

LITERARY REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL HIERARCHY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANAND AND KALAM

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Abstract

This study explores how prejudices owing to social class and discrimination are depicted in two short texts, a short story, “A Pair of Mustachios” by Mulk Raj Anand, and an extract from “My Childhood” from APJ Abdul Kalam’s autobiography, prescribed by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in English textbooks for schools. The study compares how both writers present issues of social class and prejudice, widely prevalent in Indian society. While Anand uses humour in his fiction to expose feudal pride, Kalam shares his personal experiences of being subjected to caste and religious discrimination. Both stories help students understand social divisions and how people respond to them. The research adopts a qualitative-comparative method to analyse the texts. The paper discusses how NCERT incorporates such texts in the curriculum to sensitise students on concepts like equality and justice, while underscoring the imperative for social change. Through an analysis of characters, symbols, and authorial tone, the paper explains how both writers dwell on the topic of social injustice, to encourage new thinking. The study supports the idea that literature can create awareness and inspire positive change in society.

Keywords: Social Stratification; Class Conflict; NCERT; Mulk Raj Anand; APJ Abdul Kalam

INTRODUCTION



Social hierarchy and class differences are often depicted in postcolonial literature, especially where there are clear disparities in distribution of wealth, power and access to education. Literature serves as a mirror to reflect how social structures like caste and class function, and the way people are divided and often discriminated against because of them. Mulk Raj Anand and APJ Abdul Kalam are well known writers whose works depict the realities of provincial life in India. However, a direct comparative analysis of their works focusing on social class seems to have been unexplored. The two stories written in English, “A Pair of Mustachios” by Mulk Raj Anand, and “My Childhood” by Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, clearly show how social caste and class works in Indian society. Each story has a different style to explain how class differences persist to keep society stratified and how people resist and struggle to overcome them. Anand’s story is satirical fiction, while Kalam’s is reflective and real.

As Mohan Lal Mahto (2021) notes, “It is Anand’s humanitarian zeal for the Dalits and the deprived that makes him the champion of the underdogs

and crusader against social evils and man-made barriers which divide humanity and dehumanise people in an unjust way.” (44). Anand’s story can be studied as an allegorical narrative illustrating how ideas of class and status enter even the small, everyday parts of our lives. On the other hand, “My Childhood” by APJ Abdul Kalam is a personal and thoughtful story. It talks about social divisions based on religion and class in the town of Rameswaram before India attained independence from British rule. Both these texts are prescribed by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in school textbooks for English.

REVIEW OF TEXTBOOK DISCOURSE ON SOCIAL CLASS

Textbooks and lessons prescribed in school syllabi are never neutral. Many a time, they uphold the ideology of the powerful. Works of scholars like Krishna Kumar (2004) and Michael W. Apple (2004) imply that such books often support the ideas and interests of the rich and influential groups, especially in matters related to class differences and social power. ‘Social stratification’ and ‘class conflict’ are important topics in education and academic discussions.

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NCERT textbooks adopted across schools in India, openly discuss class, caste, social stratification and social exclusion. For example, the Sociology textbook *Social Change and Development in India* (2007) by NCERT has chapters like “Social Inequality and Exclusion” and “The Market as a Social Institution”. These chapters discuss issues like caste system, economic disparities and marginalisation. The way of teaching follows the National Curriculum Framework 2005, which supports a curriculum based on social justice. It wants students to understand the inequalities present in Indian society (*National Curriculum Framework 2005*). Another example is Stephen Spender’s poem “*An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum*” which was one of the poems that was earlier included in Class 12 English textbook. It clearly shows social injustice in society. The poem talks about the poor condition of children studying in a slum school. The poet draws the attention of the readers to their suffering, to make them appreciate the importance of education for children in today’s world (NCERT Solutions for Class 12 English). It is to be noted that the poem has been excluded from the latest NCERT Class 12 English Flamingo textbook following the 2022-23 syllabus rationalisation.

The Class-VII textbook, *Social and Political Life* tells the story of Mr. and Mrs. Ansari, a couple who find it difficult to rent a house because of their religion. Even though they can afford to pay rent, people refuse to give them a house because of their last name. This reveals how both religion and social class can affect people’s lives, and how stereotypes prevalent in society can hinder a section of people from availing equal opportunities and access to facilities. The curriculum also includes excerpts from Om Prakash Valmiki’s life story *Joothan* (2003), where he talks about how he was maltreated because of his caste. He shares how he had to do dirty work and was kept separate in school just because he was a Dalit. This helps students understand the plight of the poor and weak and how caste can affect someone’s everyday life (Mukherjee).

NCERT textbooks for English are not just for learning language, they also help students understand how society functions and the inequitable treatment meted out to certain sections of the society. Some of the stories in the textbooks capture the real-life experiences of people from diverse social backgrounds. They

provide a nuanced context for students to reflect on social issues like inequality and discrimination. But, how well students understand these issues depends mostly on how teachers treat these subjects in the classroom.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study how social hierarchy and discrimination are depicted in “A Pair of Mustachios” and “My Childhood”, which are parts of the NCERT English textbooks.
- To find underlying ideas like social injustice, resistance, and change in both the stories through a comparative study of the selected works of Mulk Raj Anand and APJ Abdul Kalam.
- To analyse how the writers have delineated the characters and events to communicate the imperative for social change.
- To examine how NCERT promotes social awareness and reform through the inclusion of such narratives in its English textbooks.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study follows a qualitative and interpretative method to understand these two literary texts use socio-political literary criticism and comparative literature analysis. It explores how social class, caste, and discrimination are depicted in “A Pair of Mustachios” by Mulk Raj Anand and “My Childhood” by APJ Abdul Kalam. By comparing and analysing both texts, the research highlights how these two writers critique social systems using different styles of writing. The first short story is found in the *Class XI English literature textbook (Woven Words 68–74)* and the second one in the *Class IX English textbook (Beehive 10–16)*. Other sources consist of scholarly articles, books and newspaper articles. The research uses secondary materials to carry out the analysis and provide broader perspectives on social hierarchies. It uses a comparative framework to examine similarities and differences in narrative techniques, character development, tone, and irony used by authors to understand their approach. An understanding of the social and political background is also important, especially of colonial and postcolonial India in order to connect the analysis with real problems in society.

Textual analysis of both the texts was undertaken to depict social class and discrimination in the

stories. They were analysed to find similarities and differences in the stories.

ANALYSIS

“A Pair of Mustachios”

Mulk Raj Anand opens the story by mentioning that there are many kinds of mustachios worn in his country. The mustachio serves as an identification mark of a person's social class. A foreigner may feel that using mustachio as a social marker is not a good idea. But he admits that Indians are notorious for sticking to their queer old conventions, pride and prejudices. He says that not just the Indian but the Chinese, the Americans, and the English also have their own share of peculiarities, pride and prejudices.

The author says that in India different styles of moustaches are adopted by different social classes. The lion moustache is a symbol of the revered rajas, maharajas, nawabs, and the English army generals, known for their devotion to the King or the Emperor. The tiger moustache is worn by the feudal gentry, who have pride in their few mementoes and past glory. The goat moustache is worn by the nouveau riche, i.e., the new commercial bourgeoisie, and the shopkeeper class. The Charlie Chaplin moustache is a half-and-half affair worn by the lower middle class, a compromise between the traditional full moustache and the clean-shaven Curzon cut. Other moustaches include the sheep moustache of the coolies and lower orders, and the mouse moustache of the peasants. Different styles of mustachios are thus prevalent in Indian society; each suited to the wearer and reflecting the different hierarchical orders that are strictly adhered to.

Anand narrates a story of how there was a ruckus between two persons owing to a pair of mustachios. The story revolves around the two key characters, Khan Azam Khan, a person belonging to the proud lineage of Mughal aristocracy, and Seth Ramanand, a humble yet cunning grocer. Khan Azam Khan takes immense pride in his moustache, which he believes reflects his noble heritage. According to him, there are various styles of moustaches, each representing a specific class, with his style, the “tiger” style being the most elite.

One day, Khan Azam Khan sees Ramanand, a lower-class man, wearing a similar “tiger” moustache. He feels insulted since he considers this as a breach of social hierarchy, Khan

demands Ramanand to lower his moustache to a “goat” moustache, a style befitting his lower status. Ramanand, a clever man however, refuses to oblige him and instead manipulates the situation to his advantage. He tricks Khan Azam Khan into selling his ancestral property at a lower price, making Khan's adherence to outdated pride and vanity appear foolish.

“My Childhood”

In the text, “My Childhood”, an autobiographical narrative, we have APJ Abdul Kalam recalling his early life in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu. He talks about his simple upbringing in a middle-class Muslim family, where the values of honesty, discipline, and spirituality were instilled in him by his parents. Kalam describes his friendships with children from different religious backgrounds, indicating communal harmony. He also shares a few incidents of social discrimination that he faced due to his religion, and how his teachers and family guided him with wisdom and encouragement. Kalam emphasises themes of secularism, humility, and the importance of dreams and education in shaping one's future.

Kalam's early education and experiences shaped his character. He admired his teachers, especially Sivasubramania Iyer, who inspired him to embrace high thinking and overcome social barriers. This section of Kalam's autobiography illustrates how his hard work, curiosity, and determination laid the foundation for an illustrious career later. Kalam mentions four instances in the chapter that depict social class interactions. The first instance is when Kalam says that he had three close friends and all of them were from orthodox Hindu brahmin families. The second instance is when he mentions that his family arranged boats with special platforms during the annual Shri Sita Rama Kalyanam ceremony to transport Lord Rama's idol from the temple to the marriage site. The third instance that depicts social class interaction is the incident when he was in the fifth standard at the Rameswaram Elementary School, when an event occurred that left a lasting impression on him. At the time, he used to wear a cap that marked him as a Muslim, while his close friend Ramanadha Sastry, the son of the head priest of the Rameswaram temple, wore a sacred thread, symbolising his Brahmin heritage. One day, a new teacher joined the school. He could not tolerate a Muslim boy sitting next to the son of a Hindu priest. In a disapproving tone, he instructed

Kalam to sit on the back bench. This act saddened both Kalam and Ramanadha Sastry deeply, who broke down into tears as Kalam began to move away. The incident disturbed Kalam so much that it remained etched in his memory. When Ramanadha Sastry's father came to know of the matter, he was deeply upset. He summoned the teacher and conveyed his strong disapproval of such narrow-mindedness. The teacher eventually regretted his behaviour. This incident not only highlights the deep-rooted prejudices of society but also reflects the strength of friendship, the impact of social injustice, and the importance of standing up for what is right. The fourth instance is when his science teacher Sivasubramania Iyer invited him to his home for a meal and Kalam gladly accepted the invitation. However, when Iyer's wife saw a Muslim boy in her kitchen, she was shocked and refused to serve him food. Iyer, however, did not argue with her. Instead, he served Kalam with his own hands and sat down beside him to eat, treating him with warmth and equality. After the meal, Iyer gently told Kalam not to get upset and invited him again the following weekend. This time, his wife's attitude had changed, she not only accepted Kalam but also served him food herself. The incident left a strong impression on Kalam. It taught him the power of change through patience, kindness, and quiet determination. It also showed how real progress begins when individuals challenge social norms with courage and empathy.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE STORIES

Presence of social stratification

Both the stories show the presence of social stratification in Indian society, based on caste, class, or religion. In "A Pair of Mustachios," Mulk Raj Anand critiques the rigid class system that persisted even after India attained independence. The character of Khan Azam Khan holds on to his feudal pride by glorifying the old aristocracy. He believes in class superiority based on birth and family background, and that the style of one's moustache is a marker of one's social rank. This strange symbol highlights his strong convictions about social hierarchy and how appearances are used to claim one's status. Similarly, in "My Childhood," APJ Abdul Kalam recalls the caste differences that were prevalent in his hometown, Rameswaram. He shares how a few orthodox Brahmins from the upper caste discriminated against Muslims like him. Even though Kalam was a boy of good character and intelligence, he faced

exclusion because of his religion. These instances from both the stories reveal how such social divisions were accepted as normal and passed down through tradition and social customs.

Conflict arising from class and caste differences

The stories also show problems that come from differences in class and caste. In Anand's story, the problem is clear and even funny because it is so extreme. Khan Azam Khan gets very angry when Seth Ramanand, a shopkeeper from a lower class, keeps the same style of moustache that Khan thinks only noble people are entitled to have. This starts an argument over respect and social status. Khan thinks Ramanand is challenging the old social values. As Khan is vainglorious, and wishes to prove his superiority, he ends up in a squabble which makes him feel humiliated when he is tricked by a person whom he considers as his social inferior. In "My Childhood" also there is evidence of caste based, class conflict. When Kalam, as a Muslim boy, is asked by a new teacher to sit at the back of the class, considering him unsuitable to take a place beside his Brahmin friend, Kalam feels hurt and confused. Kalam suggests that it is not just unfair but also indicates how children are made aware of such differences from a young age. Kalam's experience of being invited to his Brahmin teacher's house for a meal, and the refusal of his teacher's wife to serve him food in her kitchen exemplify how caste and religious discrimination gets manifested in everyday life and create social barriers and distance between people, even when they all live in the same community.

Resistance to social change

Resistance to social change is another common point in both stories. In "A Pair of Mustachios", Khan Azam Khan is hidebound, who does not want to accept that society is changing fast, and the old class hierarchies are breaking down. He tries to uphold his so-called honour by focusing on something so trivial as the style of his moustache. It suggests his inability to adapt to the changing social values, where people are no longer respected for their family lineage but for their hard work and initiative. His thinking remains backward and does not progress with the changing times. In the extract from Kalam's autobiography, "My Childhood," the new science teacher, though well educated, was not ready to accept social equality in his classroom. He looks down on Kalam as a person belonging to a lower

class, and considers his friendship with a Brahmin's son as unsuitable.

Symbolism

Both stories use symbols to refer to larger social issues. In "A Pair of Mustachios," the moustache is not just a superficial physical attribute, it becomes a symbol of pride, class, and social position. The moustache style that Khan Azam Khan maintains is a status marker. It informs the world that he is from a noble family. However, Khan is affronted when Ramanand also sports the same style. It robs him of his feeling of being special. The moustache becomes a bone of contention. It indicates how sometimes even trivial things related to one's appearance can carry deep meaning in society. Similarly, in "My Childhood", small actions like sitting together in a class, or having food in someone's company, can become very meaningful. These actions show how caste and religion quietly divide people. When a student is sent to sit at the back benches of the class, it symbolises how people are alienated or pushed back in society. But when a brahmin teacher invites a Muslim boy and serves him food at his home, it shows a quiet protest against the pernicious caste system. Both stories use symbols not only to expose unfairness, but also to provoke us, as readers, to think and question the social rules instead of following them blindly.

Muslim Character

Both Anand's and Kalam's story involve Muslim characters. In Anand's story, Khan Azam Khan was a proud descendent of a noble in the Mughal court. While in Kalam's story, he himself was a Muslim. The social discrimination depicted in these stories is not just caste based but also religion based.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE STORIES

Genre and Form

The two texts are very different in their style. "A Pair of Mustachios" is a fictional story that satirises Indian society using gentle humour. The story uses irony and hyperbole to convey how silly class pride and social vanity can be. "My Childhood," on the other hand, is an extract from Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's autobiography *Wings of Fire* (Kalam and Tiwari 1999).

Tone and Style

In a "A Pair of Mustachios", adopting humour and gentle mockery, Anand draws Khan Azam Khan as

a caricature to expose his old-fashioned pride in his rank and social status. His bickering over something as trivial, as a moustache style, strikes the contemporary readers as something funny. However, behind this joke, Anand is conveying a message about how with the rise of the new middle class, the earlier feudal classes were gradually losing power. Kalam's writing, on the other hand, is realistic, respectful, and full of feeling. He narrates anecdotes from his own life and shares his thoughts candidly, as a matter of fact, without passing any value judgements on the actions of the people he describes. Even when he reflects on the unfair treatment meted out to him, he does not blame anyone or express indignation. Instead, he reviews the event with equanimity and narrates it in a calm tone. He shows the importance of love, equality, and understanding. His words try to bring people together, not pull them apart.

Treatment of Characters

In "A Pair of Mustachios," the characters are shown in a simple and big way, to represent ideas. Khan Azam Khan comes across as a pretentious and comical character, his excessive pride and obsession with his social status make him look rather pompous. His adversary, Ramanand is shrewd and practical. He represents the rising middle class, who is unafraid of the old social rules. The characters are made a bit dramatic to match the humorous and satirical vein in which the story is narrated. The characters in "My Childhood," on the other hand feel real and emotional. Kalam talks about them with care and respect. His father, Jainulabdeen is shown as wise and spiritual. His teacher, Sivasubramania Iyer, is an upright man with progressive ideals. Even the people who treat Kalam unfairly are not portrayed in a bad light. Kalam shows them as part of a society that has old and unfair rules. The characters are introduced in a thoughtful way, and Kalam uses a calm and balanced tone to talk about them.

Type of Conflict

The conflict in "A Pair of Mustachios" happens outside the characters. It is about class pride, where two characters bicker over who can wear which kind of moustache. The story concludes on a humorous note, conveying a strong message for the society. The problem starts because one man, Khan Azam Khan, does not want to accept that people from lower classes can rise or become

one's social equal. In "My Childhood", the conflict is internal. It shows the emotional and moral dilemmas that a child as well as the adults undergo when faced with inequities in the society. Kalam feels hurt when he is treated differently based on his religion. The story tells us how keenly he became aware of social disparities right from a young age, how he navigated such situations, and how the grown-ups around him managed it. The conflict is internal, without overt friction and full of feeling, while also conveying a hope that things could change for the better.

Depiction of Social Change

Mulk Raj Anand's story ends by making fun of people who are stubborn and do not want to accept social change. Khan Azam Khan, despite his swagger, gets duped and embarrassed by a man of a lower class. The story shows that people who stubbornly hold on to old ideas of superiority cannot move forward and will be left behind. Kalam's story is full of hope and positivity. Notwithstanding the discrimination, good people like his father and his teacher show compassion and a progressive mindset. The story implies that change takes time but with the right education, through imparting of strong values, and through cultivation of mutual respect, it is bound to happen. Kalam's aim is not to criticise, but to show existing issues in society which need to be addressed.

Use of Symbolism

In "A Pair of Mustachios", the use of symbols is very important. The different styles of moustache indicate class restrictions. The story is about who should wear what type of moustache, and makes fun of the idea that someone's social position can be upheld merely by observing these trivial customs. Whereas in "My Childhood," the symbols are softer and more emotional. Simple actions like eating together, sitting next to each other in a class, or offering food are not just daily activities, they become signs of either discrimination or togetherness. Kalam uses these small events to show the bigger problem of caste and religion dividing people.

Setting and Context

The setting for Anand's story appears to be a village or a small town in the north of India, immediately after the country attained independence, a period when old social structures were breaking down and class differences were beginning to get addressed.

Kalam's story happens in the town of Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, during the early years of independent India. It shows a harmonious and mixed religious community, where people of different faiths live together. Though there are social differences, there are also efforts to bridge them and bring people together with respect and unity. The time shown in Kalam's story was when India was coming into its own, as a new nation and people were learning to live together as one country.

Underlying Message

The objective of Mulk Raj Anand's story is to expose and ridicule the caste or class differences. He uses humour to satirise how people hold on to their pride based on their appearance and presumptions of social superiority. His story instructs us to leave behind such pretensions and outdated social conventions. Kalam's story is written to provide hope and inspiration to people. It exhorts readers to rise above caste and religious differences, and follow the path of education, compassion, and honesty. Kalam's story does not just aim at holding a mirror to the society, as he found it. It also subtly shares his moral sentiments. It reflects his belief in the unity among all Indians and in the value of equal treatment and cultural nurturance for growing into a good human being.

Muslim character

In Anand's story, the Muslim character Khan Azam Khan harbours a prejudice against Ramanand, a Hindu man of lower class. He is an elitist, and traces his ancestry to the noble lineage of the Mughals and regards Ramanand as socially inferior. In Kalam's story, a Hindu teacher treats the Brahmin children as belonging to a higher class and looks down upon Kalam as one from a lower class.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "A Pair of Mustachios" by Mulk Raj Anand and "My Childhood" by A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, though adopting different styles of narrative, offer a nuanced portrayal of social stratification in Indian society. Anand's fiction employs satire to expose the absurdity of rigid class hierarchies, while Kalam presents a sincere autobiographical account that reflects the ingrained cultural habits rooted in caste and religious divisions of the society. Both narratives highlight how social prejudices are subtly embedded in daily

practices, symbols, and interpersonal relationships.

This comparative study underscores literature's power not only in reflecting societal realities but also in challenging them. While Anand critiques outdated social systems with irony, Kalam's reflections inspire hope through values of compassion, education, and resilience. The

inclusion of such texts in NCERT curricula demonstrates an educational commitment on the part of the curriculum designers to raising awareness on issues of social injustice and fostering critical thinking among students. Ultimately, these stories contribute meaningfully to the discourse on social equality, revealing literature's enduring role in promoting introspection and societal transformations.

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