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Sushila Meena
Research Scholar, University
of Technology, Jaipur,
Rajasthan, India

Dr. Ram Naresh Singh Tomar
Associate Professor, University
of Technology, Jaipur,
Rajasthan, India

Corresponding Author:
Sushila Meena
Research Scholar, University
of Technology, Jaipur,
Rajasthan, India

Voices of the Oppressed: Caste, Class, and Social Reform in Mulk Raj Anand's Fiction

Sushila Meena and Ram Naresh Singh Tomar

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Abstract

This study delves into Mulk Raj Anand's novels and how they showcase his genuine concern for important social concerns in Indian society, specifically caste, class, and social inequity. The work of Anand serves as a platform for anti-caste discourse, reformist ideology, and ethical awareness by highlighting exploited people and revealing systematic injustices. This research contends that Anand's use of social protest, empathy, and realism in his storytelling helps to bring attention to the disadvantaged and stimulates readers' awareness. Anand was the first Indian novelist to rewrite the working class and the 'untouchables' as central characters, and his works mirror the economic, political, and social realities of India during and after colonisation. Based on these findings, it's clear that Anand depicts inequality in his works as something far deeper than economic disparity—a psychological and systemic problem. Anand embodies the oppressed in their fight for independence, dignity, and fundamental human rights while exposing India's entrenched societal inequities using harsh, uncompromising words.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, social inequality, caste system, protest literature, Indian English fiction, social reform, untouchability

Introduction

Among the first wave of Indian-English novels, Mulk Raj Anand had a clear political goal: to undermine the colonial capitalist system's rigid class, caste, and gender hierarchies (Naik, 1973) ^[16]. Anand persistently fought against the oppressive social order that oppressed the working class, untouchables, and the impoverished, in contrast to his colleagues who idealized Indian tradition (Iyengar, 1970) ^[11]. Though firmly grounded in the working-class awareness and Gandhian egalitarianism, his literary ambition is in line with modernist concerns (Singh, 1977) ^[24].

As a young man, Anand had the chance to read the works of great British writers like Dickens, Shakespeare, and Thackeray, and he is now considered a father of Indian English novels (George, 2000) ^[9]. Nonetheless, life events had a significant impact on him, and he vowed to expose injustices and societal absurdities.

"We are bound, first of all, to protest against the wrongs of human society in our decaying civilisation..." Anand boldly stated (1975). Therefore, you are up against an obstacle that calls for widespread protest. Because of the animosity that exists between the well-off and the poor and other social outcasts, the caste system has persisted and become a serious social problem (Jain, 1997) ^[12]. According to Jain (1997) ^[12], "conflicting situations are created by the concept of purity, the category of caste, and the distance between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin."

The kind sentiments that would influence Anand's creative aim were shaped by his formative interactions with coolies, untouchables, and other oppressed people. According to Iyengar (1970) ^[11], "Mulk Raj Anand as a child had mixed freely with the children of sweepers attached to his father's regiment, and such associations cutting across caste divisions had continued during his boyhood and youth." The protagonists of most of Anand's works were based on actual people he encountered. According to Anand (1981) ^[5], "All the heroes, as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me, because they were reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth."

Theoretical Framework: Protest Literature and Social Reform

A wide range of topics are covered in Indian English literature, including social, political, economic, and cultural aspects (Rao, 1995) ^[18]. Authors pick themes to express meaningful thoughts that try to solve societal problems. Prior to India's independence, a group of novelists called the All-India Progressive Writers' Association had been established in the 1930s. This group's members wanted to shed light on issues of economic, social, and caste exploitation through depictions of rural and social life (Reddy & Reddy, 1999) ^[15]. As Venkata Reddy points out, "The formation of the All India Progressive Writers' Association in the 1930s made the creative writers portray the Indian peasantry and the toiling masses in the hope that social transformation could be feasible only through mobilising the opinion of the underprivileged classes."

One literary subcategory that primarily deals with social issues is protest literature, in which the author aims to improve society by exposing harsh real-life conditions (Sharma, 1995) ^[21]. In the words of Sharma (1995) ^[21], "The rise of the protest novel, in one respect, was the dawn of modern era in Indian literature ushered in by a fast-changing social order." Literature serves as a social institution through the channel of language. To paraphrase Marshal (1999) ^[15], "The primary concern of a work of art is not merely with men alone but with their relationship with society." As Marshal (1999) ^[15] puts it, Indian English novelists "arouse feeling of sympathy, resistance or protest" by drawing attention to "negative decay around" their readers.

Anand's Artistic Vision and Social Commitment

States that Anand became a champion of the downtrodden due to his deep empathy for the marginalised and people living in caste segregation. He was acknowledged as a dedicated writer in Indian English literature for his outstanding handling of pressing social issues (Khan, 2005) ^[13]. *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), and *The Road* (1961) are novels that tackle society cruelty head-on. Inequality in society is the central theme of these works, which address gender, class, religion, class, caste, and political power (Naik, 1973) ^[16]. The impact of Gandhi was crucial in shifting Anand's attention to the plight of the untouchables, peasants, and workers. "As a result of his contact with Gandhiji, Anand could gain a closer and sympathetic understanding not only of social exploitation of Harijans in general—an exploitation which was embedded in the political system of the colonial rule of India by the capitalistic exploitative British." Writers, according to Anand, should oppose repression and hypocritical society as their ultimate goal. According to Anand (1975) ^[4], "Thus every insult, every humiliation, every deprivation, every lowering of dignity, must be protested." "His work covering a span of six decades shall continue to inspire the new writers," Khan (2005) ^[13] says about Anand's vision. There were no limits to his compassion for the poor and oppressed. He had an in-depth knowledge of the capitalism system and the imperial powers that take advantage of the common people. It is a groundbreaking work since it features an outcast as the main character, as George (2000) ^[9] says. It is comprehensible that Anand would address the dehumanizing social evil of the caste system so early in his

writing career; doing so would satisfy his need to bring readers to a critical understanding of the issue.

Untouchable: Caste as Destiny

According to Gupta (1974) ^[10], *Untouchable* is considered a masterpiece among Anand's literary works. The story shows how the protagonist's social status dictates his fate (Anand, 1970). Because of his caste, Bakha is cut off from the rest of society and must endure poverty, exploitation, humiliation, and misery. Human lives have been lost in numerous forms due to the evil of untouchability, which has persisted for a long time and is addressed in the novel. The first novel written by Anand is *Untouchable*, as pointed out by Gupta (1974) ^[10]. Maybe it's even his finest work. In addition to being the first English novel by an Indian writer to deal with society's underclass, it is distinctive in other ways as well. *Untouchable* could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who witnessed from the outside," remarks British author E.M. Forster (1970) ^[8], who authored the foreword. No empathetic European could have imagined Bakha's plight because they would not have been privy to enough of his experiences. The narrator paints a dismal portrait of marginalisation. The initial account raises serious concerns about the biased actions of Indian society (Anand, 1970), a cluster of two-row dwellings with mud walls made up the outcaste's colony. They were located outside the town's and cantonment's boundaries, yet they were nonetheless distinct from one another. The lack of a drainage system had turned the area into a smelly marsh due to the many seasons' worth of rain.

According to Sharma (1997) ^[14], the author shows that the intolerable treatment of sweepers is due to socioeconomic inequality. An upper-caste man brutally abuses the protagonist Bakha by striking him and saying, "Keep to the side of the road, oh low-caste vermin!" (Anand, 1970). You pig, why don't you just make a noise when you're about to arrive? "You cock-eyed, bow-legged scorpion, do you know that you have touched me and defiled me?"

Temple priest Pandit Kali Nath sexually molests his sister Sohini, symbolising the exploitation of oppressed people (Anand, 1970). Anand (1970) depicts a scene in which members of lower castes wait for members of higher castes to get water from a well: Oh, my goodness! Maharaj! Sure, why don't you just draw a little water? We implore you. We had been patiently waiting for quite some time. While treating Bakha like a diseased being, shopkeepers in the market toss goods from a distance. "*Untouchable* is a depiction of the difference between the high and the low, represented by the ruthlessness and hypocrisy of the caste-rich Brahmins against the passive untouchables." Iqbal proposes utilising flush toilets and British legal standards to avoid traditional occupational bondage, while Gandhi's philosophy and Christian conversion offer remedies (Anand, 1970). According to Anand (1970), "In *Untouchable* I meant to recreate the lives of the millions of untouchables through one single person... The slap on the face evoked all the human relations, of the sixty-five millions of people whom the hero represents against the millions of caste Hindus."

Coolie: Class and Economic Exploitation

Money has supplanted all other social metrics as the principal instrument for determining social standing,

controlling social stratification, and establishing interpersonal interactions in modern society (Sharma, 1990) [14]. Cowasjee (1977) [7] argues that the class structure is a weapon for suppressing the labour class and widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Coolie tackles the issue of class disparity in a big way (Anand, 1972). Unlike Untouchable, which focusses on caste oppression, Coolie exposes colonial India's tea plantations and other sectors that are based on religion as being completely ludicrous (Naik, 1973) [16].

Munoo is a member of the Kshatriya caste who becomes a servant to the wealthy British sahibs and Indian babus due to his dire financial circumstances (Anand, 1972). Discrimination between the well-off and the poor, the exploiters and the victimised, is a central theme of the book (Sharma, 1990) [14]. According to Anand (1972), the start sets the tragic tone: "He had heard of how land-lord had seized his father's five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when the rains had been scanty and harvests bad."

Disillusionment strikes Munoo. He "finally realises his position in the world," as the story puts it. He was to be a helpless slave, someone to be beaten and mistreated for doing menial tasks (Anand, 1972). Workers in the factory endure filthy, mandatory labour from sunrise to sunset, a scene straight out of the horror films (Anand, 1972). "There are only two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor, and between the two there is no connection," Anand (1972) imparts Marxist philosophy through Sauda. Everyone pays respect and admiration to the powerful and wealthy. "No one respects you, the poor and the humble."

"You are the roofless, you are the riceless spinning of cotton, weavers of thread, sweepers of dust and dirt; you are the workers, the labourers, the millions of unknown, who crawl in and out of factories every day," the narrator says at a trade union meeting (Anand, 1972) in reference to the working conditions of the participants.

The Village: Rural Reform and Religious Critique

The resistance and revolt against inflexible social ideals is demonstrated in Anand's trilogy—*The Village*, *Across the Black Waters*, and *The Sword and the Sickle*—by protagonist Lalu Singh (Anand, 1960). The zamindari system and landowners inflict trauma on the peasants, who are shown in *The Village* (Anand, 1960). Gupta (1974) [10] argues that Lalu embodies a rebellious character who fights against all forms of social evil, whether they be religious, landlord-induced, or otherwise. *The Village* represents both India's grief and its hope, according to Gupta (1974) [10]. The story vividly depicts a typical Indian town going through a period of change.

Numerous societal absurdities give rise to Lalu's defiant demeanour (Anand, 1960). He is driven to question exploitation by his schooling. Lalu is a representation of the modern, open-minded youth of India that the author portrays (Niven, 1978) [17]. There are instances of cynicism towards established social institutions throughout the book. Anand states that Lalu's animosity for Nandgir is fuelled by his strict landlord: "Lalu felt a violent revulsion against Nandgir..." (Anand, 1960). Why didn't they know better than to squander their money on presents for these con artists? The villagers are shown as uneducated and impoverished, clinging to traditions that limit their

individuality (Anand, 1960). "God has given a place to everyone in this world," says the character Mahant Nandgir, who portrays the rich and exploitative individuals who prey on the poor via religious dread (Anand, 1960). You are fully aware that a serf lacks the respect due to a farmer like yourself. It follows that you should maintain your status but avoid putting yourself in the same category as the general public.

Anand (1960) notes that Lalu's aunt and members of the Sikh community harshly criticise his rebellious behaviour, labelling him as an enemy of tradition and a renegade. He cannot stay in the village any longer due to these responses. In the words of Naik (1973) [16] "The Village is, thus, a memorable picture of pre-independent Indian rustic life, drawn with understanding and objectivity."

The Road: Symbol of Progress and Dignity

There is a strong emphasis on caste abuse and untouchability in *The Road* (Anand, 1983). The plot revolves around road construction labourers, who are later dehumanised and exploited because they belong to a lower caste (Sharma, 1995) [21]. Bhikhu, the protagonist, seeks to build a road by accumulating stones from nearby quarries (Anand, 1983). Despite being from lower castes, the workers nonetheless feel empathy for their leader, who is from a higher caste. They hope the road would bring prosperity to the villages, thus they are preparing it (Shivpuri, 1986) [23].

But other powerful people are against it because they see the road as a challenge to their power. Thakur Singh and Pandit Suraj Mani's dehumanising plots against the lower-caste people are detailed in the book (Anand, 1983). The pariah gang, with the assistance of government authorities, manages to construct the road despite the many obstacles they face. Anand (1983) argues that Bhikhu's departure for Delhi to construct additional roads is a social protest against the filthiness of casteism.

Priestly hypocrisy is the target of Anand's criticism (Anand, 1983). In India, practising one's faith is a real problem. In your opinion, how significant is our faith? Here, there is solely "Touch me not"—no "Don't touchism" whatever. Is this a paradise or hell? When a hundred million Brahmanas and a million Sadhus feast on the nectar of the Mohua plant while millions of others go hungry, and no one does anything to help.

The title of the novel has more than one interpretation; it alludes to advancement and the persistence of caste awareness (Shivpuri, 1986) [23]. The novel "*The Road*" relies on symbols to plot its development, according to Shivpuri (1986) [23]. A road serves as the symbol. The path forward, the path out of hell, the path forged and shaped by those who endured adversity.

Conclusion

The intriguing meeting point of art and activism is still present in the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand. His art goes beyond aesthetics to become a reforming force because of its realistic depictions of social inequity and its unwavering dedication to exposing oppression (George, 2000) [9]. Anand uses social realism and narrative empathy in his works *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *The Village*, and *The Road* to propose a more equitable society and to question long-established power structures (Naik, 1973) [16]. According to Sharma (1995) [21], Anand's novels show that he was genuine and

sensitive to important social issues in Indian society, such as class and caste. The harsh truth of a discriminating Indian society was well captured by him. In addition, Gupta (1974)^[10] says that he has several socialist and humanist views that might end social inequity and make the world a better place for everyone. His books have strong female protagonists who can help dispel class tensions and casteism. When the wealthy damage the homes of the untouchables in *The Road*, Dhooli Singh steps in to help. Change necessitates not just systemic reform but also moral fortitude on the part of individuals and unity across social classes, as these admirable figures show (Niven, 1978)^[17].

One of Anand's lasting legacies is his conviction that literature has the power to shed light on injustice and motivate people to take action, a notion that is still pertinent in the continuous fight against inequality on a worldwide scale (Singh, 1977)^[24]. He showed that literature has ethical and reformist functions in addition to aesthetic ones by breaking new ground in Indian English fiction by focussing on oppressed people (George, 2000)^[9]. Anand personified the oppressed in their fight for respect, independence, and fundamental human rights while using harsh, unforgiving language to reveal the systemic societal injustices in India.

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