

**Theme of Colonial Exploitation and Subjugation in Mulk Raj Anand's
*The Gold Watch***

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Abstract:

The present paper intends to analyze the theme of exploitation and subjugation of a middle class employee against the background of colonial rule. It studies the callous and indifferent attitude of the employers on the one hand and the anguish, helplessness and uncertainty in the lives of employees in a flawed system on the other. The paper studies the plight of a common man whose mind is invaded by the feelings of anxiety and insecurity in midst of duplicity, deceitfulness of the system. Srijut Sudarshan Sharma, the protagonist of the story represents the most vulnerable group of the middle class. The paper analyses the theme of exploitation of an employee who is forced to retire in the most hypocritical way. The paper also studies the deeply ironical behaviour of characters and incidents.

Keywords: exploitation, hypocrisy, deceit, helplessness, uncertainty

Mulk Raj Anand was an eminent Indian writer who wrote about the socio-cultural fabric of the pre and post-independence periods. He studied the societal structures and intricacies of human relationships. In his works, he brings out the pathetic condition of the backward and downtrodden people. The dominant themes in Mulk Raj Anand's short stories are poverty, exploitation, and oppression. Presenting a realistic picture of pre-independent India, most of his stories portray the callous, heartless, and cruel attitude of the rich and the privileged towards the deprived and the destitute. The plot of his stories is structured on a conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited. The evil of the villain is ridiculed by the writer and his sympathy and concern for the oppressed and deprived are easily discernible.

Srijut Sudarshan Sharma worked as a dispatch clerk among Indian staff in distribution department of Marmalade Empire of Henry King & Co. The head of the firm,

Mr. Acton, a Britisher, is the typical example of a cunning and selfish employer who is completely indifferent to the emotions and well being of his employees. His priorities seem to be the growth of business. Srijut Sudarshan Sharma, on the other hand, is a noble, honest and loyal employee. He is not much qualified but has been doing his duty with hard work and sincerity. He has firm belief in Hindu scriptures and philosophy. Being a man of character he respects and regards the women employees in the office. The story unfolds his tragedy where we see that his diligence and hard work remain unappreciated by his employer Mr Acton. Mulk Raj Anand gives an inner glimpse of the feelings of despair and desperation of Srijut. He seems to be a frustrated and undervalued individual. The analysis of his thought process and behaviour brings to light the psychological toll of serving in a strict, flawed and impersonal system. Mulk Raj Anand describes Srijut Sudarshan Sharma's character through contrast and irony.

The characters of Mr Acton and Srijut are totally contrasted. Most of the action of the story comes from Mr Acton. Srijut is the passive observer who witnesses all hopes and aspirations ending. It is quite ironical that Mr Acton the wrong doer is confident and smiling throughout the story. On the other hand Srijut Sudarshan Sharma, the sincere and loyal clerk who deserves financial protection and security remains nervous and frightened in course of events.

The saga of exploitation of Srijut is suggested in the very beginning of the story. The hypocrisy of Mr Acton is also introduced in the first sentence of the story. There is something malicious about Mr Acton's smile which was unusual on his face. Not only the smile but the fact that Mr Acton, the head of the firm should come to his table and announce a gift to him seemed of course flattering but quite mysterious to him. The smile seemed to be scheming and contriving and the surprise gift, the gold watch was to camouflage the dreadful future that would be brought to him by the forced retirement that was being rewarded to Srijut for his loyal and sincere services to the firm.

"There was something about the smile of Mr. Acton when he came over to Srijut Sudarshan Sharma's table, which betokened disaster. But as the Sahib had only said, "Mr. Sharma, I have brought something for you specially from London -- you must come into my office on Monday and take it.....", the poor old dispatch clerk could not surmise the real meaning of General Manager's remark." (Greatest 79)

Srijut could not digest the 'smile' and had sufficient reason to delve into the thoughts filled with worry and anxiety. The incident triggered the imaginations of Srijut and he analyzed all the possibilities which could be behind this seemingly kind gesture of Mr Acton. His

thoughts concentrated on the analysis of deciphering the inner meaning of Mr Acton's words and the mysterious smile.

The story also explores the exploitation of Indians by the British. The story reflects how Indian workers, like the railway employee in *The Gold Watch*, were exploited under the British colonial system. Railways, factories, plantations, and government offices depended on Indian labor, but the workers received low wages, no job security, and no dignity in return. Their hard work built wealth and infrastructure, but the benefits went to the colonial rulers, not to them. In Colonial India, Britishers reduced Indian workers to mere instruments of labour. They never gave Indians the requisite rights and dignity. The protagonist of the story, Mr Srijut is given forced retirement in the most undignified manner. They abruptly terminated the services of Srijut and gave preferred to fill the vacant post by appointing a member of their own race. Srijut's hopes to live a secure and planned retired life are brutally shattered. He had hoped to complete his job and responsibilities, the family raising, grhast according to Indian ethos and religions at about fifty- five and retire to his home town at jullundher. He had five more years to go for a normal service. This untimely and unexpected seizure of his job had given him bouts of anxiety and nervousness.

In his heart of hearts he knew the impending calamity. Although Srijut was noble and innocent, he had deeply observed the expressions of scorn behind the smiles on the white faces of Britishers. He could not suppress his eagerness and ran after Mr Acton to get a hint of the truth behind his kind gesture. Although it was unusual to talk to their boss outside the office, he compromised on the manners. His anxiety was too much for his etiquettes. Srijut Sudarshan Sharma hesitated as the appearance of Mr Acton's chauffeur was frightening. The indifferent, cold and callous attitude of the Britishers towards the employees is obvious in these lines.

'The Sahibs belonged to their private worlds, where no intrusion was tolerated for they refuse to listen to pleas of advancement through improper channels'.
(Greatest 83)

As suited to his hypocrisy, it was not a time for rudeness and accordingly Mr Acton did not mind the intrusion and confirmed the meeting for Monday to get a 'gold watch with an inscription on it'. Srijut Sharma was left dumb and blank and tried to surmise the other possible reason for the honour than retirement. All his logic and rationality put together he could not find anything gave him but retirement.

"The revelation rose to the surface of his awareness from the deep obsessive fear, which had possessed him for nearly half an hour, and his heart began to palpitate against his will; and the sweat sozzled his body'. (Greatest 84)

The gold watch given to Srijut as a reward has got ironical significance. He was given neither dignity nor respect but forced retirement with a gold watch as a compensation. It is deeply ironical that strict discipline and punctuality is now not that important in Srijut's life as a retired person. He is given a watch when it was not much needed. It heightens the anguish and desire of the protagonist for a disciplined and well regulated life that he has lived for twenty years. Not only Srijut is exploited, but his degradation is also mocked at by presenting a watch. The colour of the watch is also symbolic. The golden colour symbolizes wealth, prosperity, luxury and status. Ironically, Srijut did not receive any of these because it had only golden colour. Moreover, he was deprived of his existing status and income. The gold watch is also symbolic of hypocrisy of colonialism. Indians under the British rule were given only small tokens of recognition but the real prosperity and power were always denied. The story highlights the exploitation of the working class, who give their health, youth, and entire lives to their jobs, yet remain poor and unrewarded. The watch itself becomes a bitter symbol — instead of being a true reward, it reflects the emptiness of promises and the indifference of institutions toward human suffering.

If the story highlights the injustice done by the employer, it also reveals the passive, inactive and bearing attitude of the exploited. Srijut suppresses his emotions of anger and resentment. He did not give way to his feelings of despair and desperation but controlled them. Inwardly he had broken down but he forestalled it till he confronted the general manager Mr Acton. He had witnessed such patient and submissive behaviour from his ancestors. This hints that the earlier generations were also exploited by the feudal lords.

" Dumb, and with bent head, the fumes of his violent emotions rising above the mouth which could have expressed them, he withdrew in the abject manner of his ancestors going out of the presence of feudal lords.....As Srijut Sharma emerged from the General Manager's office, involuntary tears flowed from his eyes and his lower lip fell in a pout that somehow controlled him from breaking down completely." (Greatest 89)

The story is also a bitter critique of inhuman bureaucratic and capitalist system in colonial India. In such a system the workers received inhuman and indifferent treatment from their employers and were treated as tools and machinery rather than human beings. Srijut, the

protagonist of the story is a representative of such workers. He was rendered useless suddenly and cast aside. The Indian labour was exploited under British rule. They were used for the development of the infrastructure of their companies and projects. In short Colonialism reduced Indian workers to mere instruments of labour. The story highlights the economic exploitation of a worker. We see that the loyal and sincere services of a worker go unrewarded. Two decades of loyal services of Srijut got no recognition. He gave the prime and youth of his life to serve that company honestly and sincerely. He has no savings, no social security and financial stability. Instead of a reward or recognition, he was given shock and punishment. The story 'The Gold Watch' illustrates the plight of a powerless person in the flawed and unjust system. Here such people lose every hope of getting equality and justice. The rich and powerful progress and flourish ; the poor and powerless go down and deprived of the things they have.

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