

THE THREE VOWS

Mulk Raj Anand

MULK RAJ ANAND (1906-2004), internationally known novelist and an art critic, began his career as a writer of fiction in Sabarmati Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi, where he drafted his first novel, *The Untouchable*. Author of more than 40 books, he was alternatively engaged in teaching, writing and journalism. Anand is known for his innovativeness and originality of approach to the novel form. His important works include *Coolies*, *The Untouchable* and *Two Leavers of a Bud*. 'The Three Vows' is the first scene of *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi*, which is again the first part of his big novel *And So He Plays his Part*. Anand here reveals the Mahatma, saint politician, as an immediate human being, of the earth earthy, with his head raised to the sky. The excerpt also lays emphasis on the importance of following a routine to ensure discipline in life.



A. Work in small groups and discuss the following questions:

1. What kind of dress do people around you usually wear?
2. Is the dress of a man important? How?
3. Which dress do you feel more comfortable in?

THE THREE VOWS

The scene is a corner of the verandah of Mahatma Gandhi's cottage in Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad. At both ends of the verandah are small rooms, whose doors are open.

In a big room behind the verandah a white woman can be seen typing, while an inmate is writing on a ledger.

A female is seen spinning by the door of the cottage in the room on the right:

Further away, in the verandah on the right are two secretaries correcting proofs:

The sage is seen reclining back on a wooden-plank back rest chair, while a small demure woman, Kasturba Gandhi, his wife, in a white homespun saree, is plastering his belly with thin mud.

The table on the left of Mahatma has books and papers stacked on it: the one on the right has pencils, pens, inkpots, a white pitcher covered with a wet cloth, with three brass cups by it.

On the right is a burly brown man, Mahatma Gandhi's Secretary, Mahadev Desai, with pen and paper, ready to take down whatever the master may say.

Krishan Chander Azad enters. The Mahatma points with his hand to a mat. The visitor sits down cross-legged, somewhat uneasy, as it is difficult to fold his hard corduroy trousers into the lotus seat.

MAHATMA GANDHI (to Kasturba): 'Acha!'

Kasturba Gandhi smoothens the Mahatma's belly with a wet towel, pats the stomach with light slaps, assembles the mud pack material, heaves his body up and withdraws.

Krishan Chander Azad awkwardly joins his hands to Kasturba, who moves a lever of the bed chair, lifting the back and then walks away. Abashed, the visitor lifts his joined hands to the Mahatma, who raises his right hand in blessing; even as he adjusts the cotton cushion under his neck and sits back in a crouching position.

The Mahatma lifts his eyes to the upper part of his bi-focal glasses and looks quizzically at the visitor.

The glance confuses the guest from the stare-gaze of the Mahatma.

GANDHI: Don't you feel hot in the corduroy suit?

K.C. AZAD: The only suit I have... I came from London yesterday...

GANDHI: Even the English change into Alpaca or cotton clothes when they land in Bombay!

K.C. AZAD: They can afford to go to Army and Navy stores...

GANDHI: Anyhow, why do you want to look like a monkey?

K.C. AZAD: *(After a studied pause to control himself):*

Mahatma! You also looked like a monkey when you put on a frock coat, pin stripe trousers and top hat! ... In London! ...

GANDHI: *(Smiling)* I don't look like a monkey now ... I realised when I came back home from South Africa that our foreign clothes remove us from the people. Also you can't sit crosslegged in trousers... Go and change into Kurta pyjama – Mahadev, lend him a pair...

(Mahadev Desai gets up. He leads Krishan Chander Azad towards the room on the right of the Verendah).

(Kasturba Gandhi comes out of the big room with three small earthen mugs in her left hand and a big earthen mug in her right hand).

(She pours lassi into one small mug and offers it to her husband).

(Then she pours the whey into two other mugs. She covers them with small terracotta discs).

(An Assistant Editor, a wizened old man, with thick glasses, comes from the backroom, with a galley of proof).

ASSISTANT

EDITOR: Bapu - your editorial notes ... There are some mistakes!

GANDHI: *(Alert)* Read them to me!

(The Assistant Editor reads in halting English. Gandhi asks for the galley. He scans corrections. Then he corrects the mistakes and hands the galley back.)

GANDHI: *(to Assistant Editor)* Have some lassi before you go! And give me some! *(The Assistant Editor pours into an earthen pot and gives it to Mahatma first. Then helps himself).*

(Krishan Chander Azad returns behind Mahadev Desai.



The visitor had rolled up his loose pyjama far too big for him. And he walks self-consciously looking at himself, smiling uncomfortably.)

K.C. AZAD: I feel like the poet T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, who sang:

"I shall wear my trousers rolled!"

GANDHI : They say: "Do in Rome as Romans do!" You don't find any Englishman Wearing a *dhoti*! They think we are uncivilized. They don't see that in this hot country we have to wear scanty clothes. They wear suits! Alpaca suits! If not serge suits! Even in the summer months! ... And big boots! ... Our Babus copy them' ...

K.C. AZAD: I read somewhere that Clive took off his jacket, warm stockings and tall boots, in the battle of Plassey ...

GANDHI: His successors wear evening dress! – Even in Assam summer heat – to go for dinner in their clubs on the plantations!

K.C. AZAD: "Mad dogs and Englishmen!" – they say ... We must admit they have a sense of humour ... They laugh at themselves. We are too serious ...

GANDHI: Maybe... You are right ... I read *Punch* every week when I was in London. Yes. They also laugh here ... But mostly at the Khansamah who burns their toasts! Or the Dhobi who *singes* the Mem Sahab's frock!...

(He points to the kitchen with lassi to Mahadev, who serves the visitor and then himself).

(The Mahatma turns to the visitor).

GANDHI: What do you want from me?

K.C. AZAD: I want to show you my novel.

GANDHI: Novel? – What is it about? ... Some boy and girl affair?

(The old man looks up at K.C.A. from the upper part of his spectacles).

K.C. AZAD: No it is about your kind of love ...

GANDHI: What is my kind of love?

K.C. AZAD: It is about an untouchable. A sweeper boy, Bakha! ...

GANDHI: You mean Harijan – we don't use the word untouchable here!...

MAHADEV

DESAI: Harijan! – Son of God! ...

(*Krishan Chander Azad bows his head in shame at the faux pas he has made*).

B. 1. Answer the following question briefly :

1. Who is the 'sage' referred to here? What is he doing when the scene opens?
2. Who is Kasturba Gandhi? What is she doing when K.C. Azad arrives?
3. Name the objects on the table.
4. Who is Mahadev Desai? What sort of a man is he?
5. What does Kasturba Gandhi do at the arrival of K.C. Azad?
6. What comment does Gandhi make on Azad's suit?
7. What is Azad's reply to this comment?
8. What does Gandhi realise about foreign clothes? When did he realise this?
9. Who sang 'I shall wear my trousers rolled'?
10. Why do we in India have to wear scanty clothes?
11. Why has Azad come to Gandhi?

GANDHI: How can I help you with your novel? ... I have not read a novel since I was a student in London. Only Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych*. And I have read his autobiography *Childhood Boyhood Youth* Also his *Confession* – about his sins!

K.C. AZAD: I have read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* ...

GANDHI: I learnt much from Tolstoy. He was a true follower of Jesus ... He believed in non-violence.

K.C. AZAD: He accepted the Christian idea of sin – though he felt tempted! Always...

GANDHI: Sin is not only a Christian idea. Our own Shastras consider sex out of marriage to be sin....

(*K.C. Azad changes the subject*).

K.C. AZAD: I want to learn to write as you wrote the story about the sweeper boy Uka.

GANDHI: Uka is a real person – he lives in the Ashram. He has learnt weaving. No longer a young boy. He has taught us how to clean latrines. Also he cooks food in the kitchen.

K.C. AZAD: I would like to become his assistant. I have learnt some cooking as I worked in a restaurant for a living in London. According to your advice- 'earning while learning'...

GANDHI: Acha, we will teach you our Gujarati style cooking! You will have to learn to clean the kitchen! Washing utensils! ... And you can show me your novel. But you have to take three vows – if you want to stay in the Ashram...

(Gandhi stares at K.C. Azad penetratingly from the upper part of his glasses and remains silent).

K.C. AZAD: What are the three vows?

(Mahadev Desai is seen beaming with a broad smile, as though pleased at the discomfiture of the Brown Sahab).

GANDHI: You must not look at woman with desire!

K.C. AZAD: But! ... My girl friend paid my fare... She is in jail in Ireland. I will be dreaming of her at night if I don't think of her during daytime

GANDHI: *...*
(Looking away with an amused smile. Then he turns and says!)
You can dream of her at night, but not think of her during daytime!...

K.C. AZAD: Difficult!...

GANDHI: Why is she in jail?

K.C. AZAD: She was working with Madam Maude Gonne in the Irish freedom movement. The British police accused her of gunrunning, as she came with two Irish men from Liverpool who had a pistol each!

GANDHI: They had pistols? She likes violence?

K.C. AZAD: So the British say.

- GANDHI: Acha! You can think of her courage in working for Irish freedom to inspire you to work here. But not desire her body! ...
- K.C. AZAD: (*confused, amused, silent*) I am not sure that one can compartmentalise one's thoughts about a woman ... I love her for her beauty. Also for her courage ... I will be dreaming of her at night if I do not think of her during daytime! ...
- GANDHI: Acha! You can dream of her at night, but not think of her during day time!...
- K.C. AZAD: What is the other vow?
- GANDHI: You must not drink liquor here!
- K.C. AZAD: (*Embarrassed and wiping the sweat off his face*)
But I am pub-crawling in London. We writers write from Pub-talk. I have never been drunk!... Only once when I mixed my drinks in the inner Temple....
- GANDHI: (*Firmly*) You may drink in London – but not here!... You will find yourself writing without liquor if you become intoxicated with truth!
- K.C. AZAD: Third vow?
- GANDHI: You will have to clean latrines once a week – as we do by turns.
- K.C. AZAD: I have come to learn to be like Uka. I will clean latrines willingly...
- GANDHI: Mahadev – give him the little guest cottage to stay in – there!
- MAHADEV
- DESAI: Where is your luggage?
- K.C. AZAD: I left it in the left-luggage room at Ahmedabad station.
- GANDHI: Go and fetch it...
- K.C. AZAD: Mahatmaji – could you ask the watchman at the gate of the Ashram not be angry with visitors, but treat them civilly...
- GANDHI: Oh Acharya Gorkha! Others have also complained! ... Mahadev go call him...
(*Mahadev Desai goes out*)
- GANDHI: Let me give you Tolstoy's *Confession*.
(*Gandhi gets up goes into the room on the left side*).

- K.C. AZAD: *(Looks around at the busy scene. He is tense from the awareness of the Mahatma's moral sense),*
- GANDHI: Here is the book – it will teach you to forget your girl friend!
- K.C. AZAD: Never – I love her!
- GANDHI: All passion ends in tragedy ... What is your name?
- K.C. AZAD: Krishan Chander Azad ... And I want to live up to that name. As Krishan I want to be like the love God: Chander means moon: Azad because I want to be free – and work for India's freedom. So I have adopted Azad as my *non-de plume*. I write poems.
- GANDHI: Your love-God was also the guide of Arjuna in the *Gita*. He advised control of the senses. And righteousness! Later the Tantriks debased him. Anyhow, show me your novel

(Krishan Chander Azad opens his portfolio, takes out the manuscript with nervous fingers. The Mahatma opens the first page after turning over the title page, reads the first paragraph. Then he smiles, looks at Krishan Chander Azad benignly and says):

- GANDHI: Mocking bird with a vengeance! Such big big words! You don't know, that Harijans sigh, moan, groan and say a few words! They never talk in such big words! You want to make them into Dr. Johnsons!
- K.C. AZAD: *(Humbled)* I have been following the method of James Joyce. Stream of consciousness of characters! He has coined a new language. With puns! Satirical words! Joined words! Poetic phrases!... I thought if I also use big words, and make puns, English people will think I have mastered the English language...
- GANDHI: I thought the same in London! Then an English friend, a Quaker, told me to write simply. I began to translate into English from Gujarati. Why don't you write in your language?
- K.C. AZAD: I have no language. My mother tongue is Punjabi. But, the Sarkar has appointed English and Urdu as court languages!... Except Bhai Vir Singh and Dhani Ram Few of us write in Punjabi.

The only novel writer is Nanak Singh. There are no publishers in Punjabi or Urdu. Even Dr. Muhammad Iqbal writes in Urdu and Persian not in Punjabi! No one can earn his living as a writer in Punjab. In English - my novel may get published in London...

GANDHI: Acha! Write in any language that comes to hand. But say what Harijans say! And the poor say! Translate their speech literally. Don't use 'These' and 'Thous!' above all you must be sincere! Truthful! Write of life as it really is!... Of the poor! Few writers have written about the poor! Only Sarat Babu! And Prem Chand? - I hear!

K.C. AZAD: *Mea Culpa!* If I may use a Latin word. Guilty! I will rewrite the whole book. But in a novel I have to use imagination...

GANDHI: Talk to Uka. And other people. Accept them as your brothers and sisters. I will read your novel after you revise it.

(Mahadev Desai came back with Acharya Gorkha).

GANDHI: What did he say to you, Azad?

K.C. AZAD: He said: 'Don't enter the Ashram! Sit there on the **culvert!**' I asked him: 'Can I have a glass of water?' He said: 'Go and get it from that Pan shop!'

GANDHI: Acharya?

(Acharya remains silent).

GANDHI: Answer!

(Acharya moves his head affirmatively).

GANDHI: Acha! You are to fast for a day and night to cure yourself of your arrogance. We close the door of the Ashram against CID. Not against everyone who comes to see me!...

K.C. AZAD: I told him I had an appointment to see you at 4 p.m.

- ACHARYA: You came at 3 p.m.
- K.C. AZAD: In our villages guests are welcome at any time.
- GANDHI: It is different here! Ashram has rules according to my time table...
But he should not have been rude. He will fast ... Mahadev –
explain to Azad the routine of the Ashram... Acharya go! ... Fast
for one day to conquer your bad manners!
- MAHADEV
DESAI: Gandhiji expects everyone to walk with him at 5 a.m. on the dry
bed of the Sabarmati! After ablutions, prayer at 6:15 a.m.! Milk
or tea in the canteen at 7:30 a.m.! Work till 12 noon! Midday
meal at 12:30 p.m.! Siesta from 1:30 to 3 p.m.! Bath! Work at
home or kitchen or in garden! Evening prayers at 6:30 p.m.! Meal
at 7:30 p.m.! ... Lights off at 10 p.m. !... Mahatma may see you
for half an hour twice a week! Sundays you are free to go out.
- K.C.AZAD: Where can I buy a Kurta pyjama?
- GANDHI: In Khadi Bhandar – not far from the Ashram.

(K.C. AZAD joins hands to the Gandhi and goes out with Mahadev Desai).

B. 2. Answer the following question briefly :

1. How many novels has Gandhi read?
2. What did Gandhi learn from Tolstoy?
3. What does Anand want to learn from Gandhi?
4. What does Gandhi say about Uka?
5. What is the condition for staying in the Ashram?
6. Which book does Gandhi give to Azad?
7. What does Gandhi say about the fate of passion?
8. What does Gandhi say about Krishan?
9. Why has Azad used big words?
10. Why does Azad write in English?
11. What is Gandhi's punishment to Acharya Gorkha? Why does he punish him?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

- Ledger** (n): register
Sage (adj): erudite, saint
reclining (v): resting
demure (adj): modest
plastering (v): applying and spreading
belly (n, inf): stomach
stacked (pp): piled
burly (adj): strongly built
Acha: alright
Smoothens (v): making smooth, flatten
abashed (adj): embarrassed
quizzically (adv): curiously, enquiringly
wizened (adj): aged
scans (v): checks, looks at
scanty (adj): very little
singes (v): burns
vow (n): oath, promise
penetratingly (adv): piercingly, sharply
culvert (n) ditch, drain

C.1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. Describe the scene at the beginning.
2. Describe Azad's girlfriend. What sort of a person is she?
3. Is love associated only with beauty?
4. What are the three vows? Why are they important?
5. Who was James Joyce? What does Azad say about James Joyce?
6. Note the way Gandhi and Azad look at Krishan and get inspiration from him. Can you cite any example of the same person or thing being viewed differently because of difference in attitude?
7. What is Gandhi's advice to Azad about the use of language? Describe in your own words.
8. Describe the routine of the Ashram in your own words. What is the significance of routine in life? Do you follow any routine of your own?

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in groups or pairs:

- a. 'Earning while learning'
- b. Importance of mother language

C. 3. COMPOSITION

- Write a letter to you father telling him how you have devised a routine for you and how it has helped you.
- Write an essay in about 150 words on the 'art of good writing'.

D. WORD STUDY**D.1. Dictionary Use**

Ex. 1. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of each of the following words—the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common:

wizened vow penetrate satirical sage

D.2. Word-formation

Look at the following example:

*Gandhi stares at K.C. Azad **penetratingly**.*

Penetratingly: penetrate — penetrating — penetratingly

Ex. 1. Write similar derivatives from the verb given below:

hurt approve surprise soothe

D.3. Word-meaning

Ex. 1. Match the words given in **Column A** with their meanings given in **Column B**:

Column A

sage
demure
belly
burly
abashed
wizened
scanty
singes

Column B

embarrassed
aged
burns
strongly built
very little
stomach
erudite
modest

Ex.2. Fill in the blanks with suitable adjectives given below:

intoxicated foreign Christian scanty bad

- Our clothes remove us from the common people.
- In this hot country we have to wear clothes.

- (iii) You will find yourself writing without liquor if you become with truth!
- (iv) Sin is not only a idea.
- (v) Fast for one day to conquer your manners!

D. 4. Phrases

Ex.1. Read the lesson carefully and find out the sentences in which the following phrases have been used. Then use them in sentences of your own:

believe in according to dream of get up live up to

E. GRAMMAR

E.1. Study the following questions from the lessons:

- (i) Don't you feel hot in the corduroy suit?
- (ii) What do you want from me?
- (iii) They had pistols?
- (iv) How can I help you with your novel?
- (v) What is the other vow?

Change these interrogative sentences into assertive ones. You may need words to substitute question words. Supply such words from the lesson or from your own experiences.

F. ACTIVITY

Ex. 1. Take help from your teachers and reference books and do a project work on the 'Life and Works of Gandhiji'.

Ex. 2. Write a conversation between your father and yourself, the former explaining to you the importance of being punctual in life.

