
Universal Themes in the Story "The Lost Child" by Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Study

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Abstract: The present paper intends to analyse the universal themes in the story "The Lost Child." It also studies the working of typical human psychology and behaviour in given circumstances. The story has a universal appeal and is relatable to every individual. The story has an abundance of situations depicting simplicity, innocence, and other peculiar characteristics of a child. The dramatic shift in the child's emotions on losing his parents signifies the common human tendency of taking things for granted and undervaluing the blessings of God. Endless desires for material things, the most universal aspect of the human mind, are presented in a simple and lucid manner. The paper, while depicting the complexity of human behaviour, also contrasts child psychology with adult psychology. "The Lost Child" also depicts the strong emotional bond between parents and child.

Keywords: human nature, human behaviour, child psychology, loneliness, parent-child bond

Introduction: Mulk Raj Anand is a renowned Indian writer with an acute understanding of human psychology and behaviour. Among the wide range of his stories, "The Lost Child" is a perfect example of acute psychological perception. The story is very symbolic, as neither the child, nor the parents, nor any other character in the story has a name. The characters and the plot of the story represent human relations, the working of the human mind, and the complexity of human psychology and behaviour. The image of a child visiting a fair is quite similar to a human being in this material world getting attracted to worldly things. The story is unique in its universal appeal. Many saints have compared the world to a fair. In the world, a human mind is always caught in the web of desires and challenges. The child, which is representative of a human being in the world, becomes the example of typical human behaviour.

The story "The Lost Child" is well known IS well-known for its universal appeal and is relatable to almost every human being. Presenting a typical example of child psychology

and behaviour, the story lays bare the complex layers of the human mind. Every heart can feel the initial joy and excitement of the child giving way to grief and desperation on losing his parents. Yearning for material things is an intrinsic characteristic of the human mind. Contrary to an adult, a child is attracted to very simple and ordinary things. Toys, sweets, rides, and other odd little things engross a child completely. A child's liking for simple things signifies the purity of his mind and innocence in his character. The various things towards which the child was attracted in the story were very simple and ordinary. First of all, the toys caught the eye of the child. Although the details of the toys are not given, one can imagine the ordinary toys found in a village fair. The child followed the dragonflies, butterflies, and tried to catch them. He was also attracted by little insects and worms and ran after the doves. The child's mouth watered for burfi and was drawn towards the scent of garlands of gulmohar. Every child is irresistibly drawn towards colorful balloons, and so was the child in the story "The Lost Child."

"A man stood holding a pole with yellow, red, green, and purple balloons flying from it. The child was simply carried away by the rainbow glory of the silken colours and he was possessed by an overwhelming desire to possess them all." (The Lost, 6)

The excitement of the child was on cloud nine when he saw the roundabout:

"There was a roundabout in full swing. Men, women, and children, carried away in a whirling motion, shrieked and cried with its dizzy laughter. The child watched them intently going round and round, a pink blush of a smile on his face, his eyes rippling with the same movement, his lips parted in amazement, till he felt that he himself was being carried round." (The Lost, 7)

The other thing that differentiates a child's psychology and behaviour from an adult's is his complete engrossment in the attractions. The child in the story "The Lost Child" completely forgot the rest of the world and was lagging behind his parents. He was so much engrossed in the fascinating scene, toys, and other attractions that he did not care to be close to his parents. A child's involvement in any activity is one hundred percent, and his mind is unable to divide his attention in a balanced and mature way as an adult can. That is the reason that the child in the story completely ignores his parents when he has so many enticing things before him. He can also immediately switch his emotions of disgust and disappointment to joy and pleasure. When the child demanded the toys, he had to face not only the refusal but also faced the wrath of his father. There was a swift shift in mood and emotions of the child as his mind was swayed by other beautiful things that caught his eyes.

"The faint disgust of the child's unfulfilled desire had hardly been quelled in the heavy, pouting sob of a breath, 'm-o-t-h-e-r,' when the pleasure of what was before him filled his eager eye." (The Lost, 4)

An adult's behaviour is different from this. This quick shift in emotions, clear-heartedness, and being free from any kind of resentment cannot be seen in the behaviour of a grown-up man. These peculiar characteristics of children are universal. Their simplicity, innocence, and purity are unmatched. It is difficult for an adult to quickly switch his emotions and get involved in another activity.

The story can also be analyzed in terms of the general human tendency to undermine the present comfort and blessings and always run after the attractive and fascinating things of the world. The child in the story had the privilege of the company and security of his parents, the value of which he realized only after losing them. This is a hidden philosophical truth of life that the things we possess and the relations we find comfort in are always taken for granted. The human mind in its typical behaviour is never contented with the existing circumstances and undermines the value of those things which we possess. We value the things only after being deprived of them. The child in the story did not seem to value the company of his parents until he lost them. As his parents refused to buy him the things he wanted, they appeared cold and cruel to the child. Only after a few moments, the child found everything worthless and realized that his parents were very precious to him.

The human mind is so complex that it is unaware of its true source of happiness. The child in Anand's story assumed that the toys, sweets, balloons, beautiful sights of nature, and the gay atmosphere of the fair were bringing all the joy and the excitement. He could never have enjoyed anything without the secure, protective, and serene presence of his parents. A human does not decipher the working of his own mind as to what are the true sources of its happiness. Materialistic things seem to be filling us with happiness, but we do not know ourselves much about us, and even our own self is hidden from us.

One other major aspect of human psychology is that the image of the world that the human mind perceives is highly individual and subjective. The images of the fair as perceived by the child who set out from home in the company and protection of his parents and the same perceived by the lost child are drastically different. When the story started, the child seemed to be swimming in the sea of happiness and excitement. Everything in the fair was providing happiness to the child.

"From the wintry shades of narrow lanes and alleys emerged a gaily clad humanity, thick as a swarm of bright-colored rabbits issuing from a warren. They entered the

flooded sea of sparkling silver sunshine outside the city gates and sped towards the fair." (The Lost, 3)

As the story progressed and the child lost his parents, the world seemed upside down to the child. The same things were not only ignored by the child but also irritated him. The child turned his face away from the very things which were desired and longed for. The objective world is the same all the time. It depends on our state of mind; our subjective perception and picture of the world we see can be a hell or heaven.

"Listen to that nice music, child," he pleaded. But the child shut his ears with his fingers and shouted his double-pitched strain: "I want my mother, I want my father!"..."Would you like a rainbow-colored balloon?" he persuasively asked. The child turned his eyes from the flying balloons and just sobbed: "I want my mother, I want my father." (The Lost, 9)

At the same time, loneliness, separation, and fear of the unknown are other universal themes which are beautifully treated in the story. The presence and company of loved ones are cherished by all. It makes us relaxed unconsciously. Fear is deep-rooted in a human mind right from birth. Fear engulfs us as soon as we feel lonely. The child in the story had the fear of the unknown as soon as he lost sight of his parents. Separation and loneliness push one into the mire of anxiety, fear, and despair. Even as an adult, it is difficult to undergo this emotional trauma; the effect of this on the young, immature mind cannot be expressed in words. A child's behaviour is dominated by the heart rather than the brain. Even an infant can sense loneliness and cries when left alone. It is human nature to find solace and comfort in the company of our loved ones. We feel that we are protected and do not feel threatened by any evil force.

"The Lost Child" also depicts the universal strong emotional bonding between parents and their children. The parents have unconditional love for their children and always think to do the best for their children. Although the parents in the story did not buy anything that the child wanted from the fair, their refusal did not stop them from being the universal representatives. We all, as parents, can very well understand the reason behind such refusals. Parents have to have a stern attitude in teaching discipline to the child. The parents in Anand's story were deeply concerned about the safety and security of the child. They did not let him away for long and kept a constant eye on him. In the story, it is seen that the parents repeatedly call their child to be near them.

The child was also deeply attached to his parents. Although he was not aware of this, his parents meant the whole world to him. After being lost in the fair, he cried hard and did not pay attention to all the beautiful things which were earlier the source of attraction to him.

Conclusion: The present story wonderfully illustrates the universal themes of human life such as love, family ties, worldly desires, and the pain of separation of loved ones. Human psychology and behaviour in certain circumstances react in a similar way. Fear of separation and loneliness is deep-rooted in the general human mind. The possessions of the alluring material world can never be a substitute for the emotional comfort and security that one can find in a family. The parent-child relation is the most pious relation in this world, the purity of which can be felt by everyone. As a child, one's attachment to his parents is most innocent and purely based on emotions, as he does not have a mature understanding of the value of his parents. Mulk Raj Anand has taken the example of this pious, innocent, and strongly passionate attachment to heighten the atmosphere of despair and dejection. The universal themes are presented in the most simple and effective way.

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