

Mulk Raj Anand's *Confession of a Lover*

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Anand's latest novel has its roots in the "confession" that he wrote at the behest of Irene, the beautiful daughter of a scientific philosopher, whom he had met soon after arriving in England in 1925 to study philosophy at University College, London. Irene was impressed by Anand's gift of storytelling and encouraged him to write about himself and his family. Anand's narrative soon ran into 2,000 pages, but no publisher could be found to publish the whole or even part of the work. It did not, however, go to waste: the narrative became a source of many of Anand's novels and short stories, and finally the basis of his most ambitious work—the projected story of his life in seven volumes under the general caption *Seven Ages of Man*. Of these, only three volumes have so far appeared: *Seven Summers* (1951), *Morning Face* (1968) and *Confession of a Lover* (1976).

A month after the publication of *Confession of a Lover*, Mulk Raj Anand—conscious that I had criticized him for carelessness and verbosity—wrote to me: "You will find the *Confession* fairly well printed—also better proof correction: and I have cut thirty pages in page proofs to make it compact even at the risk of eliminating certain phases of consciousness of a morbid youth."¹ Nevertheless, this book of four hundred odd pages is much too long for what it has to say, and the errors in printing and spelling are as numerous as in *Morning Face*. The name of the German philosopher Nietzsche appears several times in the book and is spelt differently on different occasions, but it is not once spelt correctly. Anand, who has adopted the fictional name Krishan Chander, tells us in one place that he had read Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* "several times" and was asked on one occasion by his college principal to read aloud Mark Antony's speech on the death of Caesar. But both names, Antony and Caesar, are misspelled.² A work full of such mistakes cannot be rated very highly, and it is a sad reflection on present-day critical attitudes that a reviewer should call this book "the best Indo-Anglian novel published so far."³ Still, the book is not without its strong points.

Confession of a Lover deals with Krishan Chander's life at Khalsa College, Amritsar, from 1921 to 1925. The book opens with the hero in homespun Indian clothing and a sola topee on his head bicycling breezily to college, and ends with his taking a train to Bombay—en route to England—sad and disillusioned. Between these two events much happens to him. Small in build, but with an enormous ego, he is bullied by boys bigger than himself. Along with his favorite aunt, Devaki, he is excommunicated for dining with a Muslim family. He comes under the influence of Gandhi; he writes poetry, encouraged by the poet Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, and by his professors. He falls in love with the Muslim Yasmin, the sister-in-law of his closest friend Noor Muhammad and for once a woman of his own age. He learns of Yasmin's betrothal to Gul Muhammad, a railway guard, and flees to Bombay, but not before he has been arrested and jailed in Lahore as a suspected terrorist. In Bombay he cultivates the friendship of the journalist B. G. Horniman, Executive Editor Mr. Brelvi of the *Bombay Chronicle*, and Mr. Marmaduke Pickthal—an Englishman who has embraced the Muslim faith. On his father's advice he returns to Amritsar to complete his studies. The relative peace of college life is disturbed by an address given to the students by Dr. Annie Beasant, followed by the

suspension of three professors for holding nationalistic views. The students organize a *dharna*—a sit-down strike. Krishan Chander is arrested, beaten, and jailed by the police. On his release he is suspected by a section of the student body of having betrayed their interest to the college authorities, and in turn is beaten by them. While he is recovering in hospital, Yasmin visits him and they decide on an excursion to an *ashram* on the River Beas. A few weeks later he learns that Yasmin is carrying his baby. His plans to elope with her are foiled by her death (she is presumably murdered by her suspicious husband). Krishan, mad with grief, contemplates suicide, or becoming a *sadhu*, or writing a long elegy on the death of his beloved. But he learns of his success in the B.A. examination and elects instead to go for higher studies abroad.

The book's theme is Anand's many loves: his love of political and social freedoms, his love of Gandhi, his love of poetry, and most of all his love for Yasmin. Of these, only his love for Yasmin captivates the reader, and that best when Anand settles down to a clinical analysis of Krishan's psyche and motives. It is well known that Anand, in his youth, was absorbed in the political struggle, and that he had great respect for Gandhi; but unfortunately the political passages make some of the most boring pages in the book. The reason for this is that Anand has nothing new to offer: the political and social arguments are a rehash of what he has already said in his novels and in *Morning Face*. The only change we do notice is that nearly all the characters—Indian and English—are in favor of Indian freedom.

Many of the characters in *Confession of a Lover* lack complexity, and the hero's long discourses with them (especially with Professor Henry—a theosophist and a transcendentalist) on the Vedas, the Gita, God, *karma*, consciousness, the universe, man-woman relationship, body-soul, Gandhi, self, the nature of reality, and so on, make tedious reading. The characters speak alike, and in their long speeches there is something unreal, something stilted and pretentious. When Krishan Chander first meets Dr. Iqbal, the poet advises him: "Knowledge . . . experience of that knowledge and reverence for all who give knowledge, even if you don't agree with them. These things are important. Read, read, everything that comes your way. Read the Sufis, Rumi, Attar, Kabir, Nanak, read Nietchze [*sic*], Thus Spake Zarathustra. You can grow. Everyone can. There is no special tribe of Brahmins. Every man can become Superman. Man is God. Only life, life and more life!" (p. 150). Reverend Thomas Williams (a chance acquaintance who paid Krishan's fare to Bombay), Mr. B. G. Horniman, and Mr. Marmaduke Pickthal speak in the same lofty manner, and what any one of them says can be assigned to another with no injury to their respective personalities. The fact is that they are not individuals but the author's mouthpieces. Reverend Thomas Williams blames his compatriots in words that remind us of John de la Havre's diatribes in *Two Leaves and a Bud*: "I tell you, the White Sahibs have done nothing. Only imposed the machine civilisation on people with the sword. Money is the white man's god. Exploitation is his religion! They have sapped the energy of the people everywhere! Climate does the rest!" (p. 186). When Krishan tells Mr. Horniman and Mr. Pickthal how he was caned for breaking a curfew in Amritsar, Horniman exclaims: "Shabash!—I apologise, boy, for British bad behaviour . . . Not all Englishmen are like Dyer. Mrs. Besant, Andrews, myself and many others are on the side of Gandhi" (p. 196). And this is what Pickthal says: "Anyone who opposes General and Sir Michael O'Dyer is my friend. I want to go to Amritsar and apologise to the people there for the bad behavior of my countrymen. I want to assure them that all of us are not murderers!" (p. 207). In Anand's previous novels the English characters,

with one or two exceptions, showed little sympathy for Indian aspirations. We are now presented with a work in which every English character (there are some five or six of them in the book) stands for Indian freedom. We cannot help suspecting that Anand is building up a case against Britain by showing that every thinking Englishman was against British rule in India.

The principal Indian characters in the book are portrayed with sophistication. There is the saintly and uncomplaining Noor, whose love of religion has not blinded him to his love of man, and who has in his heart a place for the rigorous teachings of the Koran as well as the erratic behavior of his agnostic friend, Krishan. He helps bring Krishan and Yasmin together at considerable risk to himself, and later when Krishan is leaving for England he conveys his sense of loss with remarkable restraint: "I am happy for you, brother—but . . . I shall be left alone" (p. 386).⁴

There is Yasmin, delineated in fine detail and easily the most memorable female character in all of Anand's fiction. Married against her will to a man much older than herself, she gives every atom of her love to Krishan with an abandon which belongs only to those who have one goal, one passion, one dream. A more sensitive poet than Krishan, she answers his histrionic outpourings in verse with a couplet of her own:

I hear the cry of pain from your heart,
As though it is the shriek of my first child. (p. 279)

We have Krishan's mother, simple and affectionate as of old, who meets the new challenge of her son's growing arrogance with undying devotion. When Krishan is pining at the death of Yasmin, the mother, who has never known what it is to fall in love, ventures to soothe her boy's pain with a promise to get him a lovely bride! However misdirected, against such love there is no reproof.

Among the lesser characters we meet the illiterate Prabha (who figured in *Coolie*), wise in what Anand would call "the wisdom of the heart." When Krishan is justly angry with his mother, Prabha reminds him in his humble manner: "But mother is mother after all. . . . There is a mysterious connection between the mother and child" (p. 131). And we are equally impressed, though in quite a different way, by the colorful Professor of Persian Maulana Murtaza Hussain, whose one handicap is that he does not know English. When a student praises Professor K. M. Mitra for his notes in English of the Persian poet Sa'di's *Gulistan* and *Bustan*, the Maulana bursts out: "Aré, salé!—I also know Professor Kay Em Mitra . . . Thousands of Kay Em Mitras have issued from the drops of my urine!" (p. 62). Having routed his adversary, he intones in his mellifluous voice:

I may tell you the Truth
If you do not mind. O Brahmin cold!—
The idols in your worship-place
Have become old . . . (p. 63)

The students thump the tables in approbation, and we readily endorse their acclamation.

In *Confession of a Lover*, Anand occasionally succumbs to the perils of self-glorification when speaking of Krishan's love of freedom and poetry. Some of Krishan's blusterings—such as "Rebellion and freedom! . . . It is only through rebellion against everything false that I have written poetry" (p. 28)—might

be forgiven as the impetuosity of a vain and egoistic young man, but it is difficult to condone the praises heaped upon him by the literary and political personages in the book. Professor Henry tells Krishan that he is "potentially a young god" (p. 118); the poet Iqbal prophesies "both disaster and glory" (p. 153) for him; and Mr. Horniman, after hearing Krishan read one of his compositions, bursts out in ecstasy: "Superb! Boy! Superb opening! . . . The repetitions!—You are a poet alright! . . . We shall correct the English here and there: Your fault is exuberance! But it was also Shakespeare's fault! We shall print it. It is terrible and beautiful!" (p. 203). What is even more distressing than the eulogy is the discovery that the lines that Anand gets Horniman to applaud are essentially a repetition of the opening lines of the book, the phrase "walking along" being now substituted for the original "cycling along" of the opening. In a circuitous way, Anand is getting an English character in this autobiographical novel to praise his prose style. And he asks for no modest praise, either!

Despite self-praise and self-deception, the book reflects Anand's genius in exploring the human mind, showing the fears, horror, and selfishness that accompany man's most persistent goals. The story on one level may be looked upon as a dramatization of Julia's lament in Byron's *Don Juan*:

Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
 'Tis woman's whole existence . . . (Canto cxciv)

In the loves of Krishan and Yasmin for each other, there is a difference. For Yasmin there is no turning back, nowhere to go should Krishan fail her. For Krishan there is refuge in poetry, politics, and in the dreams which make up so much of his life.

The story of a modern Radha and Krishna is played out, not in the glades of Bindraban as in the legend, but in the city of Lahore and on the banks of the River Beas. Innocence gives way to experience as the two make love. Love itself becomes a frightened thing as the lovers fear detection by the elders of their respective communities. What would the world say of a married Muslim woman with a child giving herself up to a *kafir*? And that is not the end of Yasmin's dilemma. Would Krishan accept her daughter along with her? "You would love her," she pleads with Krishan as waves of jealousy possess him. And to comfort him, she adds: "The little one is more mine than his [her husband's]" (p. 306). The woman in love is also a mother, and she loves Krishan with the dual force of a mother and a beloved. "You are a baby," she tells him. "My baby—like my other little one" (p. 307). Not long after, she is carrying his baby.

Yasmin's predicament cries out for help. Krishan, who had earlier felt that poetry cannot be a substitute for life and that it was Yasmin he wanted, now feels that his love for her was only in his imagination, and that he had used it "for the purpose of poetry, like all the Urdu bards" (p. 341). When he is congratulated by Noor's wife on "becoming a potential father" (p. 341), his courage fails him. Elopement, which he himself had once suggested, appears a crude and prosaic proposition to him, yet he is prepared to go through with it because "the poetry of action" (p. 341) is demanded of him now. In the face of the realities, the poet sheds some of his poetry and honestly explores the nature of his feelings: "I had the corroding doubt that I really wanted the pleasure of physical love. Perhaps, awful thought, I still loved myself and my pleasures more than I loved Yasmin. I was a megalomaniac. I wanted the experience of making love, but did not want

the burden of her" (p. 344). As he waits in Kashmir for her to arrive, a telegram announces her death. Here, at last, is the moment of poetry, and what poet would deride it? Freed of the responsibility of having to take care of her, he can now turn back and rail at a malevolent God and recall his immense loss. Krishan's self-dramatization—a blending of genuine grief with playacting—is the finest thing in the book. With Yasmin's death a whole fictive world of possibilities open up before him:

Perhaps, the only way out would be to do away with myself before my parents arrived. And then if there was any truth in the idea of an after life, I would be united with Yasmin.

The drama of this thought elated me for a few moments. Soon, however, it occurred [*sic*] to me, that I did not believe in life after death at all. And if I was going to commit suicide, it would be because my desires had not been fulfilled. Also, I would be doing so, because of my fear of the scandal that would soon ensue and out of the terror of my father's contempt, and my mother's everready tears. . . .

I shook myself out of my torpor. I felt humiliated in my own eyes that I had forgotten the joys of belonging to Yasmin so quickly. Was my love really fading? Why was I not suffering, but dramatising everything? How could love change? It would be better to steal out to her, go to Lahore, dig out the dead body and embrace her. Then I could dash my brains out on the stone of her grave and lie there by her. Someone, like the poet Iqbal, who understood the love of Majnun for Laila, might suggest that I be buried next to Yasmin. And that would be a more glorious end to this miserable life than suicide in my hovel. (pp. 367-68)

No poet kills himself until he has wrenched out the last bit of resolution and catharsis from life. Krishan decides to live. He thinks of becoming a sadhu and seeing strange visions; he envisages writing an elegy like Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. That he does neither is the correct finale to the book. The poet moves on to conquer other worlds, leaving death and dismay behind him.

Anand is presently working on the fourth volume of the autobiographical novel, which he has tentatively entitled *The Bubble* and which deal with his first five years in England. It could easily prove to be a memorable work (considering the new and rich material he will have on hand), if he bears in mind what he has told us all along in his best novels—that heroism often lies in the realization of the unheroic in oneself.

NOTES

¹Anand's letter to me dated March 9, 1976.

²Mulk Raj Anand, *Confession of a Lover* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1976), p. 318. Subsequent quotations from *Confession of a Lover* are from this edition and are indicated by page numbers in parentheses following quotations.

³L. N. Gupta, *The Sunday Hitavada*, March 7, 1976.

⁴Noor was Anand's closest friend during his college days and became the subject of his long short story "Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts," published by Naya Sansar (Lucknow) in book form in 1938. The story deals with a series of memories that pass through the mind of Noor as he lies dying of consumption. The character Azad is Anand himself, and it is worth noting how closely Krishan of *Confession of a Lover* resembles Azad of "Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts." The story, which I find uninteresting, is among the author's favorite (see *Author to Critic: The Letters of Mulk Raj Anand to Saros Cowasjee*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1973; pp. 106-109).