

Caste Hierarchy and its Representation in Mulk Raj Anand's Fiction

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Abstract: *This paper critically examines the representation of caste hierarchy in the works of Mulk Raj Anand, one of the foremost Indian English novelists of the twentieth century. Anand's fiction, particularly novels such as Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), and The Big Heart (1945), exposes the brutal realities of caste oppression, social inequality, and human suffering in colonial India. Through his humanistic vision, Anand not only critiques the social structure but also provides a voice to the marginalized, making his works both literary and socio-political documents. Mulk Raj Anand, one of the pioneering figures of Indian English literature, occupies a crucial place in the discourse on social realism through his unflinching portrayal of caste hierarchy and its oppressive mechanisms*

Keywords: Caste Oppression, Untouchability, Hierarchy, Social Injustice, Social Reform

I. INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) remains a pioneering figure in Indian English literature whose works combine artistic creativity with a strong moral concern for social justice. Born in Peshawar to a coppersmith family, Anand grew up in a society where caste divisions and social discrimination were deeply entrenched. His fiction reflects both personal experiences and broader socio-cultural realities of colonial India. This paper seeks to review how caste hierarchy is depicted in his works, emphasizing its impact on characters, themes, and narrative structures.

The writings of Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), one of the pioneering figures of Indian English literature, provide a powerful critique of the caste system and its deeply rooted hierarchies in Indian society. Anand's fiction does not merely recount stories of marginalized individuals but exposes the structural inhumanity of caste, where birth determines occupation, social position, and dignity. His novels, particularly *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *The Big Heart* (1945), serve as literary testimonies against the entrenched discrimination suffered by Dalits and lower-caste communities. Growing up in colonial India, Anand was both a witness to and a victim of social divisions, and this personal experience, combined with his exposure to Western humanism, Gandhian reformist ideals, and Marxist thought, shaped his vision of literature as a vehicle for social change.

In *Untouchable*, for instance, he depicts a single day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy who is constantly humiliated because of his caste identity, while in *Coolie* he expands his focus to class exploitation, showing how caste and poverty intersect to trap individuals in cycles of suffering. Anand's approach to caste is both empathetic and reformist; he portrays untouchables not as passive victims but as individuals with human emotions, dignity, and aspirations. By doing so, he destabilizes the dominant narratives that justified caste oppression.

His representation of caste hierarchy is not limited to victimhood but also interrogates the broader social, cultural, and political systems that sustain inequality. As such, Anand's works move beyond literature into the realm of social documentation, highlighting the harsh realities of colonial India while advocating for reform and justice. Thus, the study of caste hierarchy in Anand's fiction becomes essential to understanding his literary legacy as well as the role of literature in challenging oppressive structures in Indian society.

CASTE AND INDIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The caste system has been one of the defining features of Indian society for centuries. Rooted in ancient religious and social codes, caste stratification led to systemic discrimination, particularly against the so-called 'untouchables' or Dalits. This rigid structure of hierarchy not only determined occupations but also dictated social interactions and access to resources. During colonial India, the caste question became intertwined with modernity, nationalism, and reform movements. Anand's fiction must be situated within this context to fully appreciate its critical edge.

The caste system has been one of the most deeply entrenched features of Indian social structure, shaping individual identity, social relationships, and access to power for centuries.

Rooted in the ancient Hindu varna system, which theoretically divided society into four categories Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (laborers) the caste order became rigidified over time through the emergence of numerous jatis, or sub-castes, that regulated occupation, marriage, and everyday interaction. At the bottom of this hierarchy were those labeled "untouchables," later called Dalits, who were excluded from the varna framework altogether and forced into degrading labor such as sweeping, leatherwork, or manual scavenging. This system not only perpetuated inequality but also legitimized it through religious and cultural ideologies of purity and pollution, thereby naturalizing exclusion. Social mobility was nearly impossible, since caste identity was ascribed by birth and sanctioned by ritual practices. During the colonial period, caste remained a critical axis of social organization, but it also became an object of scrutiny and reform. The British administration, while introducing modern education and legal systems, paradoxically reinforced caste distinctions through census classifications and administrative policies. Meanwhile, reformers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jyotirao Phule, and B. R. Ambedkar challenged caste oppression in different ways, ranging from spiritual reinterpretation to radical socio-political transformation. In literature, caste provided a powerful lens through which writers could expose systemic injustices and critique social hierarchies. For novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, caste was not an abstract social category but a lived reality of humiliation, exclusion, and suffering that shaped the lives of millions. By situating caste within both historical continuity and the colonial encounter, Anand's works highlight its resilience as well as its potential for critique, making the social structure of caste central to understanding Indian society and its representation in fiction.

ANAND'S HUMANISM AND NARRATIVE VISION

Anand was profoundly influenced by Western humanism, Marxist thought, and Gandhian philosophy. His fiction seeks to humanize the oppressed by depicting their struggles with dignity and compassion. Anand does not treat caste as an abstract concept but as a lived reality, experienced by individuals in everyday life. His narrative strategy combines realism with empathy, thereby dismantling stereotypes and exposing the cruelty of caste oppression.

Mulk Raj Anand's literary career is deeply rooted in his profound humanism and a vision of society that sought to dismantle structures of oppression through compassion, empathy, and social critique. His humanism was shaped by diverse intellectual influences, including Western liberal philosophy, Marxist ideology, Gandhian thought, and his own lived experiences of growing up in a caste-ridden society. For Anand, literature was not merely an aesthetic exercise but a moral and political act aimed at reforming society.

His narrative vision consistently foregrounds the dignity of marginalized individuals, particularly the poor, the working class, and the untouchables, who were often silenced in mainstream discourses. Rather than portraying them as passive victims, Anand endowed his characters with emotional depth, agency, and resilience, making them embodiments of human suffering and hope. In *Untouchable*, for instance, Bakha is not reduced to a social type but is presented as a fully realized human being, grappling with humiliation yet yearning for dignity and belonging. Similarly, in *Coolie*, Munoo's tragic journey underscores the intersection of poverty, exploitation, and caste oppression, reflecting Anand's concern with both individual suffering and structural injustice.

Anand's realism, infused with empathy, allowed him to expose the brutality of caste discrimination while simultaneously envisioning the possibility of social transformation. His narrative style often combined simple, accessible prose with vivid imagery and emotional intensity, ensuring that his works reached a wide readership. By breaking away from elitist literary traditions and focusing on the struggles of common people, Anand positioned himself as a writer committed to the ethical responsibilities of art. Ultimately, his humanism and narrative vision were

not confined to documenting suffering but aimed at inspiring awareness, compassion, and reform, making his fiction a powerful instrument of both resistance and hope.

REPRESENTATION OF CASTE IN UNTOUCHABLE

Published in 1935, *Untouchable* remains Anand's most celebrated novel, often regarded as a landmark in Indian English fiction. It narrates a single day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy condemned by his caste identity. Anand's portrayal highlights the psychological trauma, social exclusion, and humiliation faced by untouchables. The novel critiques the inhumanity of caste through Bakha's encounters with society whether in being abused for polluting a high-caste man, denied entry into a temple, or exploited by the military. The work also engages with reformist discourses, including Gandhian ideals and technological solutions, though it ultimately raises questions about the adequacy of such remedies.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) remains a landmark text in Indian English literature for its uncompromising representation of the caste system and the plight of the so-called untouchables. The novel unfolds over a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper boy, whose existence is shaped entirely by the rigid boundaries of caste hierarchy. Anand meticulously portrays how Bakha's identity is predetermined by his caste occupation, which condemns him to live in a state of perpetual humiliation, exclusion, and invisibility.

The narrative captures both the physical and psychological violence of caste oppression: Bakha is abused for merely touching an upper-caste man, denied entry into a temple, and constantly reminded of his "polluting" presence. Through these episodes, Anand exposes the cruelty of social norms that strip individuals of their dignity and humanity. Importantly, the novel does not merely describe caste as an abstract social institution but demonstrates how deeply it governs the most intimate aspects of daily life, from food and clothing to labor and relationships. Anand's realism is infused with empathy, allowing readers to perceive Bakha not as a mere representative of a community but as a fully human character with emotions, aspirations, and frustrations.

The novel also engages with contemporary reformist discourses: Gandhi's speech on untouchability and the possibility of technological change, represented by the flush system, point to potential solutions, though Anand leaves their adequacy open to debate. In this way, *Untouchable* functions both as a poignant human story and a broader social critique. By foregrounding the voice of the oppressed, Anand challenges entrenched hierarchies and compels readers to confront the moral contradictions of a society that claims spiritual purity while perpetuating systemic degradation. Thus, the novel's representation of caste remains both a literary and a political intervention of lasting relevance.

CASTE AND CLASS IN COOLIE

In *Coolie* (1936), Anand shifts the focus from caste to class exploitation while still highlighting social stratification. The protagonist, Munoo, is a poor orphan who drifts through various exploitative labor environments from domestic servitude to textile mills. Though caste is less overt than in *Untouchable*, Anand demonstrates how class oppression intersects with caste marginalization. Munoo's tragic death from tuberculosis symbolizes the systemic failure of colonial and capitalist structures that prey on the vulnerable.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936) powerfully depicts the interwoven structures of caste and class that shape the lives of India's marginalized under colonial rule. The novel follows Munoo, an orphaned boy, whose journey across different social and economic spaces from domestic service to urban labor reveals the pervasive exploitation faced by the poor. While caste remains a persistent undercurrent in Indian society, Anand emphasizes how class oppression in colonial India compounded these traditional hierarchies.

Munoo is not directly victimized for his caste as much as for his social vulnerability, yet his lowly background continually restricts his opportunities. For instance, his work as a servant in a high-caste household reminds readers that social rank dictates not only labor but also personal dignity. In the textile mills of Bombay, Munoo encounters industrial exploitation, long working hours, and inhumane conditions that reflect a capitalist order sustained by colonialism. Here, the lines between caste and class blur, as both Dalits and impoverished laborers endure similar forms of degradation. Anand portrays Munoo as a symbol of the subaltern experience, a figure whose suffering embodies the

collective struggles of India's underprivileged masses. The intersection of caste and class in the novel underscores Anand's Marxist leanings, as he interprets social injustice through structures of power and economic disparity. Yet, unlike a purely political tract, *Coolie* retains its humanist focus, presenting Munoo not merely as a victim but as a child longing for affection, dignity, and belonging. His tragic death from tuberculosis becomes a stark metaphor for systemic failure: a society where caste prejudice and class exploitation crush human potential. In this way, *Coolie* not only critiques the injustices of Anand's time but also illuminates the enduring nexus between social hierarchy and economic oppression in India.

COMMUNITY AND CASTE IN THE BIG HEART

The *Big Heart* (1945) explores the life of Ananta, a coppersmith in Amritsar, and depicts caste as an ingrained reality of artisanal communities. The novel examines generational tensions, technological changes, and the resilience of traditional structures. Anand portrays artisans not merely as victims but also as active participants in negotiating their identities within caste-based social frameworks. This text illustrates Anand's broadened concern with community and social transformation beyond the individual.

In *The Big Heart* (1945), Mulk Raj Anand turns his attention to the intricate relationship between community, caste, and labor within the artisanal society of Amritsar. Unlike his earlier novels such as *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, which primarily highlight the plight of the untouchables and the working poor, *The Big Heart* focuses on the coppersmith community, illustrating how caste operates not only as a mechanism of exclusion but also as a binding force that shapes collective identity. The protagonist, Ananta, embodies both the resilience and vulnerability of the caste-based artisan class. Through his struggles, Anand highlights how caste, tradition, and economic structures intertwine to regulate opportunities and limit upward mobility. The novel vividly portrays generational tensions within the community: while the elders cling to established practices and caste-determined roles, the younger generation grapples with the challenges of industrialization and technological change. By doing so, Anand underscores the conflict between continuity and transformation, as caste dictates inherited occupations while modernity pushes for adaptation. Yet, caste is not depicted only as a burden; it also serves as a source of solidarity, providing a shared cultural identity and a sense of belonging. Anand's narrative thus complicates simplistic notions of caste by recognizing both its oppressive and cohesive dimensions. Moreover, *The Big Heart* situates caste within the broader socio-economic landscape, showing how colonial capitalism and machine production exacerbate traditional inequalities while also threatening to dismantle established hierarchies. The novel reveals that caste, though deeply ingrained, is not immutable; it is challenged and reshaped through struggles for dignity, economic survival, and social justice. Ultimately, Anand's portrayal of the coppersmiths demonstrates his larger humanist vision: to give voice to communities often overlooked, to expose the contradictions within caste, and to suggest that change, though painful, remains possible through collective courage and resilience.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ANAND'S CASTE NARRATIVES

Scholars have interpreted Anand's fiction through multiple lenses. Postcolonial critics emphasize his challenge to colonial narratives that exoticized Indian society while ignoring internal hierarchies. Marxist readings highlight the intersection of caste with class struggle. Dalit critics, however, have debated whether Anand, as a privileged writer, could authentically represent the voice of untouchables. Nevertheless, his role in bringing caste issues into Indian English literature is undeniable.

Mulk Raj Anand's portrayal of caste in his novels has generated diverse critical perspectives, ranging from appreciation of his reformist zeal to skepticism about his ability to authentically represent marginalized voices.

Postcolonial critics have praised Anand for challenging colonial stereotypes that reduced Indian society to exotic traditions while silencing the harsh realities of caste oppression. By foregrounding the lives of untouchables and laborers, Anand destabilized the dominant narratives that privileged elite perspectives, making his fiction a counter-discourse to both colonial and Brahmanical ideologies. Marxist scholars, on the other hand, have emphasized Anand's synthesis of caste and class oppression, noting how his characters are often trapped at the intersection of economic exploitation and social exclusion. For them, Anand's fiction provides a social realist critique of systemic injustice,

aligning with his broader socialist leanings. Yet, Dalit critics have raised important questions about representation, pointing out that as a privileged writer from a non-Dalit background, Anand could never fully embody the lived experience of untouchability.

While they acknowledge his contribution in bringing caste to the literary forefront, they also stress that authentic Dalit voices, such as those of B. R. Ambedkar or later Dalit writers, provide a more genuine articulation of oppression. Feminist scholars, too, have critiqued Anand for underrepresenting the double marginalization faced by Dalit women, who suffered from both caste and gender hierarchies. Nevertheless, his humanistic vision, commitment to social justice, and empathetic characterization of the downtrodden ensure that his works remain significant. Anand's novels occupy a complex space: they are simultaneously acts of solidarity and products of their historical moment, reflecting both the promise and limitations of progressive literary interventions in pre-independence India.

DISCUSSION

Anand's fiction demonstrates that caste hierarchy is not an isolated problem but part of a larger system of economic, cultural, and political domination. By humanizing the oppressed, Anand destabilizes dominant narratives of purity and pollution. At the same time, his works reveal the tensions between reformist ideals and structural realities, reflecting the complexities of social change in colonial India.

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction provides a compelling critique of caste hierarchy, presenting it not merely as a social system but as an oppressive force that shapes every aspect of human existence. In novels such as *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, caste is portrayed as a determinant of identity, dignity, and destiny, leaving little room for individual agency.

Anand highlights how caste-based exclusion results in humiliation, exploitation, and social invisibility for those at the margins, particularly the untouchables and lower classes. His characters are not abstract symbols but deeply human figures whose suffering evokes empathy and compels readers to confront the cruelty of systemic discrimination. By adopting a realistic style infused with humanism, Anand dismantles the myth of caste as divinely ordained and reveals its constructed, exploitative nature. Importantly, he situates caste within the broader framework of colonialism and class inequality, suggesting that oppression is multi-layered and interconnected.

While his novels reflect reformist influences, including Gandhian ideals and technological modernity as potential solutions, Anand also exposes the limitations of such remedies in dismantling entrenched hierarchies. His engagement with caste is therefore not simplistic but layered, balancing a moral vision of equality with recognition of structural barriers to change. Critics have debated whether Anand, writing from a relatively privileged background, could authentically capture the lived experiences of the oppressed; nevertheless, his contribution lies in foregrounding caste in Indian English literature at a time when such subjects were often silenced or ignored. Through his narratives, Anand transforms fiction into a site of resistance, making literature both a mirror of reality and a vehicle for social transformation. His representation of caste hierarchy remains a powerful reminder of the enduring struggle for dignity, equality, and justice in Indian society.

II. CONCLUSION

Mulk Raj Anand's contribution lies in transforming literature into an instrument of social critique. His portrayal of caste hierarchy not only documented the sufferings of marginalized communities but also challenged readers to confront the ethical implications of social injustice. Anand's humanism and narrative vision remain relevant in contemporary India, where caste discrimination continues in different forms. His fiction stands as a testament to literature's power to give voice to the voiceless and to question entrenched hierarchies.

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction serves as a powerful literary canvas on which the brutal realities of caste hierarchy in India are vividly portrayed and critically examined. His novels, particularly *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *The Big Heart*, transcend mere storytelling by engaging deeply with the lived experiences of those relegated to the margins of society. Anand exposes the inhumanity of caste through characters like Bakha, whose every action is circumscribed by notions of pollution and purity, and Munoo, whose struggles with class oppression reveal the ways in which caste intersects with economic exploitation.

These narratives underscore the systemic cruelty that denies dignity, freedom, and opportunity to vast sections of society. Yet, Anand's writing is not only an indictment of oppression; it is also infused with humanistic empathy and a call for reform, as seen in his engagement with Gandhian ideals, Marxist critiques, and his unwavering belief in the intrinsic worth of the individual. His fiction demonstrates how caste operates not merely as a rigid social category but as a dynamic force influencing identity, relationships, and aspirations. By giving voice to the voiceless, Anand challenges entrenched hierarchies and compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about inequality. At the same time, his works highlight the tension between idealistic solutions and the entrenched nature of caste practices, revealing the complexities of social change in colonial and postcolonial India.

In reviewing his representation of caste, it becomes clear that Anand's contribution lies not only in documenting oppression but in reimagining literature as a medium of resistance and reform. His legacy continues to resonate in contemporary debates on caste, reminding us that literature can both reflect and reshape social realities. Ultimately, Anand's fiction stands as a testament to the enduring struggle for equality, dignity, and justice in Indian society.

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