



The Two Lady Rams: a commentary

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The hilarious story *The Two Lady Rams* by Mulk Raj Anand is majorly about the government contractor Lalla Jhinda Ram and his domestic complications in a pre-independent India. Lalla Jhinda Ram has two wives, the fifty seven year old Sukhi, and the thirty-two year old Sakuntala. Although the English laws practised in the then India did not allow polygamy, it did not oppose the mitrakshar law, according to which a man could marry more than one wife in order to beget a male heir. Jhinda Ram too took a second wife as Sukhi, the older was barren. As expected, this young girl came from a economically weaker home. She was chosen for her age and her fair skin. She too married the old Jhinda Ram because it was a sure way to climb the social ladder. Things moved on as usual in Lalla's bungalow; the usual fights between the two wives, the expected division of the home into two equal halves beyond the common living room, the usual servant grapevines doing the rounds, and the older wife maintaining her superior position in spite of Jhinda Ram now tilting towards the younger.

The domestic front that operates at the backside of the house, beyond the quiet verandah and the common living room in front, manages to shift to a position of priority when Jhinda Ram is conferred Knighthood by the Raj.



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Congratulatory messages and visits on the same purpose flood the Lalla.

However, storm brews once he is invited to the Garden party at the Governor's; the invitation is only for Lalla Jhinda Ram and Lady Ram. As expected Lalla asks Sakuntala, the younger wife, to buy a new sari for the occasion. Sukhi, the older wife learns about this from the servants. She feels thwarted as her position and existence in the house is at stake if Sakuntala gets to be called "Lady" instead of her. A wounded tigress, she barges into the quarters of her co-wife cursing and calling her names.

Lalla and Sakuntala are not yet out of bed. Rubbing his eyes the husband takes a moment before he can try to control the situation. Lalla Ram is brave enough to try pulling Sukhi by her hair, but she is desperate and he cannot move her. The five foot obese small time contractor, the son of a small time shopkeeper, whose only achievement seems to be an expertise in forgery that enabled British Officials of the Raj to earn some extra, who is to become equal to a six foot six sahib very soon cannot allow such domestic drama to thwart his chances. He has to bow before Sukhi's demand as she had brought a huge amount of dowry that enabled him to rise in business. On the other hand,



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Sakuntala cannot be left out as the man depends solely on her for fulfilment of his carnal pleasures, and then she is the only chance he has of getting an heir.

Lalla begins running from pillar to post. He tries to meet the ADC first, and then the Governor. Both prove absolute failures. Finally it his chauffeur who gives him a probable solution. He should take both his wives, and both should be called Lady Ram. He scoffs the chauffeur but being a shrewd man knows that this is the best he can do, adept as he is in forging documents. The chauffeur dextrously tricks each wife into believing that it is only she who is going. When they finally discover the truth it is too late to engage in any altercation. So both bundle in with their husband into the car. On the other hand Lalla Ram replaces “Lady Ram” with “the two Lady Rams” on the invitation card from the Governor. This alteration is never noticed and the trio successfully make it to the party where both the wives are congratulated by the Governor’s wife for the beauty of their saris. The Governor bestows the title of Knighthood on Lalla Jhinda Ram; the trio never missed any occasion to be with the Sahibs.

The story is an excellent commentary on the position of women in society. The prestige and influence of women depended on the amount of dowry



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they brought. Further the onus of begetting an heir was also squarely laid on their shoulders, without the husband sharing the burden. The husband could keep on marrying until he got his heir. Girls who couldn't fetch grand dowries from their father's often met the fate of Shakuntala; had to marry rich men, much older, as a means to climb the social ladder, and also for social and economic security.

The comedy of the story is born from a wise and proportionate mixture of 'grandiloquence, irony and mock-heroic'. The central character, Jhinda Ram, is bestowed the Knighthood because he helps corrupt British Officials to earn commissions. It is also ironical that he can neither snub Sukhi, nor can he avoid the ire of Shakuntala. Sukhi with her dark skin and advanced age calls the cards only because of the fact that the dowry she brought helped Lalla Ram to further his business. Shakuntala is the prized wife for her fair skin; an obsession of most Indians even to this day.

The language used throughout the story is to say very lightly, bombastic. The Governor of a Province is referred to as "shadow of Monarch" and "the king's representative" is rather going overboards. When describing an



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essentially domestic fight, war jargons like, “trenches were dug”, “barricades were raised”, “gunpowder”, and “all the tricks of Al Capone” are freely used.

Mock-heroism embedded into the matrix of the narration adds to the hilarity.

The reactions of Jhinda ram, when he receives the news of the conferring of

Knighthood arouses laughter. The way he looks into the mirror to watch his

obese short self, imagining his raised stature, almost makes him see his

reflection as equal to any six feet six Sahib. However, the title is no more than a

decoration; he does not have any direct access to the Governor, not even to the

ADC whom he has helped earn illegal commissions. His origins, unlike any

conventional hero, is less than ordinary. Neither had he worked to be conferred

with Knighthood! other sources of laughter is the almost word for word

translation of the Punjabi expressions to plkain and literal English. Instances

abound in “Eater of her masters, I’ll pull every hair on your head”, or “don’t eat

my life!” these also lend a *desi* flavour to the story.

The Two Lady Rams gives us an in-depth understanding of the psychology of colonised India. It reveals the darkness lurking behind the

“Angerezi Sarkar of India”. This is a story placed at the cusp of a fading

tradition and modernity. Lalla boasts of an English style bungalow, but he has



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two wives according to the traditional *Mitrakshara* law of the land. He might be raised to the status of a Sahib, but his wives must dress the traditional way, and follow traditional rules within the premises of the home. Here is a story that strikes as a vitriolic social-satire as we traverse the layers within the narration. As we progress the laughter grows louder, but hot tears of indignation flood the *desi* soul.