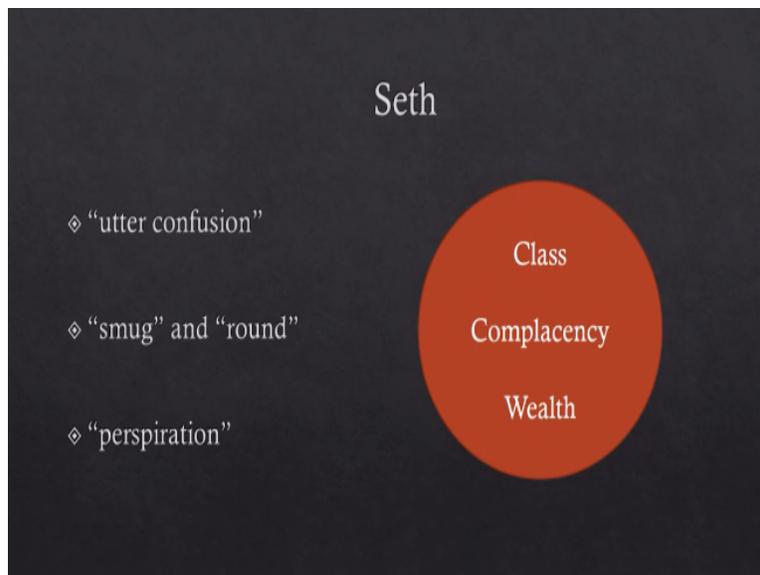


**Short Fiction in Indian Literature**  
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**Lecture - 09A**  
**Catharsis in Mulk Raj Anand's The Price of Bananas – II**

Hello and welcome back to this lecture on Mulk Raj Anand “The Price of Bananas.” The thematic interpretation that I am looking for in this story is related to the idea of Catharsis which I will come to in a short while.

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Okay, so if you recall the previous session we realized that the set the businessman is in utter confusion and why is he confused and nervous the reason is because his embroidered cap has been stolen or snatched away by a monkey at railway station in Faizabad. So this is the context for the crisis that is unraveling at the moment in the story.

So the initial description of the Seth is offered by the first person narrator is that of you know in terms of his physical appearance he is smug and his face is round. So this is the small bit of information about his physical appearance that we get from the first person narrator. earlier if you recall we had a sense of the kind of outfits that he is wearing; he is wearing a very delicate muslin cloth a tunic.

And he his clothing suggests his sophistication in taste and claws and it indicates that the outfit indicates his superior wealth too. So apart from that narration or description about his clothing the other physical details that we get about him refers to his smugness that is the quality of mine and the round is suggests both the rounded shape of his face and the rounded figure again a perhaps a very fat purse.

And in these two things again are linked to class and complacency and wealth. So we have a very complacent and self-satisfied wealthy person who is suddenly, you know shaken who suddenly nervous and he perspires out quite a bit because of this incident that happens to him and a monkey is the reason behind that. Okay, so what does he do as I mentioned briefly before.

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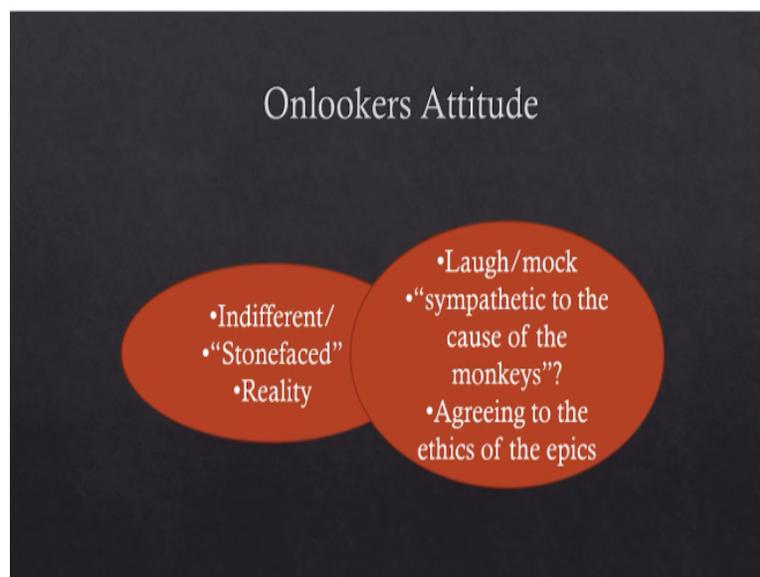
His attitude is a rebellious attitude; he is not you know in a supplicant's position instead what he does he threatens the monkey with his fisticuffs and he offers or utters loud abuse to the monkey and he hopes that these two gestures will help him get what he wants and it is a very, very interesting sort of behavior which suggests that one can get once a desire one can achieve one's ends through force and through abuse.

And the tradesman is immediate to offer such reactions perhaps because these are his usual customary reactions to any critical situations. And we need to again contrast his reaction towards the monkey which has snatched his cap and with his reaction to the Coolie who is about to be

kicked at the end of the story when he asks for more money. So his reactions are similar and that tells us something about Seth's, you know common place reactions to critical situations.

And that is something to be noted. So there is no sociality and he does not apply his mind according to the quality of the situation; the nature of the situation and change his behavior in order to get the desired outcome. So he believes that through brute force and through implications he can get away with any kind of in a difficult manner of situations. So I want to pick up on this attitude of the onlookers.

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An aspect with which I finished my previous session and the attitude of the onlookers is very interesting because it tells us a lot about the reality of the India of then and perhaps even today and it is an interesting attitude that we can explore a little further in the context of the story. And this is the extract which is interesting in this regard. And at the Seth who is very angry and abusive and towards the monkey is, you know offers a different kind of you know emotion towards the onlookers.

He says, look people he said stretching his hands to the crowd with the piteous and hopeless expression on his bespectacled face. So we have another physical description of this tradesman this businessman he wears glasses, he wears spectacles and he thought that the loss of his

headrest which is the symbol of dignity in India would be deployed by everyone and a sentiment of solidarity arise.

He hopes for a solidarity of emotion on the part of the onlookers and it is again very significant that he tries to get the sympathy of the onlookers, he has this expression of you know a hopelessness; he looks piteous, and that is a very stagey emotion that he quickly down's in order to get the sympathy of the audience who is witnessing this situation. And it is an attitude that I suggest is stagey probably because—

Because we can see that the previous moment he was vociferous in this challenge; he was really violent in the way he was forceful in the way he was threatening, challenging the monkey, so that he immediately kind of switches gear and offers a very sad expression for the benefit of the audience. So his expressions; his emotions especially the emotions that kind of ask the onlookers to offer sympathy is not something that we can trust.

That is kind of indicated in the story. So what would the audience do? The people just turn their faces away or looked stoned-face as they often do for fear of being dragged into giving evidence before the police. So this indifference and stoned-face expression on the people who are looking at the situation is perhaps the reality of day to day in Indian society where people are afraid of the police; they do not want to get into trouble; they have to face unnecessary process bureaucratic process in order to help the authorities reach justice.

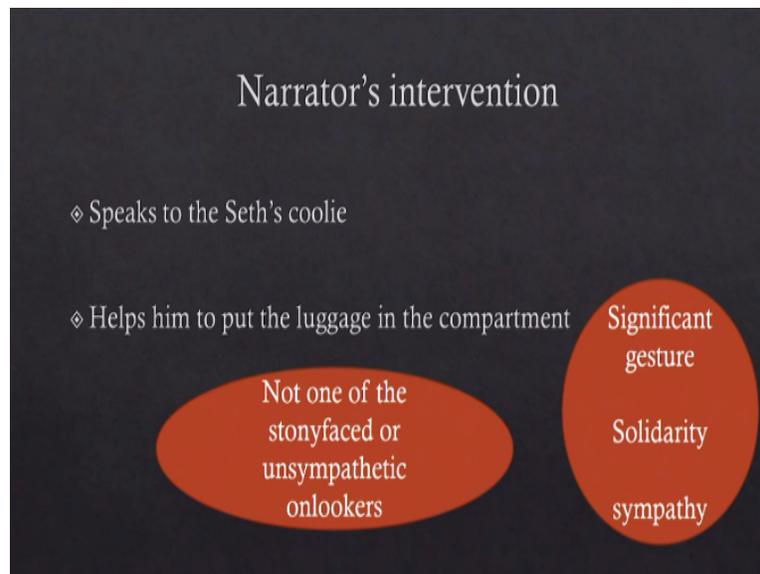
So they do not want the hassle, that is one interpretation. The other interpretation is done the onlookers perhaps I said sympathetic towards the cause of the monkeys perhaps that is why they are not expressing any kind of sympathy or any kind of pity for the situation of this tradesman this wretch tradesman.

And in fact if we notice the narration pretty closely we realized that the audience also laughs—it also laughs and that laughter can be taken as an expression of sympathy towards the monkey and against this man Seth because Seth is being mocked at by this, you know in incident which the monkey has caused. So on a comprehensive level we can sort of interpret the attitude of the

Onlookers as an expression of solidarity towards the ethics that are staged in the epics; that are brought forth in the epics.

And in the epics especially in the context of general Hanuman and his hordes of monkey troops there is this notion that they work towards establishing, justice on this earth and they work towards eliminating the evil. So all these attitudes are blended together in the reactions of the audience, and as I said the reactions are partly being social realistic and partly you know endorsing the ideological notions which are connected to the—at the epics the spiritual and religious epics of India.

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Okay, so let us look at the Narrator's intervention. So we have this painter artist who is also looking at the unfolding situation and he talks to Seth's Coolie because this man is standing clueless as to where he is supposed to put down the luggage of the Seth and this tradesman is busy in his attempts to get back his embroidered cap. So the narrator kind of steps in and gives directions to the Coolie and in fact he even helps him put the luggage in the compartment or in the first-class compartment.

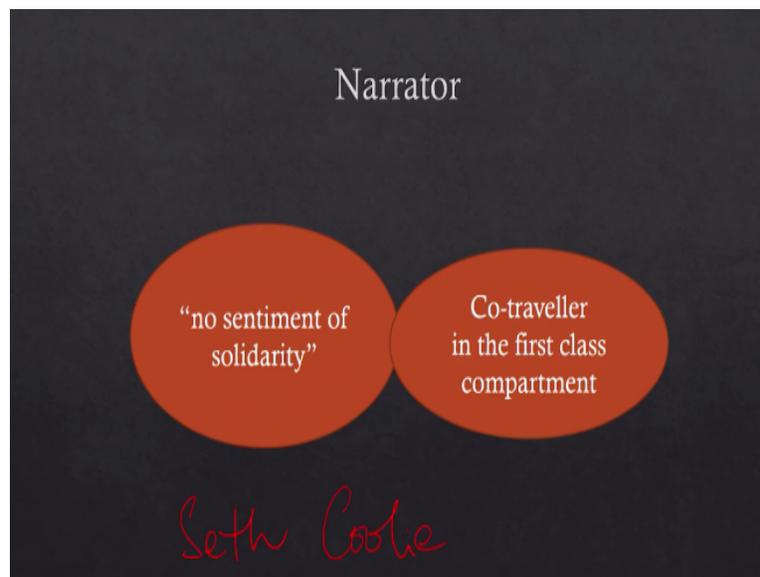
And these are actions of the narrators tell us two very interesting things. One is that he is not one of the stony-faced or unsympathetic onlookers who do not want to intervene who do not want to make any kind of any kind of action that would influence the situation in any way. So he is

intervening; so he is proactive in that regard he is not a mere spectator so that's very, that is a very interesting aspect of the narrator.

The other of significance is the fact that he expresses solidarity with the Coolie and that is something which is very, very important because in the whole scene we do not have any one kind of sympathizing with the Coolie in a very tangible manner except for this narrator this artist who has somehow found a spot for himself in the first class compartment through his professional accomplishments.

So we have a sense of solidarity a sense of sympathy expressed here on the part of the narrator towards the Coolie and that is something that has to be made a nerd-off.

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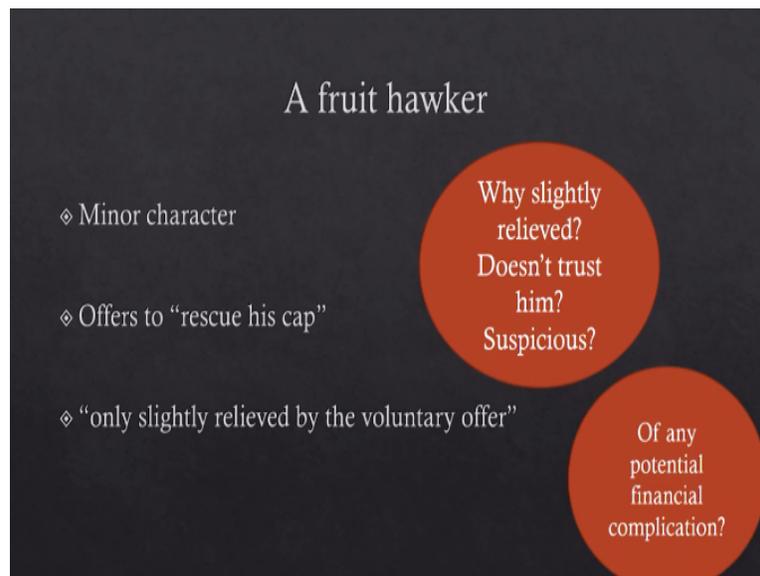
So, while the Seth is expressing a certain set of emotions he is putting up certain, you know faces in order to get a certain kind of impact from the audience; he looks piteous and he is trying to get the audience to react to this pathetic situation of his; there is no reaction to that effort. On the other hand, the Coolie who does not try to get any kind of, you know reaction from the audience does get a sentiment of solidarity from the narrator.

So the—and another thing is that this narrator is not expressing any kind of sympathy or empathy towards the Seth, he is not talking to him; he is not stepping forward; he is not offering any

suggestions in terms of how to retrieve the cap from the monkey who has taken it up onto a neem tree. So we need to note that, so the Seth does not get any kind of sentiment of solidarity whereas the Coolie gets it.

In fact, the co-traveler in the first-class compartment who is a Seth, is completely ignored by this narrator unless it is the request of the narrator to give somebody some more money, so that is the kind of relation that he has with this tradesman, Okay.

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So we have a Fruit Hawker, a fruit seller who arrives on the scene with a fruit cart and he is a minor character and he offers to-- he offers to help the Seth in rescuing his cap from the monkey and it is a very interesting passage which I would like to read it out to you.

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## Crisis

◇ “But the vendor went ahead, nevertheless, dangling a couple of bananas before the monkey with this right hand, and stretching out his left hand for the cap.”

Nevertheless?

Making the meaning of the deal clear to the monkey

So he says the narrator says that, “As I turn from the compartment I saw that the fruit hawker had come forward pushing his little cart and was telling the Seth that he would rescue his cap. Sethji seemed to be only slightly relieved by the voluntary offer of the fruit vendor. Only slightly relieved, that is a very interesting phrase and my question is why does not Seth trust him; why is he suspicious of the fruit vendor perhaps the Seth does not trust the fruit seller because—

A. He is suspicious, that is his character; he is generally suspicious of everybody. B. He does not trust working class character and the other possibility is that the Seth is worried that some kind of financial contract or complication might arise out of this offer made by the fruit hawker. So that is probably why he is only slightly relieved by that voluntary offer and that is a very important notion that we need to grasp.

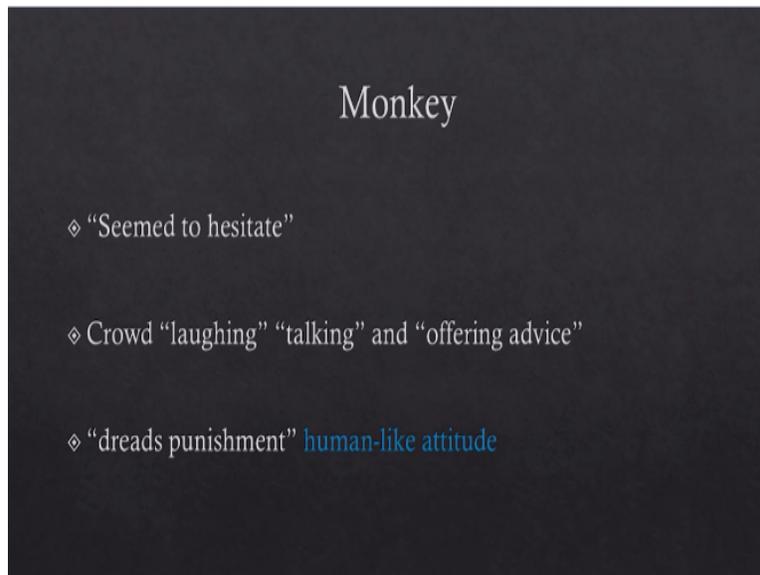
So it is the voluntary offer; nobody has asked the fruit hawker to step in and rescue the cap. So-- but the vendor went ahead the fruit vendor went ahead nevertheless dangling a couple of bananas before the monkey with his right hand and stretching out his left hand for the cap. So the fruit vendor forges ahead and he is trying to get the monkey to get the bananas from him and return the cap as a kind of reward.

So the meaning of the deal is pretty clear at least to the onlookers and to the monkey that the monkey is supposed to take the bananas and offer the cap. So that is the interpretation there. But

I am quite interested in this word “nevertheless” in this adverb nevertheless and that tells us that without getting the permission or the agreement of the Seth the trader the businessman about this kind of deal, the fruit vendor goes ahead.

So he does not get the green signal so to speak from the Seth in terms of this offer that he gives to the monkey. So, what about the monkey which has the cap and who is on the tree?

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The monkey seems to hesitate in kind of partaking of this particular bargain, that is the interpretation of the narrator who is looking at the situation so the monkey seemed to hesitate; he is interpreting the motivations of the monkey. And man the narrator says that the monkey seemed to hesitate not because he was not tempted but because there were too many people laughing and talking and offering advice and he probably dreaded some punishment if he came down.

So lots of others lot of crowd witnessing the scene and this crowd is noisy and some members of the crowd are at this point offering advice; they are now offering advice is very interesting, so the event progresses people are seemingly interested and the narrator says that the monkey probably fears punishment and that is why it is hesitating to get the bananas and make this trade with the fruit render.

And again this is a human-like attitude the fact that the monkey is dreading punishment from the crowd for some kind of wrongdoing it has committed. So again that is a very interesting observation or an interpretation that the narrator offers.

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Fruit Vendor

- ◇ “coaxes” “cooes”
- ◇ The monkey climbs down to a lower branch
- ◇ “almost contiguous to the stretched right arm of the fruit vendor”

Gentle, tender behaviour

“accepts the bargain”

So what is the fruit vendor do he coaxes and cooes again a very beautiful set of words used to express the behavior of the fruit vendor in trying to convince the monkey into offering the cap in return for the banana. So coaxes and cooes are words that used that I used in the connect—in connection with especially mothers who try to coaxes their children who cooe to their children in order to make them behave in a particular way.

Or in order to comfort them or soothe them so this is again a moment in the story where there is tenderness and gentleness expressed. And if you recall the previous session we had an expression of a sort of tenderness is hinted in the context of the monkey mothers which are trying to feed the young ones and then we have the narrator himself whose action of helping the Coolie is a very, very tender moment in the story an act of human sympathy is expressed there.

Again here we have it on the part of the fruit vendor. So-- and it—his, you know just have the desired impact and the monkey climbs down to a lower branch and it is almost on a branch that is contiguous that is parallel to the stretched right arm of the fruit vendor and as the crowd waits

with bated breath the impossible does happen and the monkey accepts the bargain. So this moment is very interesting in the story because of the fact,

That the fruit vendor when he gently gets the monkey to behave in a particular way when the threats and challenges and the curses of this trader this rich upper-class trader does not have the necessary impact the desired impact on the monkey that was there on the neem tree.

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Reactions

- ◆ Onlookers congratulate
- ◆ “Sethji rudely stretched out his hands towards the fruit vendor”
- ◆ “His eyes were withdrawn as he had obviously felt very embarrassed at being made, by a cruel fate, the victim of what now seemed like the perverted sense of humour of the monkey.”

Fate or justice?

So onlooker congratulate they comment and make the positive noises and while this is happening the Sethji what he does is he rudely stretched out his hands towards the fruit vendor asking him to give his cap back. And it is a very interesting moment and the narrator says that his eyes were withdrawn as he had obviously felt very embarrassed at being made by a cruel fate the victim of what now seemed like the perverted sense of humor of the monkey.

So, again we get a little bit of physical description about the Seth and this is the relevant set of words, “His eyes were withdrawn”, he his eyes you know they did not have that forthright look they somehow looked embarrassed and he had obviously felt very humiliated at the hands of a cruel fate and he thinks it is a bad fate and he is a victim of what now seem like a perverted sense of humor so the monkey’s behavior is understood as a kind of a distorted perverted sense of humor.

So the idea of fate is interesting because he does not bring in the idea of justice there because he doesn't realize that he has been in the wrong and in relation to the Coolie whom he has been harassing verbally and physically too for the amount of work that he makes him do. We should realize that he does not get carry a single thing all his luggage has been; you know carried on the person of the Coolie.

So he thinks that it is just cruel fate that makes that made him and the victim of a mockery at the hands of a monkey and however we know that, as readers of this particular narrative we know that with the context of the kind of the motif of general Hanuman and his monkey troops who have this instinctive ability to spot out a demon with which they a play or amuse themselves with or even fight.

So in that context we know that, you know this particular character has been served what is due to him.

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The slide has a dark background. At the top center, the name 'Seth' is written in white. Below it, on the left side, there is a list of two items, each preceded by a diamond symbol (◊): 'Unnecessary embarrassment' and '“perverted sense of humour”'. To the right of this list is a red oval containing the white text 'Is he victim or the perpetrator of a crime?'. Below the oval, the words 'Symbol exploitation' are written in red cursive script.

So while he thinks that it is unnecessary embarrassment and a perverted sense of humor, we need to as I mentioned just a second ago; we need to ask this question which is he a victim or a perpetrator of crime and that crime as I mentioned is in the context of the Coolie whom he has been abusing. But, this crime itself could be a symbol of all the crimes of exploitation that men like the Seth you know, inflict on the members of the working classes in the Indian society.

So it is a very symbolic crime and for that symbolic crime he has been punished by the monkeys through an act of embarrassment or humiliation.

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So let us look at the reaction of the fruit vendor which is very, very significant on several levels. So he says that those but budmashes are hungry so they disturb the passengers, he really wanted the banana. So we have three simple statements there which is what the fruit vendor occurs. the moment the cap is returned to the Seth. Those budmashes are hungry meaning those monkeys, and he calls the monkey scoundrels and it is almost done in an affectionate manner.

So they disturb the passengers since they are hungry they disturb the passengers and once that food is met with the food being the bananas once that hunger is satiated satisfied they just return the things or stop disturbing the passengers that seems to be the implication of that particular statement. So what strikes the reader the very careful reader is that this is a common, usual behavior of the monkeys.

So this is not something that is a one-off uncommon freak accident that has happened the Seth, in fact these monkeys have been performing such disturbing activities in order to get something from the person whom they are victimizing or harassing or disturbing. So this puts a very, very interesting spin on the actions of the monkeys. And I would suggest that this is a level of

interpretation that is connected to the realistic the social realistic aspect of this famished landscape of Uttar Pradesh.

So, again another layer of interpretation could connect this you know realistic aspect to the mythical, ethical religious plane where one could argue that these monkeys even though they are hungry they pick their victims; they choose their victims to play with only those who are evil minded in some way or the other become the victims of their amusement or mockery or angry behavior. So this set of statements is very, very interesting in the story.

So what does the Seth do? He tries to initially leave without paying him and the vendors demand is that he wants two annas and—for the bananas that he offered the monkey and the Seth reacts by saying, “What impudence! How dare he asked for two annas. For what? And the narrator once again when he witnesses this set of conversation happening between the Seth and the fruit vendor he intervenes again and says, you know, give them some more.

And this interceding and this intervention is again happening in the context of the Coolie because again the Coolie also wants more money for his service that he rendered to the tradesmen. Again-- so we see a lot of parallels there a lot of overlapping and the general theme is that the set is too stingy too stingy; he does part with the money that is due to the people who have served him and that is made clear by these, you know by these relations that he has with the Coolie and with the fruit vendor.

And when these people who have served him asked for money, he interprets their demand as shameless behavior as some kind of, you know unethical attitude on the part of the people. So the two men the Coolie and the fruit vendor help us establish reinforced the self-centered attitude the really narrow-minded attitude of this really wealthy upper-class man who does not want to return gratitude for the work the others have rendered him.

Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.