



Humanism and Caste Dynamics in the Works of Mulk Raj Anand

 Arunava Roy^{1*}

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, S.K.M. University, Dumka, Jharkhand, Ph.D. Scholar, Double M.A., PGDELLS, UGC-NET, SET, SLET & IIT-GATE Qualified, Jharkhand, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70333/ijeks-04-09-011>

*Corresponding Author: subhoavo@gmail.com

Article Info: - Received : 18 May 2025

Accepted : 25 July 2025

Published : 30 July 2025

Abstract

This article explores the intersection of humanism and caste dynamics in the works of Mulk Raj Anand, one of the pioneering figures of Indian English fiction. Through close textual analysis of *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), the study examines how Anand represents the lives of the marginalized—untouchables, laborers, and plantation workers—while challenging the entrenched systems of caste, class, and colonial exploitation. Anand's protagonists, Bakha, Munoo, and Gangu, serve as symbolic figures whose experiences dramatize the dehumanization of the oppressed, yet also articulate the resilience of human dignity. The article situates Anand's fiction within its historical and intellectual context, highlighting the influence of Gandhian ethics, Marxist realism, and the Progressive Writers' Movement. It argues that Anand's humanism is not abstract idealism but an ethical realism that insists on the intrinsic worth of every human being. By combining aesthetic form with social critique, Anand bridges the divide between art and activism, transforming literature into a vehicle for reform. The study also engages with critical debates on representation, propaganda versus art, and postcolonial resistance, underscoring Anand's enduring relevance in contemporary discussions of caste and social justice.

Keywords: *Mulk Raj Anand, Humanism, Caste Dynamics, Social Realism, Indian English Literature.*



© 2025. Arunava Roy., This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) is widely acknowledged as one of the pioneering figures of Indian English fiction, noted for his uncompromising portrayal of caste oppression and his commitment to humanist ideals. Alongside R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao, Anand laid the foundations of Indo-Anglian literature, but his distinctive achievement lies in his sustained

engagement with the marginalized—the sweepers, peasants, coolies, and plantation workers—whose voices were previously silenced in canonical narratives. His novels, particularly ***Untouchable* (1935)**, ***Coolie* (1936)**, and ***Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937)**, dramatize the entanglement of caste, class, and colonial exploitation while simultaneously affirming the resilience of human dignity.

Anand's early life and ideological encounters shaped his literary imagination. The trauma of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, his years in London among progressive intellectuals, and his close association with Mahatma Gandhi at Sabarmati Ashram deepened his concern for the oppressed.

In his own words, Anand believed in the *"struggle for men to free themselves and to expand freedom to others to sustain the ever expanding areas of consciousness, to make man truly human"* (Apology for Heroism 25).

Literature for him was not art for art's sake but a moral instrument—he declared provocatively that

"all art is propaganda" because it necessarily voices the condition of humanity (qtd. in Tiwari 3).

Central to Anand's humanism is the insistence on the shared essence of humanity across caste divisions. Through the anguished cry of Bakha in *Untouchable*, Anand encapsulates both the psychological violence of caste stigma and the search for dignity:

For them I am a sweeper—untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (Anand, *Untouchable* 55)

Similarly, Munoo in *Coolie* is rendered as *one of the millions of dispossessed, destined to serve and suffer* (Anand, *Coolie* 209).

Gangu in *Two Leaves and a Bud* voices the colonial predicament of Indian laborers with striking clarity:

We are not free men here; we are slaves bound to the white masters (Anand, *Two Leaves and a Bud* 65).

These representative voices reveal Anand's ability to transform individual suffering into a universal cry for justice.

This article examines the intersection of humanism and caste dynamics in Anand's major works. It explores how his fiction reconfigures aesthetic values, employs realism as a narrative strategy, and engages critically with both Gandhian reformism and Marxist materialism. By situating Anand's writing within the socio-political context of colonial India, the study highlights his continuing relevance as a humanist writer whose vision sought to dismantle caste hierarchies and envision an egalitarian future.

2. Objectives of the Study

- Examine the representation of humanism in Mulk Raj Anand's major novels.
- Analyze how caste oppression and social hierarchies are portrayed through characters such as Bakha, Munoo, and Gangu.
- Explore the intersection of caste, class, and colonial exploitation in Anand's fiction.
- Investigate the narrative strategies and realism Anand employs to depict marginalized lives.
- Assess the theoretical implications of Anand's writings within humanist, Marxist, and postcolonial frameworks.
- Highlight Anand's continuing relevance as a social critic and reformist writer in contemporary discourse.

3. Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative literary research methodology, emphasizing close textual analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's major works, particularly *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937). These novels have been selected because they most explicitly reveal Anand's concern with caste hierarchies, class conflict, and the assertion of human dignity.

The analysis follows a thematic and interpretive approach, focusing on the interplay between humanism and caste dynamics. Through careful reading of narrative strategies, character development, and symbolic representations, the study identifies how Anand dramatizes the lived realities of the marginalized. Quotations from the primary texts are employed as evidence to substantiate interpretations, highlighting Anand's portrayal of suffering, resilience, and the humanist vision that underpins his narratives.

In addition, the study draws upon critical frameworks from literary and cultural theory. Humanist criticism provides a lens for understanding Anand's ethical orientation and emphasis on universal human values. Postcolonial theory helps situate his work within the broader context of colonial India, where social reform and national identity intersected with caste oppression. Insights from Dalit studies are used to foreground the voices of the oppressed, ensuring that Anand's depiction of untouchability and

marginalization is examined not only as artistic representation but also as social testimony. Marxist realism further informs the analysis by highlighting Anand's critique of class exploitation and industrial capitalism.

The methodology also integrates a comparative dimension, briefly relating Anand's works to other socially committed writers of his time, while situating his fiction within the Progressive Writers' Movement. Secondary sources—scholarly articles, critical essays, and biographical accounts—are consulted to contextualize Anand's writings and provide multiple interpretive perspectives.

By combining textual analysis with interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to demonstrate how Anand's fiction functions simultaneously as literature and social critique. His novels are read not merely as narratives of oppression but as vehicles of resistance, where the dynamics of caste are confronted through a humanist reimagining of society.

4. Historical and Social Context of Anand's Writings

Mulk Raj Anand's literary career unfolded during a period of immense political, social, and cultural transformation in India. Born in 1905 in Peshawar and raised in Amritsar, Anand witnessed firsthand the brutalities of colonial rule and the entrenched inequalities of caste society. His early experiences of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919, where hundreds of innocent civilians were killed by British troops, left a lasting impression on his mind and instilled in him a deep sense of injustice. Such events sensitized him to the plight of the oppressed and provided the moral impetus for his later commitment to literature as a vehicle of social reform.

The India of Anand's formative years was marked by the colonial economy, feudal structures, and caste stratification. Untouchability was still widely practiced, with Dalits and other marginalized groups subjected to severe discrimination and exclusion. Social reform movements led by figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar were beginning to challenge the rigidity of caste, though with differing ideological emphases. Anand's stay at Sabarmati Ashram in the early 1930s allowed him to observe Gandhi's campaign against

untouchability closely, and this inspired his first novel **Untouchable (1935)**, which captures a single day in the life of a sweeper boy, Bakha, as a microcosm of the larger oppression faced by Dalits.

Parallel to these social conditions, Anand was also influenced by the global intellectual climate. His years in London exposed him to the works of Marx, Engels, Gorky, and European modernists, which shaped his belief in socialism, humanism, and realism in art. He became associated with the Progressive Writers' Movement, which emerged in the 1930s to call for literature that would address social inequalities and inspire reform. For Anand, the Indian novelist's task was different from that of European writers: while the latter grappled with issues of industrialization and alienation, the Indian novelist had to confront caste oppression, poverty, superstition, and colonial exploitation simultaneously.

Thus, Anand's writings are best understood as products of this transitional period in Indian history, where colonial domination, caste rigidity, and the struggle for independence intersected. His novels gave voice to those silenced by the mainstream, transforming their suffering into both a literary subject and a moral question. By grounding his narratives in the historical realities of early twentieth-century India, Anand ensured that his works functioned as both art and social critique, bridging the gap between aesthetics and activism.

5. Humanism in Anand's Literary Vision

Humanism forms the ethical core of Mulk Raj Anand's fiction. Deeply influenced by both Western philosophical thought and Indian reformist traditions, Anand's literary vision is anchored in the conviction that all human beings, irrespective of caste, class, or creed, possess inherent dignity and deserve compassion. His novels consistently emphasize the shared essence of humanity, even while portraying the harshest forms of exploitation and social exclusion.

For Anand, literature was a moral enterprise. He declared unapologetically that "*all art is propaganda*" because the novelist cannot remain indifferent to human suffering (**qtd. in Tiwari 3**). This view was not a reduction of literature to mere political slogan but an affirmation that art must reflect life in its totality

and strive toward social justice. His admiration for writers like Charles Dickens and Maxim Gorky shaped his belief that fiction should be rooted in realism and imbued with humanist values. Like Gorky, Anand sought to expose social evils, not only to evoke horror but also to inspire transformation.

In **Untouchable (1935)**, Anand's humanism is most vividly articulated through the figure of Bakha, whose anguish symbolizes the dehumanization inflicted by caste:

For them I am a sweeper—untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (Anand, **Untouchable 55**)

Here, the cry of the protagonist transcends individual lament and becomes a universal protest against systemic injustice. The narrative refrains from idealizing Bakha but insists on his humanity, portraying him as a victim of oppressive traditions yet capable of dignity and moral awareness. Anand's humanism lies not in sentimentality but in recognizing the humanity of those whom society has rejected.

Similarly, in **Coolie (1936)**, the character of Munoo embodies Anand's vision of universal brotherhood. Reduced to a "dispossessed" figure, Munoo represents the collective fate of millions of laborers:

one of the millions of dispossessed, destined to serve and suffer (Anand, **Coolie 209**).

The emphasis on shared suffering and resilience is central to Anand's humanism, which resonates with both Gandhian ideals of compassion and Marxist ideals of equality.

Anand's vision also extends to colonial exploitation, as dramatized in **Two Leaves and a Bud (1937)**. Through Gangu's lament, Anand underscores that the denial of freedom to laborers in tea plantations was not only economic oppression but also a violation of human dignity:

We are not free men here; we are slaves bound to the white masters (Anand, **Two Leaves and a Bud 65**).

By foregrounding the humanity of the oppressed, Anand's novels challenge both caste orthodoxy and colonial power structures. His humanism is thus not abstract universalism but a lived ethic, grounded in the realities of poverty, humiliation, and struggle. It is this commitment to the human condition that ensures Anand's fiction remains relevant, bridging the gap between art and social responsibility.

6. Caste Dynamics in Colonial Indian Society

Caste oppression in colonial India was one of the most entrenched and pervasive forms of social inequality, and it is against this backdrop that Mulk Raj Anand situates much of his fiction. The caste system, with its rigid hierarchies and practices of untouchability, not only denied basic human dignity to millions but also intersected with colonial structures of exploitation, thereby compounding the suffering of the marginalized. Anand's novels highlight how caste dynamics shaped everyday life, dictating social interactions, access to resources, and even the right to exist with dignity.

In **Untouchable (1935)**, Anand captures the psychological and social trauma of caste stigma through Bakha's daily humiliations. His anguish is condensed in his desperate cry:

For them I am a sweeper—untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (Anand, **Untouchable 55**)

This moment symbolizes the internalization of caste violence, where Bakha is forced to see himself through the lens of an oppressive social order. The novel further dramatizes the hypocrisy of upper-caste Hindus, such as the priest who attempts to molest Bakha's sister but still accuses her of defiling him. Such incidents reveal how caste operates not only as a religious or social category but as a mechanism of control and exploitation.

In **Coolie (1936)**, caste intersects with class and industrial exploitation. Munoo, though not identified strictly as an untouchable, experiences systemic discrimination and exploitation that mirrors the fate of lower-caste laborers. He becomes

"one of the millions of dispossessed, destined to serve and suffer" (Anand, **Coolie 209**).

Here, Anand universalizes the condition of the marginalized by linking caste with broader structures of poverty, industrial capitalism, and feudal domination.

Two Leaves and a Bud (1937) expands this framework by connecting caste subjugation to colonial exploitation. Gangu, a peasant turned plantation worker, laments the absolute lack of freedom under British masters:

We are not free men here; we are slaves bound to the white masters (Anand, **Two Leaves and a Bud 65**).

Although the narrative foregrounds colonial brutality, it does not obscure the caste-based inequalities that persist among Indian workers themselves. Anand demonstrates how caste and class oppression reinforced each other, leaving the poor doubly burdened under indigenous hierarchies and foreign domination.

By exposing these dynamics, Anand challenges the myth of a harmonious traditional society and critiques the colonial state's failure to address caste inequities. His novels present caste not as a static institution but as a lived experience of humiliation, violence, and resistance. Through characters like Bakha, Munoo, and Gangu, Anand shows how caste dynamics in colonial India dehumanized individuals while also planting the seeds of protest and reform.

7. Representation of Caste and Oppression in *Untouchable*

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) remains one of the most powerful literary depictions of caste-based oppression in Indian English literature. Written during a period of intense socio-political change, the novel captures a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper boy, whose experiences stand as a metaphor for the systemic dehumanization faced by Dalits. Through realism, symbolism, and psychological depth, Anand renders the invisible lives of untouchables visible, exposing the cruelty of caste hierarchies and the hypocrisy of so-called upper-caste morality.

At the heart of the novel lies Bakha's anguished recognition of his social condition:

For them I am a sweeper—untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (Anand, *Untouchable* 55)

This outburst crystallizes the internalized trauma of caste, where Bakha is forced to define himself in terms of societal rejection. The narrative dramatizes how caste stigma functions not merely as external discrimination but also as a psychological wound. Anand's choice to frame the entire narrative within the temporal span of a single day intensifies the oppressive atmosphere, showing how caste domination infiltrates every moment of Bakha's existence.

Anand also highlights the hypocrisy of caste-based morality. In one of the most striking episodes, the temple priest attempts to molest Bakha's sister, Sohini, but later accuses her of

polluting him. This inversion of guilt illustrates the deep-rooted power imbalance of caste society, where Dalits are denied even the right to defend their honor. As critics have noted, such scenes reveal how caste operates as both a social and gendered mechanism of exploitation, targeting Dalit women with particular violence.

Furthermore, *Untouchable* underscores how untouchability restricts access to basic human dignity. Bakha is denied entry into the temple, humiliated in the marketplace, and subjected to verbal and physical abuse simply for existing within spaces reserved for higher castes. Yet Anand refuses to reduce Bakha to a mere victim. His fascination with English clothes, his aspiration for dignity, and his momentary hope in Gandhi's speech reveal his desire to transcend the limits imposed on him.

Anand's use of realism—simple language, colloquial expressions, and detailed description of daily labor—serves to humanize Bakha and challenge the myth of ritual purity. By foregrounding the lived experiences of an untouchable, the novel confronts readers with the “*uncivilized manners*” of a society that sustains inequality under the guise of tradition. In doing so, Anand transforms Bakha's personal story into a universal cry for justice, affirming his central belief in the equality and dignity of all human beings.

8. Proletarian Humanism in *Coolie*

If *Untouchable* dramatizes the cruelty of caste oppression, Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936) expands the scope of his humanist vision to include the economic exploitation of labor under feudal and industrial systems. The novel follows the life of Munoo, an orphaned hill boy, as he moves through a series of exploitative environments—from domestic servitude to feudal households, from urban factories to colonial service in Simla. Through Munoo's journey, Anand highlights the interconnectedness of caste, class, and colonial capitalism, portraying the life of the poor as one of dispossession and relentless suffering.

Anand represents Munoo as symbolic of millions of marginalized workers in India, crushed by systemic exploitation:

one of the millions of dispossessed, destined to serve and suffer (Anand, *Coolie* 209).

Here, Munoo's condition epitomizes the proletarian masses who, though not all

untouchables by caste, face economic subjugation that mirrors the humiliation and exclusion of Dalits. The narrative thereby extends Anand's humanism beyond caste to embrace the working class as a whole, presenting labor exploitation as a fundamental denial of human dignity.

The novel also underscores the brutality of industrial capitalism. Munoo's time in the Bombay textile mills exposes him to inhuman working conditions, poor wages, and the indifference of both Indian capitalists and British owners. The description of Bombay as a city that is "*cruel, merciless to the sons of Adam*" (Anand, *Coolie* 243) universalizes Munoo's plight, presenting urban industrial life as a new form of enslavement. Through this representation, Anand aligns himself with Marxist critiques of capitalism, while still maintaining his humanist focus on the suffering of individuals.

At the same time, Munoo is portrayed with warmth, vitality, and innocence, which make his suffering even more poignant. His yearning for love, belonging, and dignity resonates with Anand's conviction that literature must humanize those whom society reduces to mere laboring bodies. Munoo's tragic death from tuberculosis at the end of the novel is not simply the end of an individual life but a symbolic indictment of a system that sacrifices the poor to economic greed. His death, described as a sigh of release, carries the weight of a collective tragedy—the silencing of countless lives before they are allowed to flourish.

Coolie thus embodies what may be termed proletarian humanism. It affirms the value of laborers as human beings while indicting the systems—feudal, industrial, and colonial—that exploit them. Anand's genius lies in his ability to depict Munoo not merely as a victim but as a symbol of universal suffering and resilience, making *Coolie* a novel that bridges the divide between social realism and humanist philosophy.

9. Caste, Class, and Colonial Exploitation in *Two Leaves and a Bud*

Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) extends his exploration of oppression by situating caste and class hierarchies within the broader framework of colonial exploitation. The novel, set in a tea plantation in Assam, revolves around Gangu, a poor peasant uprooted from his land and lured into indentured labor under the promise of security. Instead, he and his fellow

workers encounter ruthless exploitation, miserable living conditions, and systemic violence at the hands of British overseers. Through this narrative, Anand exposes how colonial capitalism deepened the suffering of India's marginalized, turning them into virtual slaves.

Gangu's voice embodies the helplessness of the colonized worker:

We are not free men here; we are slaves bound to the white masters (Anand, *Two Leaves and a Bud* 65).

This lament is emblematic of Anand's portrayal of colonial oppression as a violation not only of political freedom but also of basic human dignity. The economic exploitation of plantation laborers—long hours, poor wages, and constant surveillance—parallels the caste-based oppression experienced in village life. Anand thus reveals how caste and class hierarchies did not vanish under colonial modernity but were instead co-opted into the imperial economy, reinforcing old inequities within new systems of domination.

The novel also dramatizes the intersection of caste and class. Indian overseers, though themselves subordinate to British masters, reproduce the hierarchies of caste and exploit lower-class workers with equal cruelty. This dual oppression—native and foreign—illustrates Anand's belief that social reform must challenge both indigenous hierarchies and colonial power.

The climax of the novel, where British soldiers open fire on protesting workers, underscores the brutal reality of imperial authority:

The bullets tore through the workers as if they were dry leaves in the wind (Anand, *Two Leaves and a Bud* 221).

This image not only conveys the fragility of human life under colonial violence but also highlights the indifference of empire toward the suffering of its subjects. Gangu's eventual death symbolizes the death of hope for millions of laborers trapped within the nexus of caste subjugation, class exploitation, and colonial domination.

Through *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand offers a scathing critique of colonial capitalism while maintaining his humanist commitment to portraying the dignity of the oppressed. By blending the themes of caste, class, and imperial exploitation, the novel expands the moral scope of Anand's fiction, situating the plight of Indian

laborers within a global struggle against oppression and injustice.

10. Narrative Techniques and Realism in Anand's Works

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction is distinguished not only by its social commitment but also by its distinctive narrative strategies and use of realism. Rejecting the elitist traditions of high literature that often ignored the lives of the poor, Anand sought to craft a literary style that was both accessible and politically charged. His narrative techniques reflect his conviction that literature must serve as a mirror of social reality and a tool for humanist reform.

Anand is often described as the foremost practitioner of social realism in Indian English literature. His novels depict ordinary lives with unembellished detail, exposing the material conditions of labor, poverty, and discrimination. In *Untouchable*, for instance, Bakha's day is described with attention to the rhythms of his menial tasks, the indignities of public humiliation, and his longing for dignity. This realism functions as an act of resistance, refusing to romanticize the suffering of the oppressed and instead confronting the reader with uncomfortable truths.

Although Anand's novels are often realist, he also employs psychological techniques to capture the inner life of his characters. Bakha's internal monologues in *Untouchable* reveal not only his shame but also his dreams of self-respect, demonstrating Anand's sensitivity to the psychological effects of oppression. Similarly, Munoo in *Coolie* is presented through moments of childish curiosity and fear, which humanize his tragic plight. These techniques allow readers to enter the consciousness of marginalized figures, breaking the distance between "*high literature*" and subaltern experience.

Another hallmark of Anand's style is his experimentation with English. He infused English prose with the rhythms and idioms of Indian vernacular speech to authentically capture the voices of his characters. For example, the colloquial cadences of Bakha's dialogues echo the speech patterns of North Indian Dalits. This hybrid linguistic style not only lends authenticity but also asserts the literary value of marginalized voices. In doing so, Anand challenged colonial literary standards and expanded the expressive capacity of Indian English fiction.

Anand often employs tight temporal frames—*Untouchable* unfolds within a single day, intensifying the claustrophobia of caste oppression. Symbolic motifs, such as Bakha's fascination with English clothes or Munoo's wandering across social spaces, reinforce themes of alienation, aspiration, and systemic injustice. In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, the plantation setting itself becomes symbolic of colonial exploitation, where human beings are reduced to disposable labor.

Above all, Anand's narrative techniques are inseparable from his humanist mission. His realism is never detached reportage but a moral intervention designed to awaken empathy and inspire reform. By granting literary space to those excluded from mainstream narratives, Anand redefined the scope of the Indian English novel. His works embody what may be called ethical realism—a mode of storytelling that insists on the dignity of every human being, even amid conditions of systemic oppression.

11. Aesthetic and Theoretical Perspectives

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction cannot be fully appreciated without considering the aesthetic principles and theoretical influences that shaped his work. While firmly committed to realism, Anand was also deeply engaged with philosophical debates on art, politics, and ethics. His writings reflect a conscious attempt to merge artistic expression with social responsibility, thus situating him within broader humanist and progressive traditions.

Anand's early encounters with Mahatma Gandhi profoundly influenced his ethical outlook. Gandhi's emphasis on truth, compassion, and the eradication of untouchability resonated with Anand's belief in the dignity of every human being. In *Untouchable*, Gandhi's speech at the end of the novel provides a symbolic moment of hope for Bakha and his community. Yet, Anand does not simply echo Gandhian reformism; he also critiques its limitations. While Gandhi advocated moral transformation, Anand underscores the structural and systemic dimensions of caste oppression, insisting that social change requires more than individual goodwill.

During his years in London, Anand was exposed to Marxist ideas and the writings of Maxim Gorky, which left a deep imprint on his aesthetics. He believed, like the Marxist realists, that literature must represent the struggles of the

working class and unmask the exploitative forces of capitalism. Coolie exemplifies this orientation by presenting Munoo as a symbolic figure of the proletariat:

“one of the millions of dispossessed, destined to serve and suffer” (Anand, Coolie 209).

Here, Anand adapts Marxist realism to the Indian context, showing how caste and colonialism exacerbate class exploitation. His fiction thus blends humanist compassion with a structural critique of economic systems.

Though writing before postcolonial theory formally emerged, Anand’s novels anticipate many of its central themes. *Two Leaves and a Bud*, for instance, dramatizes the violence of colonial plantations where Indian laborers were

“slaves bound to the white masters” (Anand, *Two Leaves and a Bud* 65).

By highlighting both indigenous hierarchies and imperial exploitation, Anand critiques the dual oppression that defined colonial India. Postcolonial critics have since read his work as an early articulation of resistance to cultural domination and economic subjugation.

At the core of Anand’s aesthetics is what may be called ethical realism. His insistence that *“all art is propaganda”* (qtd. in Tiwari 3) underscores his belief that literature cannot be divorced from social realities. For Anand, the novel was not a retreat into aesthetic isolation but a forum for ethical intervention. His realism, therefore, is not detached observation but moral engagement—an effort to reveal the injustices of society and to inspire change.

Anand’s achievement lies in his ability to integrate aesthetics with activism. His prose style, blending vernacular idioms with English, his symbolic use of narrative settings, and his empathetic portrayal of marginalized characters all reflect his attempt to expand the expressive range of Indian English literature. By doing so, he crafted a body of work that is at once artistically significant and socially transformative.

12. Critical Reception and Debates

Mulk Raj Anand’s fiction has received sustained critical attention since the publication of *Untouchable* in 1935. Critics have consistently praised his courage in addressing caste discrimination and his commitment to giving voice to the oppressed. At the same time, debates around his aesthetic choices, ideological

commitments, and narrative strategies have shaped the reception of his works in both Indian and international literary circles.

When *Untouchable* first appeared, E. M. Forster’s preface hailed the novel as an unprecedented depiction of an untouchable protagonist, acknowledging Anand’s courage in portraying what many considered an unspeakable subject. Early reviewers admired Anand’s boldness but often read his work primarily as social document rather than as serious literature. This dual recognition—of his social significance but aesthetic marginalization—would mark much of Anand’s critical trajectory.

Many critics have celebrated Anand as a humanist realist who infused the Indian English novel with social urgency. C. D. Narasimhaiah and K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar praised his empathetic portrayal of marginalized figures and his commitment to social reform. For them, Anand’s fiction demonstrated how literature could bridge art and life, merging aesthetic representation with moral responsibility.

Anand’s own claim that *“all art is propaganda”* sparked considerable debate. Some critics, such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, argued that Anand’s overt didacticism occasionally compromised the subtlety of his narratives. Others, however, defended his approach, noting that his realism was never sterile reportage but infused with ethical conviction. The tension between aesthetic form and political commitment remains one of the most discussed aspects of his oeuvre.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Marxist critics emphasized Anand’s alignment with the Progressive Writers’ Movement, interpreting *Coolie* as a proletarian novel and *Two Leaves and a Bud* as an indictment of colonial capitalism. More recently, postcolonial critics have highlighted how Anand interrogated both indigenous caste hierarchies and colonial exploitation, positioning him as a precursor to subaltern and Dalit discourse. These readings underscore the layered complexity of Anand’s critique of power.

Scholars have also pointed out limitations in Anand’s representation of Dalit women. While *Untouchable* foregrounds Sohini’s harassment by the priest, some Dalit feminist critics argue that Anand speaks for Dalits rather than enabling them to speak fully for themselves. This raises questions

about representation and narrative authority that remain relevant in contemporary debates on caste literature.

Today, Anand is recognized as one of the architects of modern Indian English fiction, alongside Narayan and Rao. However, unlike Narayan's domestic realism or Rao's philosophical narratives, Anand is remembered chiefly for his literature of protest. His works continue to be taught and studied not only for their historical significance but also for their resonance in contemporary discussions of caste, class, and human rights.

13. Discussion

The preceding analyses of *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud* illustrate how Mulk Raj Anand's fiction fuses literary aesthetics with social critique. While each novel addresses distinct contexts—untouchability, industrial labor, and colonial exploitation—they collectively articulate a vision of humanism that confronts systemic oppression. The discussion here synthesizes these strands, highlighting the broader implications of Anand's literary project.

First, Anand's humanism emerges as both ethical and practical. It is not an abstract philosophy of universal brotherhood but a lived ethic rooted in the concrete experiences of marginalized communities. Bakha, Munoo, and Gangu are not passive symbols but active embodiments of human dignity under siege. Their cries of anguish—whether Bakha's lament as an untouchable, Munoo's dispossession as a coolie, or Gangu's recognition of colonial enslavement—function as universal indictments of oppression, even as they remain grounded in the specificity of Indian society.

Second, Anand's work demonstrates that caste, class, and colonialism are interlinked systems of domination. *Untouchable* foregrounds caste discrimination, *Coolie* dramatizes class exploitation, and *Two Leaves and a Bud* exposes colonial brutality; yet in each case, these structures overlap. Anand's genius lies in showing how these forces reinforce one another, creating a web of oppression that denies freedom and dignity to millions. This intersectional perspective anticipates later debates in postcolonial and Dalit studies, confirming Anand's relevance as a precursor to critical theories of power.

Third, Anand's novels highlight the tension between reform and revolution. Gandhi's presence in *Untouchable* points to moral reform through compassion, while the violent climax of *Two Leaves and a Bud* underscores the inevitability of resistance when peaceful means fail. Anand thus straddles the space between Gandhian humanism and Marxist realism, suggesting that social transformation requires both ethical awakening and structural change. His fiction is therefore dialogic, engaging with multiple ideological positions without being reducible to any single framework.

Finally, Anand's narrative techniques reinforce his humanist mission. His use of realism, vernacular-inflected English, and psychological depth ensures that marginalized voices are neither exoticized nor silenced. Instead, they are rendered with authenticity and urgency, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths. In this sense, Anand transforms literature into an ethical act, where aesthetics and activism converge.

Taken together, these insights reveal that Anand's fiction is not simply a documentation of social injustice but a literature of protest and affirmation. It protests against the indignities of caste, class, and colonial domination, while affirming the irreducible humanity of the oppressed. By bridging aesthetics with activism, Anand crafted a body of work that remains both historically significant and urgently contemporary.

14. Implications of the Study

The analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's works reveals several significant implications for literary scholarship, social history, and contemporary discourse.

First, Anand's fiction demonstrates the power of literature as social intervention. By portraying the everyday struggles of untouchables, coolies, and plantation workers, Anand positioned the novel as a vehicle of reform, exposing the contradictions of a society that professed spiritual equality yet practiced systemic exclusion. His writings remind us that literature can transcend aesthetic boundaries and function as an ethical instrument of change.

Second, the study underscores the importance of viewing caste oppression in intersectional terms, as deeply entwined with class exploitation and colonial domination. Anand's narratives show that caste cannot be

understood in isolation; it is reinforced by economic structures and imperial authority. This insight has continuing relevance, urging present-day critics to adopt holistic frameworks when analyzing oppression and marginalization in Indian society.

Third, Anand's commitment to humanist realism has implications for debates in literary aesthetics. By fusing narrative artistry with political urgency, he challenges the dichotomy between art and propaganda. His work validates the notion of "ethical realism," where the act of storytelling itself becomes a moral intervention. This perspective enriches ongoing discussions on the role of literature in social justice movements and postcolonial studies.

Fourth, the study highlights the representational challenges of writing about marginalized communities. While Anand gave unprecedented visibility to Dalits and the poor, later critics have pointed out that his upper-caste, English-educated position shaped his portrayal of subaltern voices. This invites further reflection on issues of narrative authority, authenticity, and the politics of representation—questions that remain central to Dalit literature and cultural studies today.

Finally, Anand's fiction continues to resonate in contemporary India, where caste discrimination, labor exploitation, and social inequities persist despite constitutional safeguards. His works thus serve not only as historical documents but also as living texts that challenge readers to rethink structures of inequality and envision a more egalitarian future.

15. Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction stands as a landmark in Indian English literature, not only for its artistic qualities but also for its uncompromising engagement with the realities of caste, class, and colonial exploitation. Through novels such as *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand gave voice to those who had been systematically silenced in both society and literature. His protagonists—Bakha, Munoo, and Gangu—embody the lived experience of oppression, yet they also reflect the resilience and dignity that form the essence of his humanist vision.

The study has shown that Anand's humanism is never abstract or sentimental; it is

rooted in the material conditions of poverty, untouchability, and labor exploitation. His use of realism, psychological depth, and vernacular-inflected English underscores his attempt to represent marginalized lives authentically while engaging readers in an ethical dialogue. By blending Gandhian compassion with Marxist critique and anticipating postcolonial concerns, Anand crafted a unique literary voice that bridges aesthetics and activism.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond literary criticism. Anand's works highlight the enduring relevance of literature as a force for social awareness and reform. At the same time, they invite reflection on the challenges of representation, particularly when speaking for the oppressed. His novels remain urgent today, reminding us that caste hierarchies and labor injustices are not merely historical but continue to shape contemporary realities.

Ultimately, Anand's legacy lies in his ability to transform individual stories of suffering into universal cries for justice. His fiction embodies what may be termed a literature of protest and affirmation—protesting against systemic inequality while affirming the fundamental dignity of every human being. In doing so, Anand not only redefined the scope of the Indian English novel but also secured his place as a writer whose vision remains vital for any discourse on humanism, caste, and social justice.

References

- Adhikari, Bikash. "Humanity in Mulk Raj Anand's Novels." [Pursuits: A Journal of English Studies](#), vol. 6, no. 1, 2022, pp. 9–18.
- Afrin, Sayeda, and S. M. Muniruzzaman. "Bakha's Identity Dilemma in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: An Exploration of Dalit Psychology." [Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature](#), vol. 16, no. 1, 2022, pp. 150–164.
- Alam, Md. Nazrul. *Transformative Trends in Indian English Short Fiction: A Critical Study*. [Satraachee: A Journal of Literary Studies](#), vol. 14, 2020, pp. 45–60.
- Anand, Mulk Raj. *Introduction to the Study of Indian English Literature*. Orient Longman, 1974.
- Arora, Neena. *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Study of His Hero*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2005.

- Behera, S. R. "The Literary Style of Mulk Raj Anand." In *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Study*, edited by Saros Cowasjee, B.R. Publishing, 2000, pp. 89–108.
- Deka, Dipen P. *A Critical Study of the Elements of Social Discontent and Subdued Spirit of Rebellion in the Selected Novels of Mulk Raj Anand*. Gauhati University, 2017. PhD dissertation.
- Dhungel, Nimesh. "Casting Ugliness: Redefining Aesthetics in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Innovation in Nepalese Academia*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2025, pp. 217–233.
- Dodiya, Jaydipsinh K., and Pravin Khuman. "Social Realism in Major Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Study." *International Journal of English Research*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, pp. 45–50.
- Gajarawala, Toral Jatin. *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. Fordham University Press, 2013.
- Kumar, Vikas. "Reflection of Social Evils and Humanism in the Major Novels of Mulk Raj Anand." *Research Ambition: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1–3.
- Mohanraj, R. "Exploring Caste and Oppression before India's Independence: A Critical Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*." *Journal of Literature and Social Change*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2021, pp. 55–63.
- Narayan, S. "A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's Novels towards Humanistic Approach of Socio-Discord." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2018, pp. 12–16.
- Rai, J. P. *Bakha's Struggle for Existence in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable**. Faculty of Arts in English, Banaras Hindu University, 2012. PhD dissertation.
- Reddy, K. J. P. Narayana, and K. Chakravarthy. "The Power of Words: Sociolinguistic Perspectives in Mulk Raj Anand's Novels." *Brazilian Journal of Development*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2024, pp. 420–433.
- Reddy, K. V. "Rise of Social Fiction in Colonial India: Focussing on Mulk Raj Anand." *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, pp. 101–110.
- Sharma, Anita. "Humanism and the Downtrodden in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2017, pp. 371–376.
- Tiwari, Rajesh. "Mulk Raj Anand's Humanistic and Bold Portrayal of His Protagonists." *Journal of Literary Criticism*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2020, pp. 22–28.
- Verma, K. D. "Understanding Mulk Raj Anand: An Introduction." *South Asian Review*, vol. 15, no. 12, 1991, pp. 1–11.
- Wheeler, Sue. *Mulk Raj Anand: Moving India Forward*. Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2011.

Cite this article as: Arunava Roy., (2025). Humanism and Caste Dynamics in the Works of Mulk Raj Anand. *International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies*. 4(7), pp. 1047 – 1057.

<https://doi.org/10.70333/ijeks-04-09-011>