In the story, the writer is found to be indignantly critical of the hypocrisies of a section of ‘novo rich’ of the society who could set themselves in the high social pedestal by adopting some foul means like corruption and being subservient to their colonial masters. In order to shed lights upon the actualities of their life, the story writer brings before us the funny side of the receipient’s personal life. Written in a mock heroic style, the story relates to us the façade of a singular domestic crisis faced by Jhinda Ram- whose identity is of a petty contactor under the Raj. It is a story told in comic vein regarding a peculiar situation which Jhinda Ram had been in on the eve of a garden party hosted by the ‘Sarkar’ on his getting the title of Knighthood from Her Majesty the Queen of England in recognition of his service to the government. The writer by telling us about the nature of the domestic life of Jhinda Ram, intends to state how a title like Knighthood could also be bestowed upon a person as ridiculously mean as Jhinda Ram only because he is a corpulent petty contractor. Moreover, he is a collaborator with the British dispensation who could remain subservient to the colonial masters. The story writer wants to show that the British could reign India comfortably because of such collaborators only. Jhinda Ram is obviously one of the Indian gentry who were able to amass wealth by shameful acts like corruption. The writer also mocks equally upon the hypocrisy of Jhinda Ram- the recipient of the knighthood title by relating to us the anecdotes like his act of shamefully dragging one of his wives by her hair and pretending to be a cutlery seller to meet the ADC.

The story is thus conspicuous by a lively satire. The writer also opens up his mock-indignation upon the British colonial dispensation through the character of Jhinda Ram. His mockery has come in full circle when he states that the recipient (Jhinda Ram) indeed while accepting the numerous congratulations hardly believed that “…he, Jhinda Ram, contractor whose father was a small shopkeeper, had suddenly been lifted from his five feet of corpulence in an exalted height equal to that of any six foot six sahib”.

(The story also reveals to us how women in the pre-independence India were treated as possessions by men).

Over and above, the story is not just something narrated with the intention of evoking simple laughter, it is a piece of social satire portraying a realistic picture of the positions of some gentries and of women in British India.