

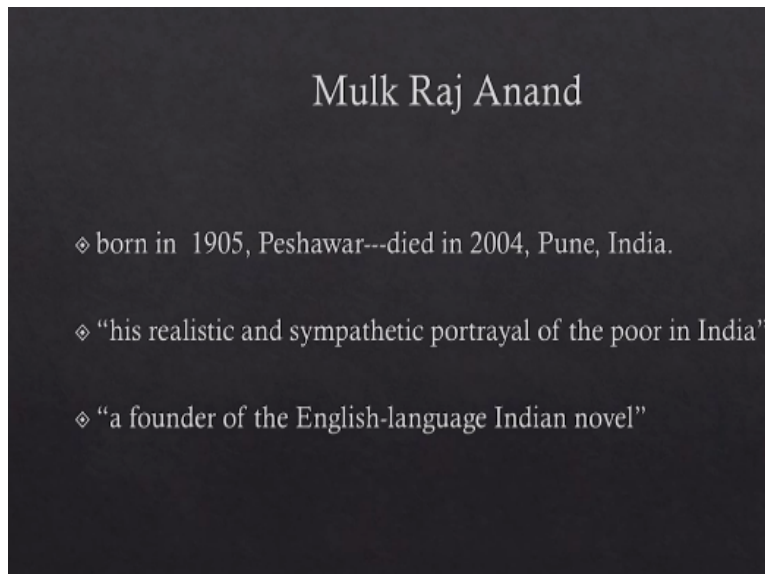
Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture - 09
Catharsis in Mulk Raj Anand's The Price of Bananas – I

Hello and welcome to week 9. The lecture is on Mulk Raj Anand's *The Price of Bananas* and the angle of interpretation that I am going for is the idea of Catharsis in this particular short fiction.

So a brief introduction about Mulk Raj Anand.

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He was born in 1905 in Peshawar in British India and he died in 2004 in Pune in India. And Mulk Raj Anand is specifically known for his realistic and sympathetic representation of the poorer classes in India. And he is also known as one of the most important founders of the English language Indian novel.

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Mulk Raj Anand

- ◇ *Untouchable* (1935)
 - ◇ *Coolie* (1936)
- “the problems of poverty”
- ◇ “*The Village* (1939), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), and *The Big Heart* (1945; rev. ed. 1980).”

And these are his most famous works the first two the *Untouchable* published in 1935 and the *Coolie* published in 1936 deal very rigorously with the problems of poverty in the Indian carnation and the other works which are of equal importance are the *village* published in 1939, *The Sword and the Sickle* 1942 and *The Big Heart* published in 1945 and a revised edition came out in 1980. Now let us come to his short fiction and Mulk Raj Anand has written quite a lot of short stories as well.

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The Price of Bananas

- ◇ Hopes to narrate an “informal pilgrimage” through paint
- ◇ A singular incident through writing
- ◇ “verbal description”

“amusing”

“certain shades of feeling”

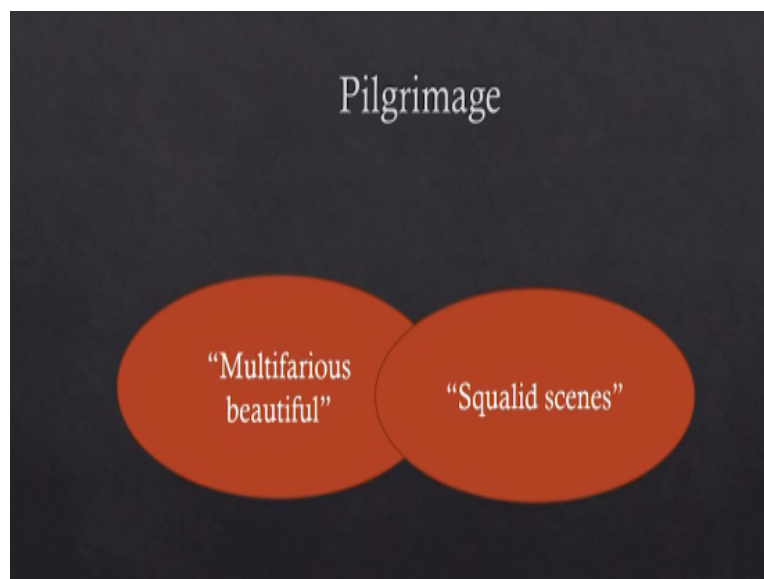
This particular short fiction, “*The Price of Bananas*” also deals with a very interesting theme in the Indian society and that is, you know the idea of some sort of punishment being given to one

due to his personal Folly or Foible misdeed and one of the central characters in this particular story also gets punished in a way through a very strange means.

And how the narrator looks at that central character and the way the punishment is meted out to this interesting centered protagonist or so antagonist is what the story is about. So the price of bananas is narrated in the first person by an artist a painter and he talks about his informal pilgrimage which he you know, undertook on the previous year and he hopes to narrate that informal pilgrimage through paint through the language that he is very familiar with and that is the language of paint and crayons and a pencils.

And though that is his usual language that he really likes and is very, very deft in there is one particular incident that he really wants to narrate through writing through, through words and he says that he is going to do a verbal description of that particular episode because it talks about certain shades of feeling that is manifest in the Indian country and such shades could also be seen as being very amusing too.

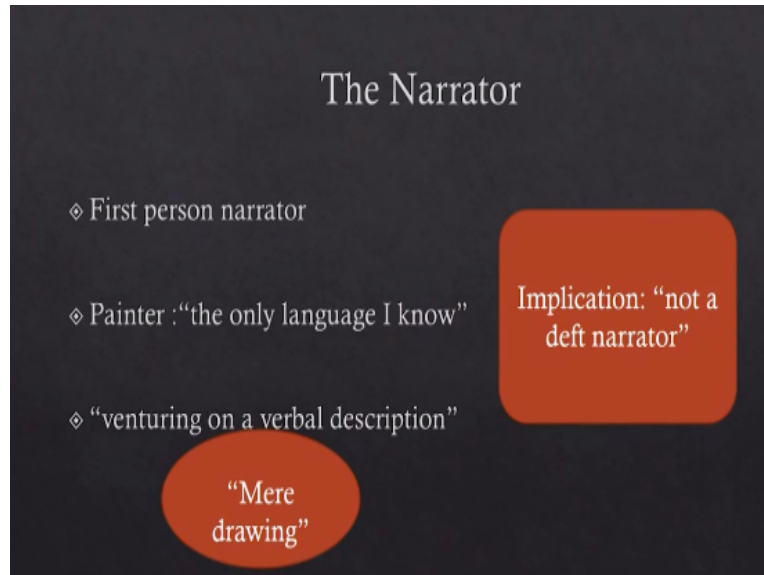
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So this Pilgrimage that he undertakes is also a combination of the beautiful and squalid so there are a multitude, multifarious means multitude various sets of beautiful scenery that he came across during his pilgrimage and that is a good subject matter for the painter who wants to bring out the beautiful sides that he has come across and he has also seen equal number of squalid

scenes and that one such squalid scene is what this particular painter is going to narrate through words.

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So as I mentioned he-- this is a first-person Narrator that we have in this particular story and he is an artist and he says that the only language that I know is painting, the implication is that the only language that I know really well is painting but for a particular incident he is going to venture like an adventurer on a verbal description of that particular incident because a mere drawing will not be sufficient to bring out the several shades of feeling that this incident has for the reader.

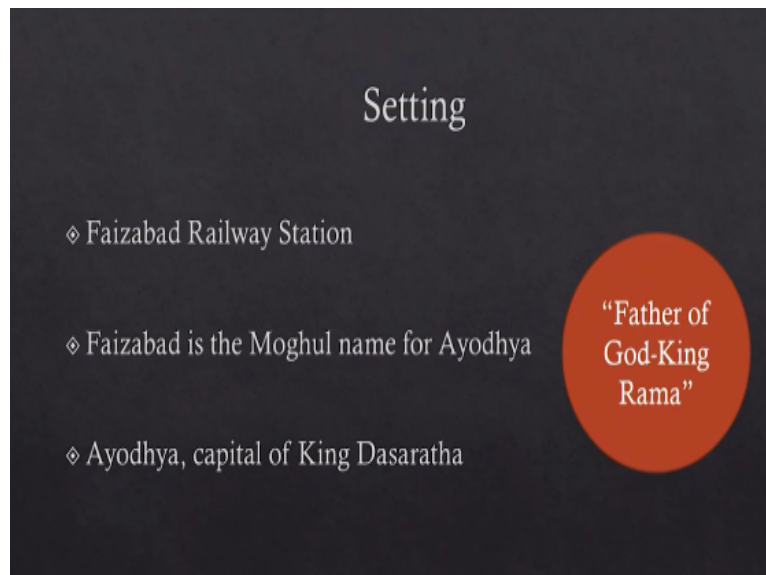
So he says, that a Mere drawing is not going to be useful and he is going to venture on a short write-up of that particular event and another implication there is that, that I am not a deft narrator but I am going to try my hand at it. So the passage the particular passage that we are interested in this particular set of ideas is the very opening narration from Mulk Raj Anand and that is this.

He says, “During the ‘Informal Pilgrimage’ of India which I made last year, I came across many things multifarious, beautiful and squalid scenes and a great deal happened to me which I hope to record in the only language I know the language of the sharpened pencil; the colored crayons and the paint brush. But there was one incident which I remember that compels me to put pen to paper.”

So the idea of being compelled is very, very interesting, you know the very incident seems to bring out this particular mode of narration which is done through words. So he says, which I remember that compels me to put pen to paper because a Mere drawing will not help, so I am venturing; I am going to try my hand on a verbal description of this episode which may perhaps prove to be as amusing as it is significant.

So it is a combination of both the-- you know the funnier aspects as well as the profound aspects of life in India as it is significant of certain shades of feeling in our last country. So this is what the first person narrator offers as a premise to you know, kind of give us a description of that particular incident which happened to him during his informal pilgrimage last year.

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So this Narrator is in Faizabad railway station and he is on the way to Lucknow and he kind of sets forth on giving a historical mythical religious context for this particular place fights about and he says, that it is the Moghul name for Ayodhya. And as we know Ayodhya is the capital of King Dasaratha and he was the father of God-King Rama in this religious epic of India which is Ramayana.

So from that setting of Faizabad railway station we move into mythical religious epic territory of the Ramayana and he further says that--

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Setting

- ◆ The epic, Ramayana
- ◆ Defeat of Ravana, demon-king of Lanka
- ◆ “Monkey general Hanuman and his hordes of monkeys, lemurs, apes and gorillas”

Ramayana which is about the defeat of Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka at the hands of this God-King Rama who managed to defeat this demon-king with the help of the Monkey General Hanuman and his holds hordes of monkeys, lemurs, apes and gorillas. So from this station Faizabad we have come to the notion of the monkey hordes.

The different kinds of species of monkeys which were under the control of the monkey general Hanuman has been established very, very deftly, cleverly by this Narrator.

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Setting

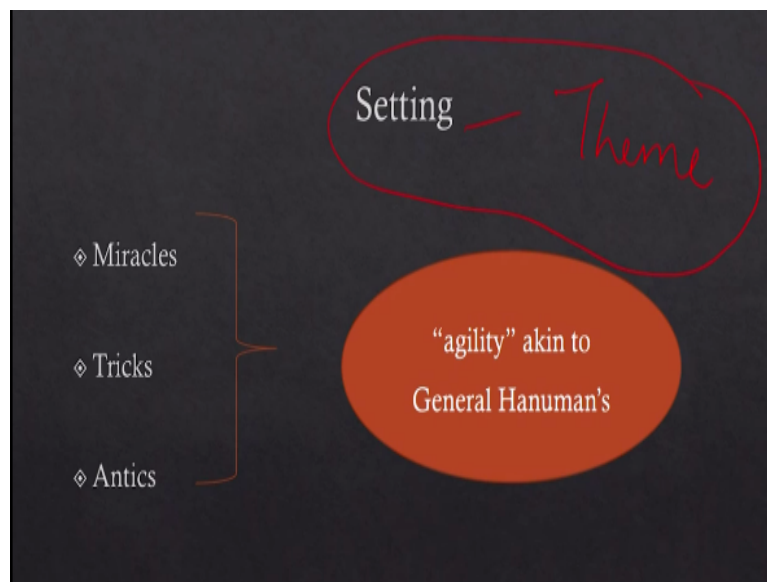
- ◆ Descendents of the monkey army in Ayodhya
- ◆ “heredity...traditions, the noble ideals, the rituals and even the riotous excesses”
- ◆ Traditionally noble behaviour and “a sense of hilarity”

So he says that, the descendants of the monkey army in Ayodhya, you know some of them settled in that region itself while the others migrated to the rest of the country and these are monkeys

held on to their heredity; their traditions; the noble ideals you know. The high quality of mind the rituals and even the riotous excesses and might one of the homeworks that I would suggest for the students on the course is to find out about the riotous excesses of the monkey general Hanuman in the Ramayana.

I will come back to that a bit later but I would like to I would like you to find it about the riotous excesses that this general carried out and which is made reference here in this particular story. So according to this narrator we have a combination of a traditionally and noble behavior and a sense of hilarity you know, a sense of the amusement mockery sarcasm that is embedded in the characteristics of the monkeys in this vast country who are the descendants of the monkey hordes who helped the God-King Rama in achieving his purpose which is at the defeat of the demon-king of Lanka.

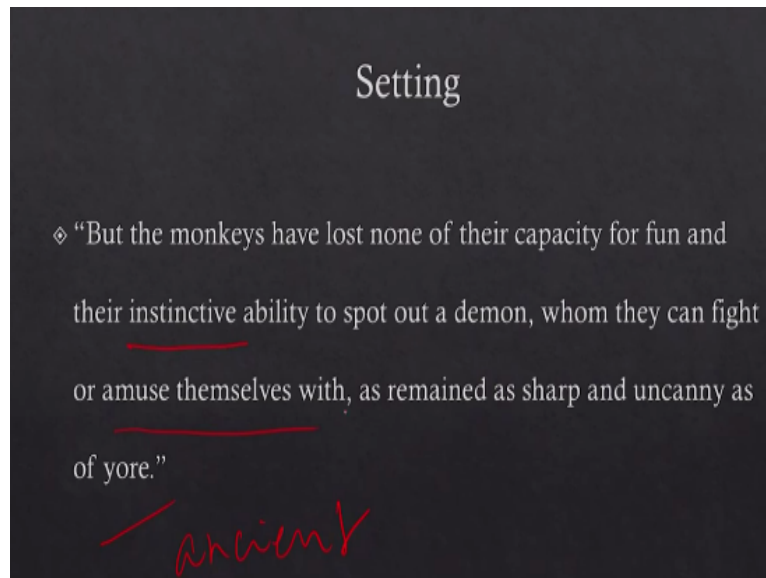
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Okay, so we are here in this idea of setting the notion of setting which is deeply connected to the theme of the story and again the key figure in these two aspects of the story analysis is the figure of the monkeys and these monkeys are you know known to perform miracles they are known to perform tricks and they also perform antics and some of the monkeys who do all these are commonly seen especially the ones who do tricks and antics are commonly seen in the streets of India.

And the narrator says that the agility or the strategies or the agility or the tricks that these monkeys perform today are comparable to the agility the sharpness of behavior and thought of general Hanuman himself. So there is a comparison a kind of connection or an association that is drawn between the monkeys of today and general Hanuman and his troop's author of the regime of God-King Rama in those days in Ayodhya.

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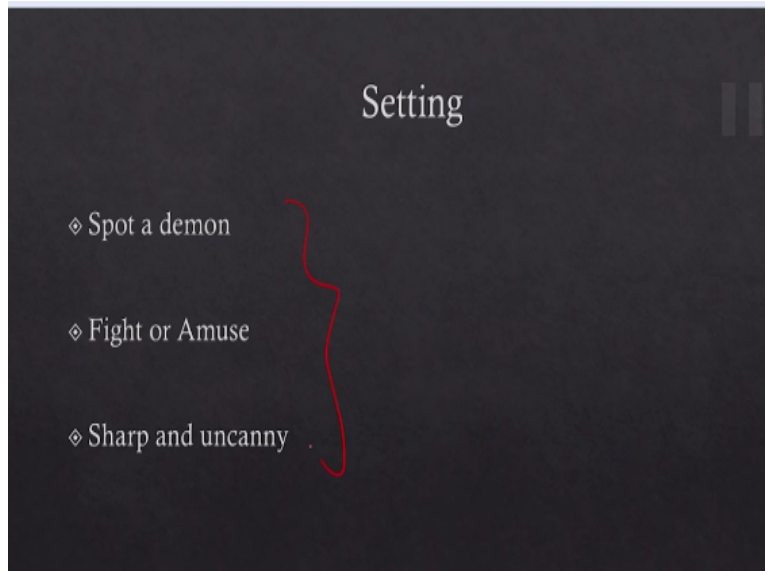
Okay, so-- and he wants to reinforce this narrator wants to reinforce this point that the monkeys have lost none of the capacity for fun and the instinctive ability to spot out a demon whom they can fight or amuse themselves with as remained as sharp and uncanny as of yore, yore means are ancient.

Okay, so the monkeys of today have not lost their capabilities for fun, amusement and they also have retained that instinctive ability that innate inborn ability to find out a demon a person who is evil whom they can fight amuse whom they can fight physically using their strengths or amuse themselves with or play with them and this quality this, this blend of the funny and cruel maybe has remained as sharp and uncanny as in the ancient day.

So they inevitably do that so that is what the narrator wants to establish. So it is very-- a Mulk Raja Anand has beautifully set up you know, a particular characteristic for the attitude of the

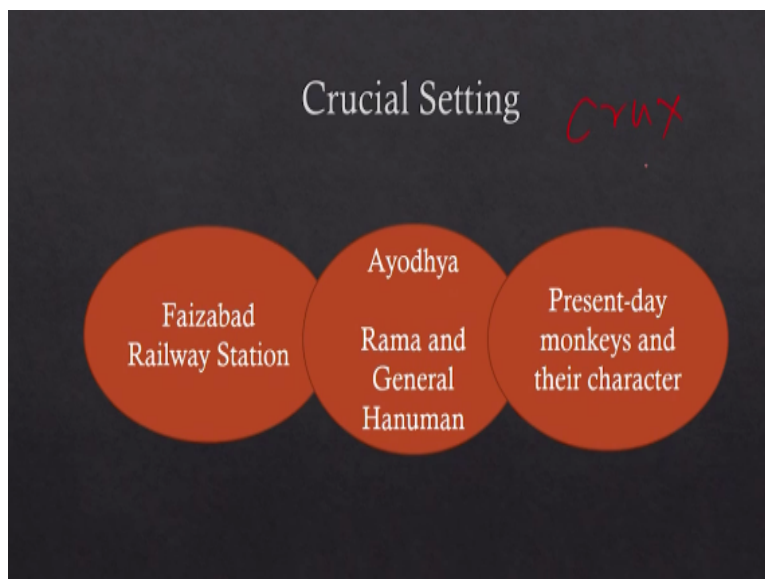
monkeys but connecting it to their mythical past and that kind of is the most important driving force of this particular story “The Price of Bananas.”

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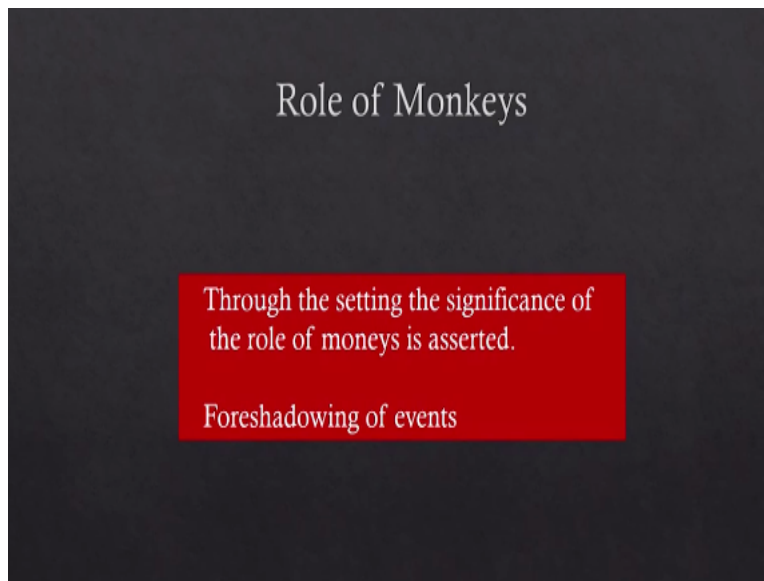
So as I said these are the characteristics that they have in themselves which is you know find out an evil person to fight with them or amuse themselves with and this ability is sharp and uncanny and these are some of the things that we need to keep in mind when we read the set of incidents which are going to follow in this particular. So the setup has been done. So this is the key to the puzzle that is going to follow in this “Price of Bananas” story.

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So-- we can map this out as well because this is as I said the crux of the story. It begins in the railway station the Faizabad railway station and that has a historical name which is Ayodhya. Ayodhya is associated with Rama and general Hanuman. And these to connect the Present-day monkeys and their character because Lord Rama and General Hanuman are the key figures who kind of help us understand the characteristics of the monkeys who have a particular set of behavior in relation to establishing justice wherever they are.

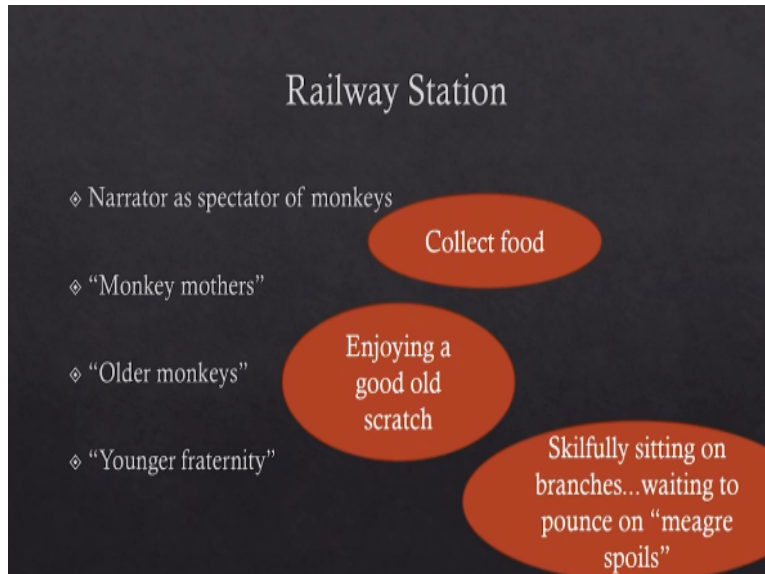
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Okay. So, through the setting what I am trying to argue here is that through the setting and the significance of the role of monkeys is established in this particular story. It is almost as if the following set of events are supposed to be interpreted in keeping this particular notion in mind so it is a kind of a theoretical foreshadowing of events that is what I would suggest.

A theoretical underpinning for the following set of scenes is offered in the brief narrative about Lord Rama and General Hanuman and are the role of the monkey troops in this mythic in this religious epic there are minor.

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So we are in this railway station and this Narrator who is a painter acts as a spectator of the events on the railway station. And what is he looking at he is looking at the monkey hordes are in this station and there are different kinds of monkeys we have the monkey mothers and we have the older monkeys and we have the younger fraternity and the monkey mothers are serious about collecting food which they help feed their young ones.

And we have the older monkeys enjoying a good old scratch and we have the younger set of monkeys a younger community fraternity which is skillfully you know, sitting on the branches and they are waiting for a moment to pounce on some of the meager spoils stuff that is available to eat. So this is the context and I have that extract here.

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Power of the Monkeys

◇ The younger fraternity sat adroitly on the thinnest boughs of neem and tamarind trees, camouflaged by the leaves and so poised as to jump down with alacrity in pursuit of any meagre spoils that may be visible in the famished landscape of Uttar Pradesh.

So the monkey mothers; it is a very interesting passage that gives us a set of notions about the landscape of this particular region and what are the fractures there in terms of the symbolism in terms of the major concerns. The monkey mothers were hugging their little ones tenderly as they descended now and then from the purchased collect half sucked mango stones and the remainders of food from the platform.

So they are scavenging there; they are scavenging food to offer it to their children; the older monkey sat enjoying a good old scratch which is so soothing in the hot weather as they have obviously learned from the loin cloth wearing merchants of a city. So the monkeys here Apes the human beings and the younger fraternity sat adroitly, skillfully on the thinnest boughs of neem and tamarind trees camouflaged by the leaves and so poised as to jump down with alacrity in pursuit of any meagre spoils that may be visible in the famished landscape of Uttar Pradesh.

So this is the setup. And through the behavior of the monkeys the mothers the older monkeys the younger monkeys Mulk Raj Anand is trying to communicate the idea that food is scarce for the population in this region and they do their best to get by so they, they lead their lives as scavengers; they lead their lives as you know “looters” because the younger fraternity of monkeys as is mentioned is eager to you know, kind of go after any small leftovers.

And they are eager to snatch this from their you know from their locality from their environment and at the famished landscape of Uttar Pradesh is a very interesting set of words that tell us about the context of food scarcity in this region. So again it is the owners on the monkeys—monkey mother especially to take care of their little ones and that is very interesting idea that is plays there.

So the tenderness that is there in the story, very few reference to tenderness in story and ones it reference is in the context of the monkey mothers and the other and the other reference I will come to in a short while. So this is something that we need to keep in mind that we have the literal context of poverty, scarcity, you know a dearth of food on this famished hungry landscape that is something we need to keep in mind.

And then we need to think about the you know the nobility of character of the monkeys as well as the sense of righteousness that they have and you know the power that they have to punish the wicked. So we need to keep all these very varied set of ideas in mind we approach this particular story.

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So the train station is also very important in talking about the various classes in society because the train compartment is divided into the three classes, the third-class compartment; for the lowest of the low; the intermediate for the middle classes; the first class for the really wealthy

and the rich. And the narrator says that there is a mad rush on the part of the people to find a place in the compartments in the third class compartment as well as in the intermediate compartment and there are loud words there is gnashing of teeth and all these--

--angry wild slightly inhuman animal-like behavior becomes manifest when people fight for space in these compartments are in the third class and he says it is especially about abominable when we think about the intermediate because we have the middle class people fighting for space and behaving in a less sophisticated manner so and that is to be load that is what is the implication behind the critique of the Narrator in this particular story.

And what I am trying to connect here is the comparison between the people with their animal-like behavior when they want to you know find a space for themselves a good space for themselves on these different compartments and the monkeys the especially the young fraternity who are eager to fight for any kind of spoils that is available around them; so there is a comparison there between the humans and monkeys there.

And there is a parallel in their behavior because both are dealing with some kind of scarcity and so the human beings a scarcity of space but for the monkeys its scarcity of food. Okay, we have the-- I have not talked about the first class compartment there.

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Narrator

- ◇ Narrator qualifies into the first class
- ◇ Money from "Delhi show of ...pictures"
- ◇ "torrid atmosphere of the compartment unbearable and walked out on to the platform"

I will come to it in connection with this particular slide, the Narrator is a person who usually belongs to the middle class in society, he is part of the middling classes. But in this particular occasion he qualifies into the first class compartment because he has had some money which he got from a daily show of his picture so he has a kind of a nest egg he has a particular amount of money and he is able to spend some, you know money in buying a first-class ticket which is why in this particular context he is there among the bureaucrats and they are really wealthy people.

And in he gets a kind of a specific window into life from this particular position at the top of the hierarchy. And this narrator boats the train but he realizes that the atmosphere is torrid it is unbearably hot, so the torrid atmosphere of the compartment is unbearable and he walked out onto the platform. So I put that phrase there to suggest a symbolic connection there between and the atmosphere and the quality of character of some of the people who inhabit that space, because we are going to see shortly about a character called Sethji.

He is a businessman and his mind is torrid as well. He is unbearable to be around. So I am trying to make an association between the train compartment the first-class train compartment and this unbearable a character called Sethji who has booked a space for himself in this particular compartment. So the Narrator is on the platform and he witnesses the set of events that unfold before him.

So and we have a very interesting event a kind of a run-up to the major crisis in the story so it is a kind of mini crisis and interesting incident a--

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Foreshadowing

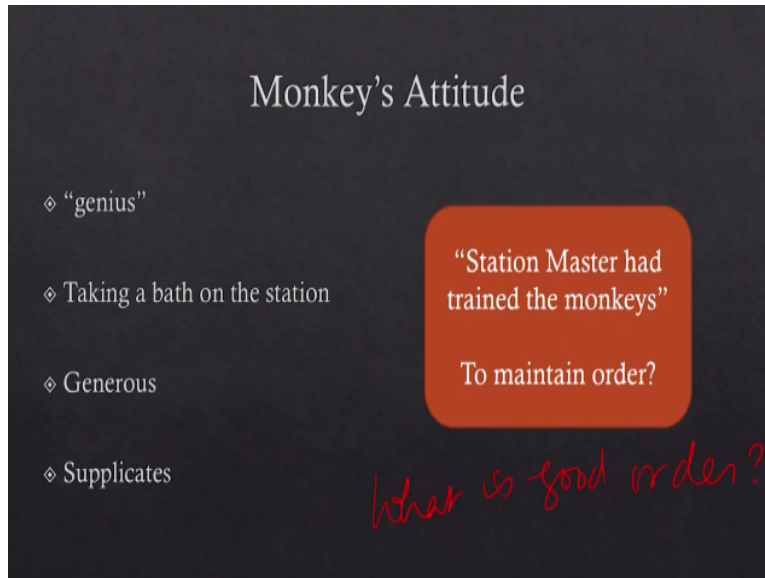
◇ Then I was fascinated by the genius of a monkey in snatching away the loin cloth of a pious Hindu who had begun to take bath under the pump. The general amusement that was caused by this incident became hilarious laughter when, after the bather had supplicated to the monkey with joined hands, the generous Simian threw down the loin cloth from the neem tree at the man's feet. It seemed as though the Station Master had trained the monkeys to keep good order on the platform.

Foreshadowing of the bigger event that is going to happen to this particularly interesting character of the Sethji whom I am going to talk about in a minute. So this is the incident. The narrator says, “Then I was fascinated by the genius of a monkey in snatching away the loin cloth of a pious Hindu who had begun to take part under the pump remember we are in the railway station so that contact should be taken note of.

The general amusement work that was caused by this incident became hilarious laughter when after the bather had supplicated to the monkey with joined hands, the generous Simian threw down the loin cloth from the neem tree at the man's feet. It seemed as though the Station Master had trained the monkeys to keep good order on the platform.

So this is the interesting incident. So I hope you understand what is going on there. So we have a pious Hindu who has been taking a bath there and his loin cloth had been snatched away by a monkey and this pious Hindu, you know pleads to the simian to the monkey to give him the loin cloth back and the monkey exceeds gives him the cloths back. So the comment, the last comment in that particular extract is very interesting because it is—the narrator says that it seemed as though the Station Master had trained the monkeys to keep good order on the platform.

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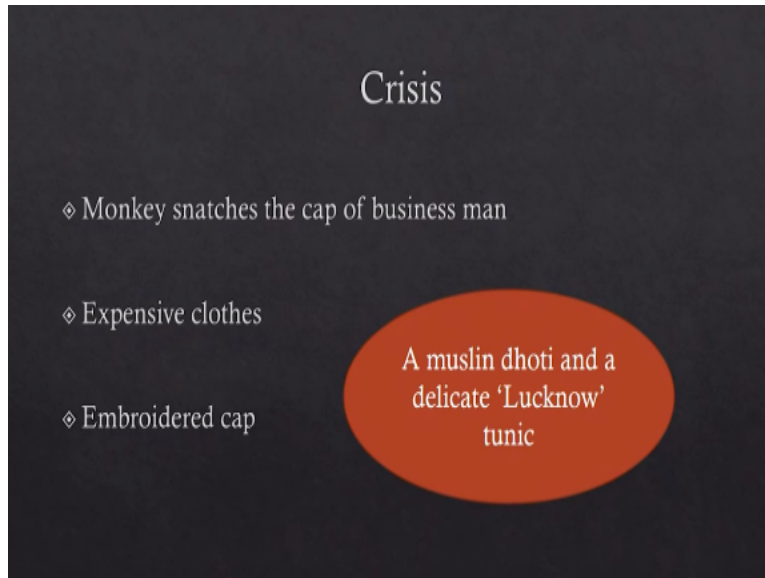


So what is good order that is a question that we need to ask, so what is good order? The good order in this railway station is perhaps not to take a bath under the pump. So-- and the pious Hindu breaks that unwritten rule placed there by the Station Master. And this particular monkey seems to act on the orders of the Station Master to enforce order.

So again the idea that the monkeys are the custodians of good behavior; the custodians of righteousness in society is underlined in this particular incident too, and the other point that I want to highlight here is that, there is amusement. So the monkey enforces the rule by provoking hilarious laughter. And the other point that we need to pay attention to is the fact that this pious Hindu does not shout at the monkey.

He does not threaten the monkey he just, you know supplicated to the monkey; he pleaded to the monkey; he begged the monkey to return his loin cloth. And the generous Simian, so this generous hearted Simian does that, you know, it kind of listens to the supplication and behaves accordingly. So this is a very important incident with which we can compare the later extended incident that happens to this businessman called Sethji.

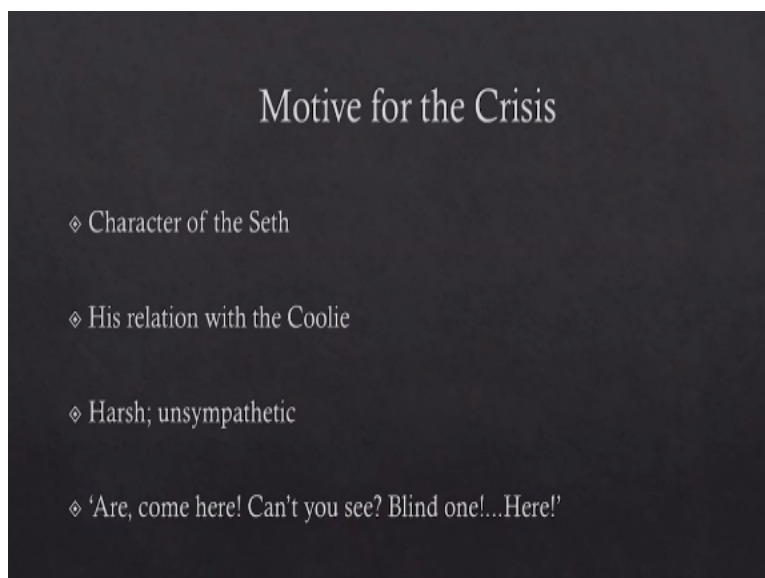
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Okay. So we have the big crisis in the story which is that the monkey snatches the cap of a businessman and at this businessman walks down the platform and he has a Coolie who was walking behind a little further off and that Coolie is almost weighed down with the amount of luggage that he carries for the businessman the Seth.

And this particular businessman wearing very expensive clothes in fact it is a muslin dhoti and a delicate Lucknow tunic all very fine sophisticated clothes and he is also donning an embroidered cap, and it is this particular cap that has been snatched by the monkey and this businessman becomes disoriented when this theft happens.

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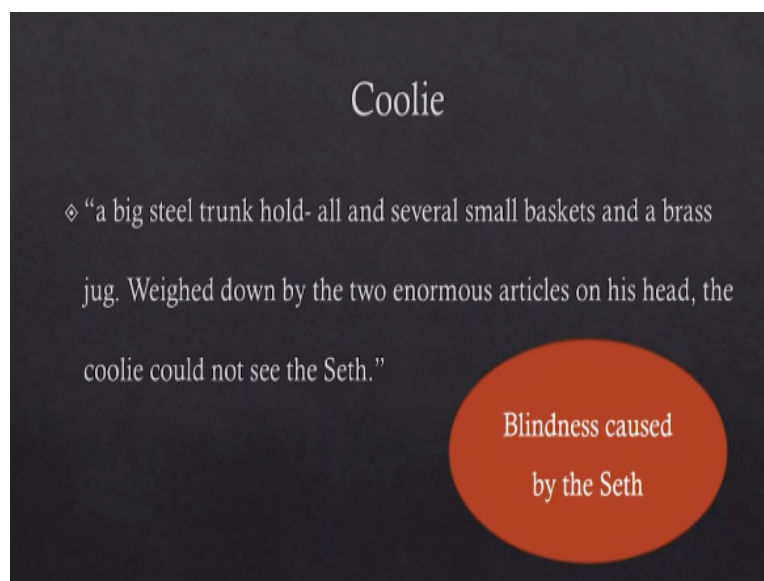


So the character of the Seth is established through several things and most primarily with his relation to the Coolie. And this businessman is especially harsh and unsympathetic. And I would like to briefly read the relevant extract because this is the kind of motivation for the crisis to happen. So, while all this was going on I noticed that a gentleman a businessman by the look of him clad in a white muslin dhoti a delicate Lucknow tunic.

And an embroidered cap on his head had come up towards a first-class compartment and stood looking at the white reservation card to see if his name was on it. He recognized his name on the card and turning back into the Coolie who was following with his luggage a big steel strong and whole doll and several small baskets and a brass chuck; weighed down by the two enormous articles on his head the Coolie could not see the Seth.

So the businessman shouted “Are, come here! Cannot you see Blind one!... Here. So he shouts at the Coolie and asks him if he is blind.

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In fact, we need to know that this is blindness caused by the Seth himself because-- and this is— this is a momentary blindness and it is also symbolic blindness I would suggest, a blindness that is created by the exploitation of the Seth and the Seth is representative of all the exploitative traders and merchants who extract the maximum from people suggest the Coolie that we have here in this particular situation.

So before these and the Coolie responds by saying, “aaya hazoor, I am coming and he quickened his pace but before these reassuring words could have reached the Seth—

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Crisis

◇ But before these reassuring words could have reached the Seth, he was unnerved completely, not by default of the coolie, but by the adroit skill of a monkey, who leapt down from the top of our compartment, snatched away the fine embroidered cap of the businessman, and got up to the neem tree.

He was unnerved completely not by default of the Coolie but by the adroit skill of a monkey, who leapt down from the top of her compartment, snatched away the fine embroidered cap of the businessman and got up to the neem tree. So the businessman becomes completely enough unnerved, disoriented, unstable because of the fact that his embroidered cap is gone taken away snatched by the monkey.

And we can assume that this monkey is from the younger fraternity that the narrator notices when he is, you know looking at the monkeys on the neem trees and in that particular word “adroit skills of a monkey” is a word that-- choice of word adroit sharp makes us think about the other monkeys. The monkeys who are the descendants of general Hanuman and his horde of monkeys is kind of as suggested there through that particular choice of word.

And again the word adroit is mentioned in connection with the younger fraternity who fit adroitly on the thinnest bulbs of neem and tamarind trees. So we can see a connection there between Hanuman’s monkey and the monkeys on the train station of Faizabad or Ayodhya. So

this embroidered cap is particularly important for the men in India especially in North India. It is because it is a symbol of dignity.

It is a symbol of self-respect and when that is taken away by the monkey this man becomes completely upset and-- it is very interesting that this particular incident happens right after the fact that after the fact that the Sethji is harassing the Coolie, he calls him a blind one. So it is almost as if the monkeys who have been watching on the trees have made a quick decision.

They see this man Sethji abusing this Coolie this poor worker who is literally blinded by momentarily blinded by the amount of material that he is carrying for the Seth and when they watched that scene of abuse the monkeys make a quick decision to punish this particular demon within court and they do and they do this act of snatching. So that is what is implied their thematically in the attitude of the particular monkey that snatches the cap. So what is the reaction of the Seth, the Seth is very, very abusive of the monkey.

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The slide has a dark background. At the top center, the word "Crisis" is written in a light-colored serif font. Below it, there is a list of four points, each preceded by a diamond symbol (◊). To the right of the list, there is a red oval containing text.

- ◊ Threatens the monkey on the tree
- ◊ Abusive
- ◊ Monkey is unaffected
- ◊ "same skilful Simian who had played the prank on the bather"

Seth's attitude contrasts with the "pious Hindu"

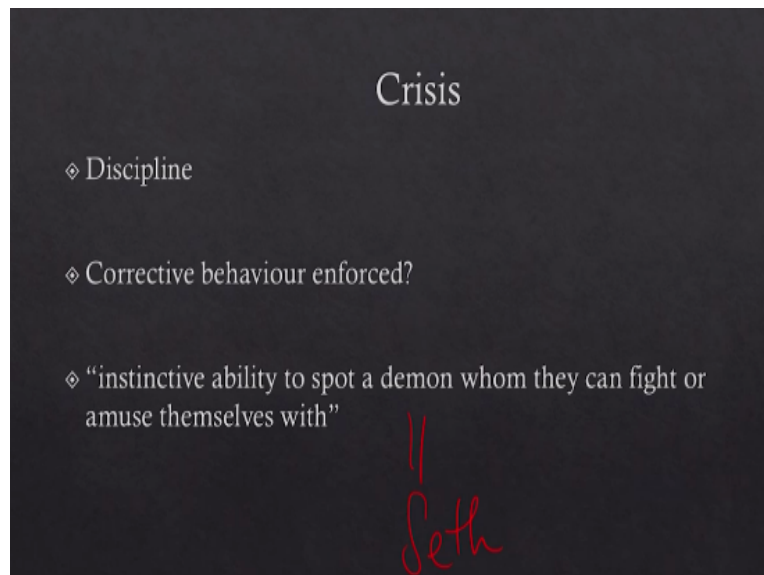
And he threatens the monkey who has got back on the neem tree and the monkey however is unaffected completely, you know unaffected, you know unaffected-- undisturbed by the words of the Seth. And the narrator says that it is perhaps the same skillful Simian who had played the prank on the bather. So the narrator thinks it is the same monkey who attacked the pious Hindu

by snatching his loin cloth and went once he mentions that connection the immediate question or the immediate comparison that we have in our minds is the difference in attitudes.

On the one hand we had the pious Hindu who did not abuse the monkey, on the other hand he pleads with the monkey and here we have the Seth who is shouting at the monkey in order to get his cap back, so that contrast and attitude becomes very, very clear and we can see why this particular monkey is not very generous to the Seth and it refuses to return the cap. So the question that we need to ask is this.

So just as in the previous case is this behavior of this Simian and act of enforcing discipline.

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So it is corrective behavior enforced through the behavior of this particular monkey which has snatched away the cap. And is this corrective behavior in context in the context of polite behavior that should be extended towards the lower orders in society. So we should also remember that particular, you know comment made by the narrator early on.

That the monkeys have this instinctive ability to spot a demon whom they can fight or amuse themselves with. So we have a demon here who is the businessman the Sethji and his behavior his unsympathetic, hard behavior towards the Coolie is being criticized by this monkey which

has taken away his cap. So what are the repercussions in terms of the onlookers on the train station?

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The slide has a dark background with white text. At the top center is the word "Crisis". Below it are three bullet points, each starting with a diamond symbol. The first bullet point says "Seth is 'perplexed' by the lack of sympathy". The second says "Onlookers laugh at his 'challenges, threats and imprecations'". The third says "'turned their face away or looked stonefaced, as they often do for fear of being dragged into giving evidence before the police'". To the right of the third bullet point is a red oval containing the text "'a spoken curse'". A red bracket groups the third bullet point and the oval. Below the oval is the handwritten word "Crowd" in red cursive.

Crisis

- ◇ Seth is "perplexed" by the lack of sympathy
- ◇ Onlookers laugh at his "challenges, threats and imprecations"
- ◇ "turned their face away or looked stonefaced, as they often do for fear of being dragged into giving evidence before the police"

"a spoken curse"

Crowd

So the narrator says, that the Seth is "perplexed" is confused; is puzzled by the lack of sympathy from the onlookers who are watching this scene happened before their eyes. And in fact some of the onlookers also laugh at the way he challenges, threatens and makes imprecations towards a monkey, so they laugh at this and an imprecation is a spoken—curse.

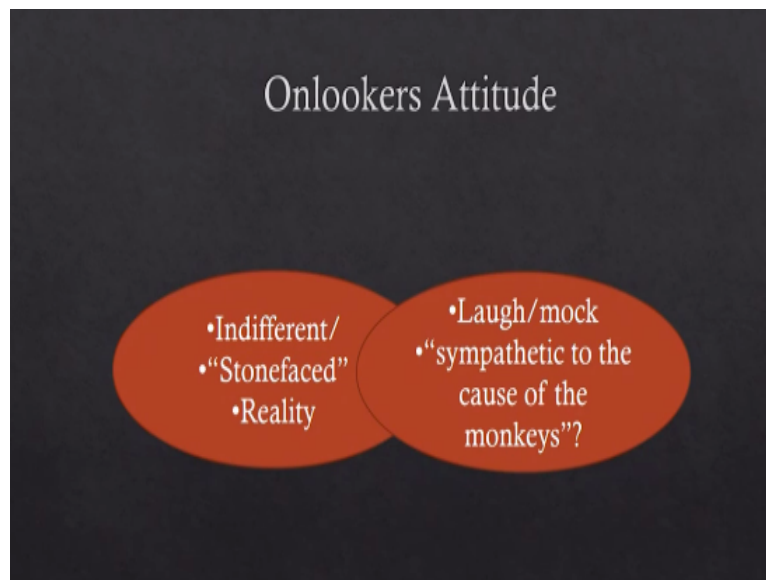
So when this particular when this particular man the businessman looks at the onlookers and hopes to get some kind of sympathy they turned their face away or looked stone-faced as they often do for fear of being dragged into giving evidence before the police. So the narrator says that, the onlookers do not offer sympathy because they do not want to get into some kind of trouble or some kind of work with the police because they might have to give some evidence and things like that.

So that they do not want to get into any kind of incident because they want to save themselves, so unnecessary trouble they do not want which seems to be the understanding; which seems to be the case when these onlookers do not want to help the Seth. So again the attitude of the crowd is very, very interesting; why the crowd does not step in to help or to you know question injustice

that is happening is again it is kind of hinted out perhaps the crowd behaves in that particular way.

Because the system is itself is not very helpful to the people who want to carry out such you know activities. Okay.

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So we have you know two sets of attitude here which can be interpreted in terms of the onlookers. They are indifferent; they are stone-faced and that is the reality and that is one interpretation. And the other interpretation is that they laugh and they mock the Seth because they are sympathetic to the cause of the monkey. So we can interpret the actions of the onlookers in two ways and that is very, very interesting.

So thank you for watching. I will continue this point further in my next lecture. Thank you for watching. Have a good day.