

## A Pair of Mustachios

- Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand, (1905-2004) is one of the best known Indian writers of fiction in English. This prominent Indian author of novels, short stories, and critical essays in English, is known for his realistic and sympathetic portrayal of the poor in India. He is considered a founder of the English-language Indian novel. His first main novel, *Untouchable*, published in 1935, was a chilling description of the day-to-day life of a member of India's untouchable caste. In Anand's second novel, *Coolie* (1936), he continues to describe the plight of India's poor by telling of a 15-year-old boy, trapped in servitude as a child labourer, who eventually dies of tuberculosis. He wrote 19 novels, 12 collections of short stories and 30 other library works. His well known short stories are 'the lost child,' 'A pair of mustachios,' 'Old Babu,' 'Lajwanti The Barber's Trade union' and 'The Trader and the Corn Goddess'

The story 'A pair of mustacheos' is a light, humorous but thought provoking representation of how people attach false motives to the things which they do not belong to. The story may be divided in two parts. The first relates the author's own statement of the types of mustachios popular in India, while the second narrates a satirical story of a person who claims himself of a feudal descent. Victim of false pride of his descent, the person loses all he had to get lowered down the mustachios of a grocer whom he considers not entitled to wear the upright mustachios like his.

There are various kinds of <sup>1</sup>mustachios worn in my country to make the boundaries between the various classes of people. Outsiders may think it stupid to lay down, or rather to raise, lines of demarcation of this kind, but we are notorious in the whole world for sticking to our queer old conventions, prides and prejudices, even as the Chinese or the Americans, or, for that matter, the English... And, at any rate, some people may think it easier and more convenient to wear permanent boundary-lines like mustachios, which only need a smear of grease to keep them bright and shiny, rather than to wear frock coats, striped trousers and top hats, which constantly need to be laundered and drycleaned, and the maintenance of which is already leading to the bankruptcy of the European ruling classes. With them clothes make the man, but to us mustachios make the man. So we prefer the various styles of mustachios to make the differences between the classes .....

And very unique and poetical symbols they are too. For instance, there is the famous lion mustache, the fearsome upstanding symbol of that great order of resplendent Rajas, Maharajas, Nababs and English army generals who are so well known for their devotion to the King Emperor. Then there is the tiger mustache, the uncanny, several-pointed mustache

mustachiou / mə'stæʃiəu /  
laundered / 'ləʊndəd /

queer / kwɪə /  
bankruptcy / 'bæŋkrʌptsi /

striped / straɪpt /

worn by the unbending, unchanging survivals from the ranks of the feudal gentry who have nothing left but the pride in their greatness and a few mementos of past glory, scrolls of honour, granted by the former Emperors, a few gold trinkets, heirlooms and bits of land. Next there is the goat mustache a rather unsure brand, worn by the nouveau riche, the new commercial bourgeoisie and the shopkeeper class somehow don't belong an indifferent, thin little line of a mustache, worn so that its tips can be turned up or down as the occasion demands a show of power to some coolie or humility to a prosperous client. There is the Charlie Chaplin mustache worn by the lower middle class, by clerks and professional men, a kind of half-and-half affair, deliberately designed as a compromise between the traditional full mustache and the cleanshaven Curzon cut of the Sahibs and the Barristers, because the Babus are not sure whether the Sahibs like them to keep mustachios at all. There is the sheep mustache of the coolie and the lower orders, the mouse mustache of the peasants, and so on.

In fact, there are endless styles of mustachios, all appropriate to the wearers and indicative of the various orders, as rigorously adhered to as if they had all been patented by the Government of India or sanctioned by special appointment with His Majesty the King or Her Majesty the Queen. And any poaching on the style of one class by members of another is interpreted by certain authorities as being indicative of the increasing jealousy with which each class is guarding its rights and privileges in regard to the mark of the mustachio.

Of course, the analysis of the expert is rather too abstract, and not all the murders can be traced to this cause, but certainly it is true that the preferences of the people in regard to their mustachios are causing a lot of trouble in our parts. For instance, there was a rumpus in my own village the other day about a pair of mustachios.

It so happened that Seth Ramanand, the grocer and money-lender, who had been doing well out of the recent fall on the price of wheat by buying up whole crops cheap from the hard-pressed peasants and then selling grain at higher prices, took it into his head to twist the goat mustache, integral to his order and position in society, at the tips, so that it looked nearly like a tiger mustache.

Nobody seemed to mind very much, because most of the mouse mustached peasants in our village are beholden of the grocer, either because they owe him interest on a loan, or an instalment on a mortgage of jewellery or land. Besides, the Seth had been careful enough to twist his mustache so that it seemed nearly though not quite like a tiger mustache.

But there lives in the vicinity of our village, in an old, dilapidated Moghul style house, a Mussulman named Khan Azam Khan, who claims descent from an ancient Afgham family whose heads were noblemen and councilors in the Court of the Great Moghuls. Khan Azam Khan, a tall, middle-aged man is a handsome and dignified person, and he wears a tiger mustache and remains adorned with the faded remnants of a gold-brocaded waistcoat, though he hasn't even a patch of land left.

Some people, notably the landlord of our village and the moneylender, maliciously say that he is an impostor, and that all his talk about his blue blood is merely the bluff of a rascal. Others like the priest of the temple, concede that his ancestors were certainly attached to the court of the Great Moghuls, but as menial workers. The landlord, the money-lender and the priest are manifestly jealous of anyone's long ancestry, however, because they have all

mementos / mə'mentəʊ /  
rigorously / 'rɪɡərəs /

nouveau riche / nu:vəʊ 'ri:tʃ /  
dilapidated / dɪ'læprɪdɪtɪd /

bourgeoisie / bu:ʒwaɪ'zi: /

risen from nothing, and it is obvious from the stately ruins around Khan Azam Khan's pride is greatly in excess of his present possessions, and he is inordinately jealous of his old privileges and rather foolish and headstrong in safeguarding every sacred brick of his tottering house against <sup>4</sup>vandalism.

Khan Azam Khan happened to go to the moneylender's shop to pawn his wife's gold nose-ring one morning and he noticed the upturning tendency of the hair on Ramanand's upper lip which made the grocer's goat mustache look almost like his own tiger mustache.

'Since when have the lentil-eating shopkeepers become noblemen?' he asked surlily, even before he had shown the nose-ring to the grocer.

'I don't know what you mean, Khan,' Ramanand answered.

'You Know what I mean', said the Khan 'Look at the way you have turned the tips of your mustache upwards. It almost looks like my tiger mustache. Turn the tips down to the style proper to the goat that you are! Fancy the airs of the traders now a days!'

'Oh, Khan, don't get so excited,' said the money lender, who was nothing if he was not amenable, having built up his business on the maxim that the customer is always right.

'I tell you, turn the tip of your mustache down if you value your life!' raged Khan Azam Khan.

'If that is all the trouble, here you are,' said Ramanand, brushing one end of his mustache with his oily hand so that it dropped like a deadfly. 'Come, show me the trinkets. How much do you want for them?'

Now that Khan Azam Khan's pride was appeased, he was like soft wax in the merchant's sure hand. His need, and the need of his family for food, was great, and he humbly accepted the value which the grocer put on his wife's nose-ring.

But as he was departing, after negotiating his business, he noticed that though one end of the grocer's mustache had come down at his behest, the other end was still up.

'A, strange trick you have played on me,' the Khan said.

'I have paid you the best value for your trinket, Khan, that any money-lender will pay in these parts,' the grocer said, 'especially, in these days when the Sarkars of the whole world are threatening to go off the gold standard.

'It has nothing to do with the trinket,' said Azam Khan, 'but one end of your mustache is still up like my tiger mustache though you have brought down the other 'as your proper goat's style. Bring that other end down also, so that there is no apeing by your mustache of mine.

'Now, Khan,' said the grocer 'I humbled myself because you are doing business with me. You can't expect me to become a mere worm just because you have pawned a trinket with me. If you were pledging some more expensive 'jewellery, I might consider obliging you a little more. Anyhow, my humble milk-skimmer doesn't look a bit like your valiant tiger mustache,'

maliciously / mə'liʃəs /  
vandalism / 'vændəlɪzəm /

menial / 'mi:niəl /  
surlily / 'sɜ:rlɪ /

ruins / 'ru:ɪn /

'Bring that tip down!' Khan Azam Khan roared, for the more he had looked at the grocer's mustache the more the still upturned tip seemed to him like an effort at an initiation of his own.

'Now, be sensible, Khan,' the money-lender said waving his hand with an <sup>2</sup>imperturbable calm.

'I tell you, turn that tip down or I shall wring your neck,' said the Khan.

'All right, the next time you come to do business with me I shall bring that tip down,' answered the money-lender cunningly.

'That is fair,' said Chaudhri Chottu Ram, the landlord of the village, who was sitting under the tree opposite.

'To be sure! To be sure!' some peasants chimed in sheepishly.

Khan Azam Khan managed to control his murderous impulses and walked away. But he could not quell his pride, the pride of the generations of his ancestors who had worn the tiger mustache as a mark of their position. To see the symbol of his honour imitated by a grocer this was too much for him. He went home and fetched a necklace which had come down to his family through seven generations and, placing it before the grocer said:

'Now will you bring that tip of your mustache down?'

'By all means, Khan' said the grocer 'But let us see about this necklace. How much do you want for it?'

'Any price will do, so long as you bring the tip of your mustache down,' answered Azam Khan.

After they had settled the business the money-lender said: 'Now Khan, I shall carry out your will.' And he ceremoniously brushed the upturned tip of his mustache down.

As Azam Khan was walking away, however, he noticed that the other tip of the grocer's mustache had now gone up and stood dubiously like the upturned end of his own exalted tiger mustache. He turned on his feet and shouted:

'I shall kill you if you don't brush that mustache into the shape appropriate to your position as a lentil-eating grocer!'

'Now, now, Khan, come to your senses. You know it is only the illusion of a tiger's mustache and nowhere like your brave and wonderful adornment,' said the greasy money-lender.

'I tell you I won't have you insulting the insignia of my order!' shouted Azam Khan. 'You bring that tip down!'

'I wouldn't do it, Khan, even if you pawned all the jewellery you possess to me,' said the money-lender.

'I would rather I lost all my remaining worldly possessions, my pots and pans, my clothes, even my houses, than see the tip of your mustache turned up like that!' spluttered

jewellery / 'dʒu:əlri /

imperturbable / ɪmpə'tɜ:bəbl /

fetches / fetʃed /

exalted / ɪg'zɔ:ltɪd /

insignia / ɪn'sɪgnɪə /

Azam Khan.

'Acha, if you care so little for all your goods and chattels you sell them to me and then I shall turn that tip of my mustache down,' said the money-lender. 'And, what is more, I shall keep it flat. Now, is that a bargain?'

'That seems fair enough,' said the landlord from under the trees where he was preparing for a siesta.

'But, what proof have I that you will keep your word?' said Azam Khan. 'You oily lentil-eaters, never keep your promises.'

'We shall draw up a deed, here and now,' said the money-lender. 'And we shall have it signed by the five elders of the village who are seated under that tree. What more do you want?'

'Now, there is no catch in that,' put in the landlord. 'I and four other elders will come to court as witnesses on your behalf if the grocer doesn't keep his mustache to the goat style ever afterwards.'

'I shall excommunicate him from religion if he doesn't keep his word,' added the priest, who had arrived on the scene on hearing the hubub.

'Acha,' agreed Azam Khan.

And he forthwith had a deed prepared by the petition writer of the village, who sat smoking his hubble-bubble under the tree. And this document, transferring all his household goods and chattels, was signed in the presence of the five elders of the village and sealed. And the money-lender forthwith brought both tips of his mustache down and kept them glued in the goat style appropriate to his order.

Only, as soon as Khan Azam Khan's back was turned he muttered, to the peasants seated near by: 'My father was a sultan.

And they laughed to see the Khan give a special twist to his mustache, as he walked away maintaining the valiant uprightness of the symbol of his ancient and noble family. Though he had become a pauper.

## Glossary

worn	-	(present wear) to have a beard or mustache
demarcation	-	a border or line that separates two things.
notorious	-	known in bad sense
bankruptcy	-	the state when a man has less money to pay than what he owes.
order	-	class or group of society
resplendent	-	bright and colorful in an impressive way.
survivals	-	successors
feudal gentry	-	people connected with the social system that existed during the Middle Ages

clothes / kləʊðz /  
siesta / si'estə /

chattels / 'tʃætɪ /  
pauper / 'pɔ:pə /

memento	-	a thing that you keep or give to somebody to remind you or them of a person or place
scroll	-	a long roll of paper for writing on.
trinket	-	a piece of jewellery or small ornament that is no worth much money.
heirloom	-	a valuable object that has belonged to the same family for many years.
nouveau rich	-	a person who has recently become rich and likes to show how rich he is in a very obvious way.
bourgeoisie	-	the capitalist (pronounced as 'bozwazi' )
Charlie Chaplin	-	British comic actor
curzon cut	-	like that of lord Curzon, viceroy in British India
rumpus	-	a lot of noise that is made especially by people who are complaining about something; commotion.
twist	-	give a curve to
beholden	-	owing something to somebody because of something that he has done for him
mortgage	-	the sum of money that you borrow.
dilapidated	-	old and in a bad condition
descent	-	ancestry.
remnants	-	remaining
malicious	-	having or showing hatred for somebody that causes a desire to harm him
impostor	-	a person who pretends to be somebody else in order to deceive people.
blue blood	-	from a royal or noble family:
the bluff of a rascal	-	an abusive expression
inordinately	-	excessively.
headstrong	-	persons determined to do things their own way and refuse to listen to advice.
vandalism	-	the crime of destroying or damaging.
surly	-	bad tempered and rude.
amenable	-	easy to control, willing to be influenced by somebody,
maxim	-	well known phrase that expresses some thing that is usually true or that people think is rule for sensible behaviour.
appease	-	to make somebody calmer or less angry by giving what he wants
gold standard	-	an economic system in which the value of money is based on the value of gold.
greasy	-	friendly in a way that does not seem sincere.
insignia	-	the symbol, badge or sign that shows somebody's rank or that he is a member of a group or an organization.
splutter	-	speak quickly and with difficulty, making soft spitting sounds because you are angry.

chattel	- something that belongs to you.
Siesta	- early afternoon rest or sleep especially in hot countries.
excommunicate	- to punish somebody by officially stating that he can no longer be a member of a religion.
pauper	- a very poor person.

## Exercises

### Word Power

#### (A) Fill in the blanks with the words given below:

(descent, surly, conventions, vandalism, malicious, amenable, memento, mortgage, imposter, headlong)

1. Young boys enjoy flouting \_\_\_\_\_ these day.
2. I have applied to the bank for a \_\_\_\_\_ on my house.
3. I bought a statuette as a \_\_\_\_\_ on my trip to Khajuraho.
4. He spread \_\_\_\_\_ gossip against me.
5. Every man in that locality is proud of his royal \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Look at that man. He is not a real constable. He is a \_\_\_\_\_.
7. The boy is \_\_\_\_\_. He won't listen to anybody's advice.
8. She was very \_\_\_\_\_ to my idea of leaving the house.
9. The man glanced me with a \_\_\_\_\_ look. I did not like it.
10. The boy died in the hospital due to the doctor's negligence. The next day it became the target of irate crowd's \_\_\_\_\_.

Satire is a literary work, in verse or prose, in which the author ridicules some human folly or vice, The essence of satire is revelation of the contrast between reality and pretence. Satire involves three elements- attack, laughter and morality. In satire, humour and irony are clearly perceptible elements.

#### (B) Assess the story as a modern satire.

### Comprehension

#### (A) Answer the following questions in 4 or 5 sentences each:

1. What kinds of mustachios has the author described? Name the classes of people who can wear them.
2. What did the village people say about Khan Azam Khan's descent?



3. Describe, in brief, Khan Azam Khan's financial condition?
4. Why did Khan Azam Khan accept the value the grocer put on his wife's nose-ring?
5. What did the grocer say when Azam Khan told him to bring the other tip of his mustache down?
6. On what condition was the grocer ready to bring both the tips of his mustache down?
7. Why did the villagers laugh when Azam Khan walked away?

**(B) Answer the following questions in about 150 words :**

1. “Khan Azam Khan's pride was greatly in excess of his present possessions,” Explain the statement.
2. Write a character sketch of Ramanand, the grocer.
3. Do you justify Khan Azam Khan's action? Give reasons for your opinion.