

Impact of India's Social Structure on Mulk Raj Anand's Work

Rakesh Kujur¹ and Dr. Udit Rajput²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English

²Assistant Professor, Department of English
Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan, India

Abstract: *Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), one of the pioneering figures of Indian English literature, is celebrated for his humanistic portrayal of India's marginalized communities and his critique of social inequalities. His novels and essays mirror the rigid caste system, economic disparity, and colonial oppression that defined India's social structure in the twentieth century. This review paper examines the extent to which India's hierarchical social fabric influenced Anand's writings, particularly focusing on his characterization, themes, and narrative techniques. It also evaluates his works in the context of social realism and humanist ideology, drawing upon critical perspectives from various scholars*

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, Social Structure, Caste System, Colonialism, Indian

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian society during the colonial and pre-independence period was deeply shaped by caste hierarchies, class divisions, and colonial exploitation. Mulk Raj Anand, often described as the “father of Indian English fiction,” foregrounded these issues in his works. His novels like *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) directly reflect the lives of the socially oppressed and economically exploited, challenging both indigenous traditions of casteism and the exploitative practices of colonial capitalism (Iyengar, 1985). Anand's narrative thus becomes an interplay between individual suffering and collective social consciousness.

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the pioneering figures of modern Indian English literature, is widely acclaimed for his realistic portrayal of Indian society and its entrenched social structures. Born in 1905 in Peshawar, Anand witnessed firsthand the rigid hierarchies of caste, class, and colonial subjugation that defined the socio-political landscape of India in the early twentieth century. His literary vision was deeply rooted in humanism and social justice, reflecting both the oppressive realities of his time and his hope for a more egalitarian order. The impact of India's social structure on Anand's work is most vividly evident in his depiction of marginalized communities, such as the poor, the untouchables, peasants, laborers, and women, who were subjected to systemic exploitation and denial of dignity.

For Anand, literature was not merely an aesthetic pursuit but a moral mission, a tool to expose the hypocrisy of societal norms and to challenge the centuries-old injustices embedded in Indian culture. His novels such as *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) stand as milestones in Indian fiction for their unflinching realism and empathy toward the downtrodden, bringing into focus the psychological scars inflicted by caste prejudices, economic exploitation, and colonial power structures. Anand was deeply influenced by the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, particularly the Gandhian critique of untouchability, as well as by Western thinkers like Bertrand Russell and Marxist ideals that shaped his concern for equality and human rights. He sought to merge the Indian socio-cultural experience with global humanitarian values, making his writing resonate with both national and international audiences.

The oppressive caste hierarchy, for instance, is not only central to *Untouchable* but also serves as a metaphor for the broader dehumanization prevalent in Indian society. Similarly, *Coolie* exposes the brutal exploitation of child labor and class oppression, while *Two Leaves and a Bud* critiques colonial capitalism and the plight of plantation workers. Anand's characters, often drawn from the lower rungs of society, embody the silent suffering and resilience of millions of Indians whose voices were historically suppressed. By humanizing these characters, he challenged the elitist traditions of Indian literature and shifted its focus toward social realism. The narrative technique of Anand also reveals

his preoccupation with the social structure: his use of vernacular expressions, colloquial dialogue, and detailed socio-cultural settings immerse readers in the lived experiences of the oppressed.

Moreover, Anand's engagement with India's social structure was not static; it evolved alongside the country's struggle for independence and the subsequent challenges of nation-building. His later works began to explore themes of modernity, identity, and cultural transformation, while still retaining his commitment to social justice. In essence, Anand's writings reflect a profound dialogue between literature and society, where art becomes a mirror to oppressive traditions and a call for reform. Thus, the impact of India's social structure on Mulk Raj Anand's work cannot be overstated—it was both the backdrop and the driving force of his creativity, compelling him to chronicle the anguish and aspirations of the marginalized with compassion, realism, and revolutionary zeal.

INDIA'S SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ITS REFLECTION IN ANAND'S WORK

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the pioneering figures in Indian English literature, wrote against the backdrop of India's deeply entrenched social structure, which shaped much of his creative vision and thematic focus. His novels serve as a mirror to Indian society, particularly during the colonial and pre-independence era, when caste hierarchies, poverty, colonial oppression, and social inequalities were dominant realities of life. Anand's works consistently reflect the human struggles produced by India's rigid social order, with his characters often drawn from marginalized communities whose voices were historically suppressed. His emphasis on the individual's suffering and dignity illustrates how India's stratified social fabric profoundly influenced his literary imagination.

One of the most striking reflections of India's social structure in Anand's work is his portrayal of caste discrimination. In his celebrated novel *Untouchable* (1935), Anand narrates a single day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy born into the lowest strata of society. Through Bakha's humiliation and yearning for human dignity, Anand reveals how caste-based exclusion defined the everyday lives of millions in India. The novel portrays the harshness of a system that denied basic human rights to "untouchables," reducing them to subhuman status. Anand uses Bakha's experiences not only to expose the cruelty of caste but also to critique the larger societal apathy that allowed such practices to continue unchallenged. In doing so, he holds a mirror to India's social structure, showing how deeply caste divisions were embedded in cultural and religious practices.

Equally significant in Anand's works is the depiction of poverty and class exploitation. In *Coolie* (1936), he presents the tragic life of Munoo, a young boy who becomes a victim of economic exploitation at every turn. Munoo's story reflects the wider struggles of India's poor laboring classes, caught between colonial economic structures and indigenous social inequalities. Anand's narrative captures the crushing impact of poverty, showing how children like Munoo were denied opportunities for growth, education, and security due to systemic social and economic marginalization. This emphasis on class highlights Anand's sensitivity to the ways in which India's hierarchical order operated not only through caste but also through class stratification and economic exploitation.

Furthermore, Anand's work often critiques the intersection of colonialism with India's internal social divisions. He demonstrates how British imperial rule thrived on reinforcing caste and class barriers, using them as tools to maintain dominance. Anand's novels, therefore, highlight a dual oppression: the indigenous population crushed under both colonial exploitation and traditional structures of inequality. His characters embody the psychological and material struggles created by this double burden, making his work both socially conscious and politically charged.

Anand's humanism shines through in his consistent attempt to give dignity and voice to those silenced by India's social structure. His focus on marginalized groups, from sweepers and coolies to peasants and industrial workers, reflects his belief in the inherent worth of every human being, regardless of caste or class. Through his works, he critiques the hypocrisy of a society that upheld spiritual ideals while denying equality and compassion to its weakest members.

The impact of India's social structure on Mulk Raj Anand's work is profound and undeniable. His novels serve as literary documents of India's caste hierarchy, poverty, colonial exploitation, and social injustice, blending realism with reformist zeal. By writing about the marginalized with empathy and authenticity, Anand transformed literature into a platform for social critique and reform. His works remain powerful reminders of how literature can expose entrenched inequalities and advocate for human dignity within oppressive social systems.

Caste Hierarchy

Anand's *Untouchable* is the most powerful indictment of caste discrimination. Through the protagonist Bakha, Anand critiques the dehumanizing conditions imposed upon untouchables in India's social order (Rao, 2011). His realist approach exposes how caste-based oppression limits individual agency and human dignity. Caste hierarchy plays a central role in shaping the themes and narrative strategies of Mulk Raj Anand's literary works, as he consistently highlighted the oppressive social structure of India and its devastating impact on marginalized communities. Anand, deeply influenced by his humanist ideals and social realism, used his novels such as *Untouchable* and *Coolie* to expose the rigid and discriminatory practices of the caste system, where individuals were denied dignity and basic human rights merely because of their birth.

His protagonists often belong to the lowest rungs of society, symbolizing the voiceless masses crushed under the weight of caste-based oppression. By portraying the humiliation, exploitation, and alienation experienced by these characters, Anand not only criticized the cruelty of traditional caste hierarchies but also questioned the hypocrisy of a society that upheld spirituality while practicing social exclusion. Thus, his works serve as a literary protest against the injustices of India's social structure, making him one of the foremost voices advocating for social equality and reform.

Class and Economic Exploitation

In *Coolie*, Anand portrays Munoo's struggles as a victim of poverty and industrial exploitation. The novel mirrors the socio-economic inequalities entrenched in colonial India, highlighting the intersection between class and caste oppression (Naik, 2006). Mulk Raj Anand's literary works vividly portray the deep connection between India's rigid social structure and the realities of class and economic exploitation. Rooted in the caste system and colonial economic order, his narratives expose how marginalized communities, particularly the poor and the untouchables, are trapped in a cycle of oppression. Characters like Bakha in *Untouchable* and Munoo in *Coolie* embody the struggles of those denied dignity and economic security due to entrenched hierarchies.

Anand highlights how caste prejudice overlaps with economic exploitation, where the lower classes not only suffer social humiliation but are also forced into degrading labor with little chance of mobility. His humanistic vision criticizes both feudal traditions and colonial capitalism, which together reinforced inequality in Indian society. Through his compassionate storytelling, Anand emphasizes that true progress requires dismantling oppressive social structures and ensuring justice for the economically and socially marginalized.

Colonialism and Social Injustice

Two Leaves and a Bud demonstrates the exploitation of Indian workers on British-owned tea plantations. Anand blends anti-colonial sentiment with humanistic critique, making colonial oppression an extension of India's rigid social and economic inequalities (Mehrotra, 1998). Mulk Raj Anand's literary vision was deeply shaped by the impact of India's social structure under the shadow of colonialism and entrenched social injustices. His works reflect how British colonial dominance not only exploited the Indian economy but also reinforced rigid hierarchies of caste, class, and social discrimination. Anand exposed the struggles of marginalized groups such as untouchables, peasants, and laborers, who bore the double burden of colonial oppression and indigenous social inequality.

In novels like *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, he portrays the everyday indignities and exploitation faced by individuals trapped in caste-based restrictions and economic poverty, revealing how colonial systems perpetuated inequality by aligning with conservative social structures. Anand's critique highlights that colonialism did not function in isolation but thrived by sustaining and manipulating India's existing divisions, thereby worsening social injustice. Through his humanist lens, he condemned both colonial exploitation and the cruelty of the caste system, making his works a powerful commentary on the socio-political realities of India in the early twentieth century.

Humanism and Social Realism

Anand's works are infused with deep humanism, which transcends mere social commentary. His realism, shaped by exposure to Western thinkers like Marx and Gandhi, allowed him to critique India's social system while advocating dignity for all humans (Mukherjee, 1971). Mulk Raj Anand's literary works reflect a deep engagement with humanism

and social realism, shaped significantly by India's rigid social structure. His narratives highlight the struggles of marginalized communities, including the poor, the untouchables, and the working class, who were often victims of caste oppression, poverty, and social discrimination. Anand's humanism emerges in his empathetic portrayal of characters as individuals with dignity, aspirations, and emotions, even when they are trapped in exploitative systems. At the same time, his social realism is evident in the unflinching depiction of harsh realities such as caste-based hierarchy, colonial exploitation, and economic disparity. India's stratified social framework thus served as both a background and a catalyst for Anand's critical voice against injustice, inspiring him to advocate for equality, compassion, and reform through literature. His works like *Untouchable* and *Coolie* stand as testimonies of how humanism and social realism combine to challenge oppressive structures and awaken social consciousness.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Scholars agree that Anand's writing was instrumental in shaping Indian English fiction as a socially conscious literature. According to Narasimhaiah (1987), Anand redefined the Indian novel by merging Western narrative techniques with Indian themes of social injustice. Similarly, R.S. Pathak (1990) stresses Anand's role as a reformist, arguing that his novels serve as a "literary weapon" against social inequality. Mulk Raj Anand's literary corpus reflects a profound engagement with India's rigid social structure, particularly its entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and colonial subjugation. His works serve as critical perspectives on how these structural inequalities shape human experiences and perpetuate suffering. Anand exposes the exploitation of marginalized communities, such as untouchables, peasants, and laborers, presenting their struggles not merely as individual plights but as consequences of systemic oppression.

For instance, in *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, he foregrounds the dehumanization faced by Dalits and the working poor, challenging the normalization of such injustices within traditional social frameworks. By intertwining personal narratives with the broader socio-political realities of India, Anand critiques the hypocrisy of a society bound by tradition yet yearning for modernity. His sympathetic portrayal of the oppressed functions both as social documentation and as a call for reform, making his work a lens through which the impact of India's social structure on human dignity can be critically examined.

II. CONCLUSION

Mulk Raj Anand's works reflect the profound influence of India's social structure, particularly caste, class, and colonial hierarchies. His commitment to social realism, combined with a humanist outlook, not only gave voice to the oppressed but also carved a new path for Indian English literature. Anand's contribution remains vital for understanding the intersections of literature and society in modern India.

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