

# Mulk Raj Anand's Private Life of an Indian Prince as a story of Resistance

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to conduct a study of *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* is a novel by Mulk Raj Anand published in 1953 as story of Indian resistance. Man's life is determined by the social norms as we have miserably failed to develop a scientific outlook, which is the need of the hour. It is well nigh impossible for us to effectively shape the destiny of the oppressed, to improve the quality of life and to provide the basic necessities of life unless we are steeped in science. For science awakens the urge to inquire and re-search for the truth. This kind of attitude would probably help bring about a social change from hide bound traditional ties that has kept us in its vicious grip. Many of the social values that were upheld in the ancient times are outworn and irrelevant in the changing times, and are to be discarded once and for all. However, the hideous face of untouchability will perhaps remain as a painful lesson from our unredeemed past.

In the case of *The Private Life of an Indian Prince*, the critical opinion is divided. Most of the critics do not rate it highly. This was despite the fact that the stage for the merger of the states with the Indian Union during the years after 1947 was a burning topic of discussion and was very much a part of the contemporary political agenda. If Anand chose to write on the private life of an Indian prince, it was more or less in tune with what most people were talking about. Before he left for UK, Anand had spent some time in Shimla. During this period he had worked as a tutor to a couple of small princes. This dimension of life was therefore not unfamiliar to him in other words, when he chose to write on this theme, Anand was writing about something which he had known at first hand. Despite these favourable factors, most readers are critical of this particular novel. To be precise, in writing the kind of novels that he wrote in that phase of his career, Anand had broken new ground. Writing about the princes was to some extent the obverse of what he had been doing so far. The only notable critic who has said anything positive about this novel is Saros Cowasjee. The historian will be fascinated by the intriguing relationship between the Prince and his subjects and the new Government of India; the moralist will find confirmation of his belief in Vicky's destruction; the romanticist will find consolation in the Prince's ultimate love for Ganga Dasi and his sacrifice; the realist will point at the futility of knowledge which is not backed by a will to act; the psychologist will either agree with Dr. Shankar's analysis or gleefully take issue with him. But the novel will most please the committed reader who is also an artist. An order has been ruthlessly condemned, but the hereditary architect of the order remains sympathetic to the end.

*Key words: Private Life of an Indian Prince, Mulk Raj Anand, moralist, resistance*

## Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand's most profound study of human nature the story of a mans compelling love for a woman, this is at the same time a historical novel of unusual power, showing the demise of the princely states with the birth of a free India. **The Private Life of an Indian Prince** for one thing, it was unlike his earlier novels where the heroes were invariably victims of the social forces at work. For another, he had dignified them by making them the leading characters of his novels and by taking up their crisis situation as the core issue. Therefore, what we need is not the militant revival of a moribund culture but the creation of dynamic contemporary society as envisaged by Mulk Raj Anand. Mulk Raj Anand's novels can thus be read as a forerunner to the contemporary Dalit debates. The victims, the modern day counterparts of Bakha and Bhikhu, have come a long way in their struggle for cultural identity against divisive political and social forces. In his edited volume, Mulk Raj Anand Omnibus, published by the Penguins after Anand's death, apart from Untouchable and Coolie, this is the third novel to be included. Cowasjee has described it as the most "profound" of Anand's novels. According to him, "by focusing upon the principal characters of the novel—Vicky and Ganga Dasi—these characters are described as individuals of such complexity and with such psychological insight that critics will go on redefining them". Cowasjee goes on to say, Private Life of an Indian Prince has something to offer to every kind of reader. In contrast, however, the following opinion of MK.Naik, one of Anand's better known critics, may be quoted here: Whatever the achievement of Private Life of an Indian Prince is, it is hardly a profound interpretation of "Indian life in a phase of pervasive crisis". It could well have been, if it had not been afflicted with the artistic schizophrenia of trying to be at once a case history and a political chronicle.

With all its own limitations, Manohar Malgaonkar's The Princes is a far more realistic and balanced political chronicle of the troubled times of the merger of the states. Most critical opinion does not agree with Cowasjee's view and describes the novel as superficial. What else can explain the description of a tiger hunt and a juggler's show in the novel? These are calculated to attract the Western audience. Maybe that was the reason why the first edition was published in UK and not in India. The second thing that needs to be recalled is that Anand wrote this novel in the background of his own emotional crisis. To what extent this fact came in the way of his writing an acceptably good piece of fiction is difficult to say. The fact remains that if Anand is remembered today as a novelist, it is not because of this or other novels but Untouchable and Coolie, which have been included by Cowasjee in his Omnibus volume. What is more significant, however, is that, in terms of his creative output, the decade of the 50s was comparatively barren as far as Anand was concerned. IV In 1960 Anand published a new novel titled The Old Woman and the Cow. It was republished in 1980 with a changed title called Gauri. Of all the novels published after his return to India, this one is perhaps the best. All that was needed to make it almost flawless was the deletion of a few pages towards the end where an attempt is made to dilate upon what was explicit. Had that not been done, it would have become a novel with a much clearer focus and an unblemished artistic finish. Perhaps this statement requires a bit of explanation. Gauri is a villager and is sold to an old man even though she is already married. Her mother who had been widowed a few years earlier had developed relations with somebody. That man who was her lover was some kind of a crook and sold Gauri for a certain sum of money. The mother was aware of what was happening but kept quiet because her lover was the kind of man who was not above pulling a fast one on others every now and then. What followed was not unexpected. Though her husband was difficult to get on with, Gauri knew how to come to terms with her situation. Through a series of circumstances (into which it is not possible to go here) Gauri was sold to an old rich man who wanted a young wife. Eventually, she found herself working in a private hospital. The hospital was controlled by two doctors who

were in partnership with each other. The two were different in their mental make up. Not unexpectedly, they adopted conflicting approaches towards Gauri.

### **Objective:**

This paper intends to explore *Private Life of an Indian Prince* novel by Mulk Raj Anand classified as one of Anand's most impressive and important works. In keeping with his other writings dealing with the topic of resistance social and political reform, this book deals with the abolition of the princely states system in India.

### **The Prince and his subjects**

Writing about the princes was to some extent the obverse of what he had been doing so far. The only notable critic who has said anything positive about this novel is Saros Cowasjee. In his edited volume, *Mulk Raj Anand Omnibus*, published by the Penguins after Anand's death, apart from *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, this is the third novel to be included. Cowasjee has described it as the most "profound" of Anand's novels. According to him, "by focusing upon the principal characters of the novel—Vicky and Ganga Dasi—these characters are described as individuals of such complexity and with such psychological insight that critics will go on redefining them". Cowasjee goes on to say, *Private Life of an Indian Prince* has something to offer to every kind of reader.

The historian will be fascinated by the intriguing relationship between the Prince and his subjects and the new Government of India; the moralist will find confirmation of his belief in Vicky's destruction; the romanticist will find consolation in the Prince's ultimate love for Ganga Dasi and his sacrifice; the realist will point at the futility of knowledge which is not backed by a will to act; the psychologist will either agree with Dr. Shankar's analysis or gleefully take issue with him. But the novel will most please the committed reader who is also an artist. An order has been ruthlessly condemned, but the hereditary architect of the order remains sympathetic to the end. Eventually this leads to a breakdown of the partnership and Gauri returned to her husband. This is one of those few novels by Anand where the growth of a character under the stress of changing circumstances produces a change in the personality of the person concerned. When her husband tries to bully her after her return to him, Gauri resists that kind of bullying. Not only that, when she shows willingness to leave him and go back to that job in the hospital which she had left earlier, the husband is unable to understand her. The plain fact is that Gauri had evolved as a human being but he had not. This is a kind of climax which is not all that common in Anand's fiction. By implication, what we witness in this novel is the sight of a village woman who, till her exposure to new influences in that private hospital, was soft and submissive. She however outgrows that stage of development to become a different person now.

These details have been provided so as to make the point that, for once, Anand had left his earlier concern about exploitation by different social forces at work and chosen to focus on the problems of a village woman who, given an opportunity to respond to the new challenges, refuses to act like the traditional Hindu wife. Things changed and so did Gauri. As put by one of the critics, Gauri graduates into modernity overnight. Earlier, she was firmly rooted in the ancient tradition of submission; now when the occasion came, she went beyond it. To put it another way, she shuns the tradition upheld by the Indian idol, Sita. She is grounded in reality and aware that in today's world, the earth is not going to open up and swallow her as had happened in Sita's case. The agent of change in this instance was Col. Mahindra, one of the doctors in the private

hospital. He is enlightened and well intentioned, and believes in doing good rather than being a self seeker and does not compromise with evil. The only weakness of the novel lies in Col. Mahindra's talking a little too priggishly. As a character in the novel, he plays the role that is expected of him but as a human being he is not all that convincing. Much more can be said about the novel but the point to be recorded is the fact that, as a novel, this one by Anand comes across as a more finished piece of writing than anything else that he had written. He had been proud of having written *Untouchable* and *The Big Heart* but in terms of finish and the craft of presentation, *Gauri* is much ahead of those two novels and of most others. A year later came *The Road* which was, candidly speaking, quite disappointing. Towards the end of the 50s, Anand chose to settle down in Gurgaon and bought some property there. One of the shocking things which he witnessed there was the system of caste discrimination which was as strong as it used to be when he had first encountered it in his childhood. This prompted him to write a new novel on the same theme of caste discrimination about which he had written in *Untouchable*. This issue was very much on his mind and he even talked to Pandit Nehru about it at one stage. The latter's response was one of disbelief in the beginning and then of irritation with what was happening. But Anand decided to express his sentiments in the way he had been doing; that was to write another novel on that very theme. *The Road* covers the same ground as *Untouchable* does but there is a world of difference between the two novels.

### **Resistance flaws of construction**

Despite some flaws of construction and projection, *Untouchable* stands out as a convincing and powerful indictment of the caste system. Apart from the fact that he was not handling the caste issue for the first time and had indeed blazed a new trail in Indo Anglian fiction, he did not feel compellingly involved in the writing of this new novel. In writing *The Road*, he was covering familiar ground but he was neither original nor inventive. Almost every single critic of Anand has decried this novel as unworthy of him. How far did he succeed with his next novel, *Death of a Hero: Epitaph for Maqbool Sherwani*? It should not be all that difficult to judge. This novel was based on an actual incident. Sherwani was one of those heroic persons who fought Pakistan when Kashmir was attacked by the tribals in October 1947. He laid down his life while fighting. According to Anand's own statement, it was first written in New Delhi in late 1947, in other words, within a few weeks of the actual incident. This incident was written about in considerable detail in the newspapers and Anand chose to fictionalise it. Anand revised this novel in 1961 according to his own statement but it was published only in 1963. These different developments seem to suggest a certain kind of indecision of mind on his part. Even a casual reading of the novel brings out two things. One, it is a long story rather than a novel and there is no sense of progression. Secondly, the novel reads like a piece of reportage rather than fiction. In a piece of fiction, when anything happens, the motives behind the happenings are always analysed in detail. Anand's novel gives some kind of a description but it is totally lacking in depth and understanding. That is why the word reportage has been used. The paltry details about this novel as given above clearly point to one thing. What Anand had done in the first round of writing was based on genuine, first hand experience and he was moved by his creative urge to write about them. This is evident not only from his first three novels which have been discussed in some detail but also in the *Lalu* trilogy referred to earlier though not described in detail. The plain fact is that Anand had ceased to be creative by then.

As one of the critics put it, when Anand first wrote, he was angry and full of genuine passion at what he had been seeing all around him while growing up and what had been happening around him and to him. By the time he returned to India, the creative spark had virtually died out. Whatever he was doing now was either to repeat himself or to write for the sake of

writing. In plain words, he had entered a phase of mental and spiritual vacuum. How to get over it? The answer that he found for himself was to dig into his past once again. Seven Summers, a novel about his childhood, which he had completed in UK and was first published there had shown the way. Why not use the same formula? In all likelihood, something of this kind would have happened and the result was Morning Face which he published in 1968. 7. THE LATER FICTION Anand's autobiographical novels fall into a special category, if one may say so. Seven Summers had, by and large, been sifted from the 2,000-page long autographical account of his past that he had written for himself under the inspiration— or whichever way we put it—of his friend, Irene. He kept on pouring out the details of his childhood and the subsequent years to her. She was fascinated by what he was telling. Before long, he reduced it to writing and, little by little, it became a manuscript of almost 2,000 pages. Irene did him the favour of typing them out, and the manuscript became the potential source material for some bits of what he wrote later.

### **Autobiography of Anand**

Apart from this particular feature of Seven Summers, a notable quality of this novel is a certain kind of freshness about it. This feeling of freshness comes from a variety of sources. One is the mood of effortless ease which it conveys. Another is the kind of child that he was - irrepressibly curious, always willing to experiment and to learn and adjust. Anand depicts the child as one whom he cannot but project in any way other than with genuine warmth and sincerity. As Anand himself says somewhere, an autobiographical novel is not the same thing as an autobiography. The distinction is important and has to be kept in mind while discussing these novels. Even though he intended to write an autobiography, he never got around to doing so except incidentally. In a pamphlet put out by his publisher, even the title of each of the seven volumes of the proposed series was given. It was envisaged that, on the lines of Seven Summers and others, three more novels would be written. Those were listed as So He Played His Part, A World Too Wide, and The Last Scene. Only the first four got written and the other three remained unwritten or, maybe, he changed his mind or whatever.

There was one exception which will be dealt with a little later. One other was that he wrote a small book titled Little Plays on Mahatma Gandhi. This slim volume was published and circulated but did not measure up to the earlier volumes. The point is that perhaps owing to his other preoccupations or a change of plan, the autobiography was not written. In addition to the one referred to above, the other three autobiographical novels that were published were Morning Face, Confessions of a Lover, and The Bubble. There was also a further confusion in respect of planning the series of autobiographical novels. In his dedication to Morning Face, Anand projected the problem in these words: When you first appeared in Seven Summers, the critics said variously that you were an incarnation of Krishna of the Yadus or just a Punjabi Spark'. They were not far wrong, because, if I may confess to you the truth, the old myth was dormant in my heart and mind as these myths were inherited by every Indian.... The 'spark' of the street urchin was, however, also in me and I may have imbued you with it. But...you are really not the Krishna of the age of gods...you cannot be, because the age of the gods is over, you seem to be aspiring to the new contemporary myth of man of the kaliyug, the iron age, in which Money itself, as a vast impersonal mechanism of power, inexorably governs life, like an unknown fate, as the unknown Gods, or the unknown evil in man, commanded life in the past, pursuing its seemingly mysterious ends, indifferent to the feelings of men and women. In his eventual approach, he does not stick to either of these approaches with the result that there is a certain degree of ambiguity about the whole thing. Even when one overlooks all this confusion, the fact remains that each one of the novels needs to be

evaluated in its own right. This is for the simple reason that he was not consistent in his planning or approach nor always consistent in the execution of what he had planned.

How does Anand come across? Of his childhood, this much is indisputable that he was curious and even precocious to some extent. He was all the time asking all kinds of questions. While some of them were answered, others were not but each one projected a new dimension and level of understanding. As a child, he was extremely fond of his mother and was somewhat afraid of his father. In addition to the fact that he received boundless love from his mother, one thing that endeared his mother to him particularly was her gift for story telling. In this connection, his own words given in the novel may be quoted here: My mother had a vast fund of folk tales, having heard them in her childhood from her own mother, as legends, fables, myths and other narratives of gods and men and birds and beasts have been told in endless variations for thousands of years on the flat roofs of the mud huts in the villages. As a matter of fact, his mother seems to have stimulated his imagination by telling him stories day after day. A kind of special bond grew up between them. This happens in many a home. All that one can say is that his mother was one of those exceptional women who laid the foundations of a goodly part of what he accomplished in later life. Altogether, *Seven Summers* makes for compulsive reading and successfully evokes the picture of a lively and curious child. And there lies the strength of this first autobiographical novel. II The second novel of the series which he wrote was published in 1976. In other words, it was published 15 years after *Seven Summer*., had been published. According to the claim made by the author, this novel covered the next seven years of his life. It is difficult to divide one's life into such neat divisions. The fact however remains that each autobiographical novel is interesting, largely because each one of them corresponded to the physical and mental changes that were taking place in his life.

The dominant themes in the second novel are two. One, he gives a more detailed description of life in British cantonments than what he had described earlier. To take one example, in the earlier novel, his mother had forbidden him not to mix with either the British soldiers or the scores of minions who had been engaged to look after the needs of the soldiers and to render service to them. From the mother's point of view, it was an important injunction but the kind of child that he was— inquisitive and self-willed—he ignored it. When it came to mixing with the minions, it was an impossible injunction to obey. Most of his friends came from that social background, and indeed, some of them were close to him, Bhaka of Untouchable fame being one of them. There were several others also and Anand was equally close to them in a whole variety of ways. The second feature of his childhood which increasingly made an impact upon his consciousness and began to matter in his life was the kind of man his father was. It took Anand some time to understand the situation. As an administrative assistant to the Battalion Commandant, his father was expected to play a role which he took to mean unalloyed loyalty to the British masters. While Anand has given several details of the uneasy relationship between his father and his mother, step by step, he began to understand what was happening

### **Confessions of a Resistance**

The following few lines describe the situation as he saw it years later: Over long, anxious days, father sought the evidence of a smile on the faces of the Sahibs to assure him that they did not suspect him of disloyalty. And with that fear of someone backbiting through jealousy of him, he lived in dread of some enemy who might go and poison the Sahibs' minds about him. And he went about sedulously cementing his relations with his friends in the regiment. Another couple of his new experiences also need to be referred to: The first one was the fact of interaction with other members of his family. During the earlier years, his contact with them was casual and superficial. Because of his father's frequent transfers from town to

town, he was now admitted to a school in Amritsar. He had now to interact with the members of his family about whom he had hardly heard till then. Now, he had to deal with them. The other new development was that, not unoften, he found himself at the receiving end of repeated physical punishment by teachers in the school. He refers to several of them. A couple of them derived pleasure from inflicting physical punishment but that was not true of everyone. There were a number of such incidents in his school career but, in the long run, what saved the situation for him was that he was one of the brighter students in the class and his knowledge of English was distinctly better than that of most others. This stood him in good stead. *Seven Summers* is perhaps the best of his autobiographical novels. The rest have their own standing but it is not possible to go into details here.

For instance, *Morning face* was given the Sahitya Akademi Award. That was given partly for the reason that over the years he had become a literary celebrity but no one in India had chosen to honour him in a formal way though eventually some of them did choose to honour him. Till then, he had not been given even an honorary degree by any one of the Indian universities. The Akademi Award seemed to be the obvious thing to do and it was done. The more pertinent issue is why, instead of wanting to write his autobiography which he had plans to do, he wrote autobiographical novels. That they were based on his earlier life certainly lent greater authenticity to his fiction than might have happened otherwise. The truth of the matter is that, apart from one significant novel of his, *Gauri*, which he published in 1960, either he repeated himself or wrote things which were somewhat wanting in a genuine spark of creativity or that sureness of touch which had characterised his earlier writing. What he was doing in *Marg* was so much more meaningful and self fulfilling. A good deal has been said about it earlier but the full impact of what he wrote and published in *Marg* has not been projected in as full and comprehensive a manner as deserves to be done. Meanwhile, these autobiographical novels served the purpose of helping him to remain afloat in the literary world. When it comes to evaluating those four autobiographical novels, perhaps the best of them was *Seven Summers*. *Morning Face* gives many more details of his earlier life and some of those have been referred to. Of the remaining two novels, *Confessions of a Lover* is on the whole a little pedestrian. What is unpardonable, it is somewhat juvenile in certain portions. But *The Bubble* is distinctly more substantial and makes for more consistent and absorbing reading. For one thing, it gives many more details of his growing up in the student environment in U.K about which we do not know all that much, for another, the personality of Irene—one of the more central figures in the novel—is so much more many-sided and authentic and comes across with a degree of personal warmth as well.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, the novels of Mulk Raj Anand impress us, as the products of the Indo Anglian Literary Naturalism - a break with the past, denial of religion and respect for science and sympathy for the individual in his conflict with the society. But the artistic exegesis of this philosophy involves a study of certain types of himian behaviour in a hostile environment. This naturally results in a tedious stereotyping of the basic attitude of the writer under the thin veneer of diverse situations and different individuals. The final impression is one of the admirations for the solidity of factual details in the extreme precision in his study and presentation of man and the milieu, rather than for the fulfilment of art itself. However, the achievement of Anand is not merely 'methodological'; nor do the protagonists of his novels always meet with death. The tragic destinies of the heroes of his novel do indeed suggest the remedy for the social disease, which arrests the healthy growth of the personality of the individual.

Thus for example, industrialization or more precisely, mechanization is the remedy for the evils of untouchability. Scientific education and a socialist outlook can effectively put an end to the capitalistic exploitation; and a voluntary and free acceptance of this social reality in an organized way, can rectify the various wrongs of society. Anand cannot in fact, be charge with pessimism or fatalism; as the ultimate aim of his protagonists is always social upliftment and human betterment. Although mechanistic determination is instrumental in bringing about the eventual catastrophe of the protagonist. The triumph of Anand seems to be in his transcendental comprehension of the social dynamics that determines the destiny of every individual.

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