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Caste, Class, and Consciousness: The Socio-Cultural Realism in the Select Works of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

This paper explores the interwoven themes of caste, class, and consciousness in the select novels of Mulk Raj Anand, with particular focus on *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937). Anand's fiction represents a pioneering form of socio-cultural realism that transcends mere documentation of social evils, presenting instead an ethically charged engagement with India's marginalized communities. By dramatizing the humiliations of caste oppression, the brutalities of industrial exploitation, and the dehumanization of colonial capitalism, Anand situates his narratives within a framework of social reform and human dignity. Characters such as Bakha, Munoo, and Gangu are portrayed not merely as victims but as figures whose experiences awaken forms of consciousness that challenge entrenched hierarchies. The article also engages with critical perspectives from E.M. Forster, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Meenakshi Mukherjee, C.D. Narasimhaiah, and Harish Raizada, highlighting how Anand's realism merges moral urgency with literary form. It concludes that Anand's socio-cultural vision remains vital, as his fiction anticipates later discourses on intersectionality and emphasizes literature's transformative potential in confronting structures of caste and class.

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Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the founding figures of modern Indian English fiction, occupies a unique place in the literary and cultural history of twentieth-century India. His works, especially *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), represent more than creative literary undertakings; they serve as interventions into the deeply stratified and oppressive social order of colonial India. This article focuses on above novels together because they map caste oppression, industrial class exploitation, and colonial plantation capitalism across contiguous terrains of domination. His narratives foreground the intricacies of caste hierarchies, economic exploitation, and cultural subjugation. To highlight the authenticity of Anand's voice, it is important to recall E.M. Forster's Preface to *Untouchable*. "*Untouchable* could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created Bakha" (v). By employing a realist mode, Anand constructs narratives that do not merely depict social evils but engage in what may be called a project of "socio-cultural consciousness." The present article argues that Anand's fiction dramatizes the intersections of caste and class as categories of oppression and resistance. His characters are not abstracted archetypes; rather, they are grounded figures whose individual predicaments point to larger systemic inequalities. Anand's realism functions not as detached representation but as a politically charged aesthetic that critiques the prevailing social structures while offering glimpses of emancipatory consciousness.

Caste, Class, and the Question of Realism

The critical category of "realism" has often been interpreted in narrow formalist terms, as the attempt to reproduce external reality through mimetic detail. Anand's realism, however, is not an uncritical mirror of social life but a moral and political stance. His choice to foreground marginalized castes and the impoverished laboring classes marks a deliberate departure from the elite preoccupations of much early Indian English fiction. Critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee have emphasized that Anand's realism was not mere documentary detail. "Anand's realism is never neutral documentation; it is an imaginative re-creation of social conditions in the light of moral indignation" (Mukherjee 78). In this sense, Anand stands closer to the literary traditions of social realism developed in nineteenth-century Europe (e.g., Dickens, Gorky, Zola), while simultaneously reworking these traditions within the specificities of Indian society under colonial rule. Caste and class emerge in Anand's novels as dual structures of domination, often intersecting but never reducible to one another. Caste oppression is historically entrenched in the Indian social fabric, while class exploitation gains sharper contours within the capitalist framework of colonial modernity. Anand's genius lies in his ability to demonstrate how these systems overlap, producing compounded forms of

marginalization. His realism, therefore, does not merely describe individual tragedies but reveals the mechanisms of structural violence.

Untouchable: The Anatomy of Caste Oppression

Anand's *Untouchable* remains his most powerful and direct indictment of the caste system. The novel follows a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper boy condemned to the lowest rung of Hindu society. The narrative begins with Bakha's menial routine of cleaning latrines and unfolds into a series of humiliations: being slapped for accidentally brushing against a high-caste man, enduring insults while fetching water, and facing exclusion from religious and social spaces. The starkest example of caste oppression comes early in the novel when Bakha is physically assaulted for accidental contact. "Polluted, polluted! he muttered, at the same time giving Bakha a slap on the face, so that the boy staggered" (Anand, *Untouchable* 48). What distinguishes Anand's portrayal is the fusion of sociological precision with psychological depth. Bakha is not only a victim of systemic injustice but also a thinking subject, capable of desiring, questioning, and imagining alternative futures. His admiration for the discipline of British soldiers reflects a longing for dignity, while his sense of humiliation reveals the internalization of caste-based stigma: "He had looked at the Tommies and envied them... the dignity of their bearing, the cleanliness of their bodies, the discipline of their lives" (*Untouchable* 63). Anand's realism here becomes ethical: he compels the reader to confront the lived experience of untouchability not as an abstraction but as a daily reality. The conclusion of *Untouchable*—with Bakha hearing Gandhi's speech against untouchability and the possibility of a flush system eliminating the need for manual scavenging—opens an ambiguous horizon. On one hand, it suggests technological and political remedies; on the other, it underscores the inadequacy of these measures in addressing the deeper consciousness of caste prejudice. The novel dramatizes not only the degradation inflicted on the oppressed but also the stirrings of social consciousness, both within Bakha and within the nation at large. The section culminates in Gandhi's intervention, which Bakha hears: "You are not an inferior being because you do the work of cleaning... the sin lies in those who treat you as if you are" (*Untouchable* 146).

Coolie: Class Struggle and the Proletarian Condition

If *Untouchable* foregrounds caste oppression, Anand's *Coolie* shifts the focus to class exploitation under colonial capitalism. The protagonist, Munoo, is an orphaned boy who moves from one form of labor to another—domestic servant, mill worker, rickshaw-puller—each revealing the brutality of economic structures that prey on the vulnerable. Unlike Bakha, whose oppression is tied explicitly to caste, Munoo embodies the dispossession and alienation of the poor in a system that commodifies human labor. Anand structures *Coolie* as a tragic odyssey, where Munoo's innocence collides repeatedly with the harshness of exploitation. Anand's mill chapters condense the inhumanity of industrial exploitation into sensory shock: "The din of the machines was like the roar of a thousand devils, the air heavy with the stink of oil and sweat" (*Coolie* 212). Munoo's death from tuberculosis is emblematic of the expendability of the poor under both colonial and indigenous capitalist systems. Yet, Anand does not render Munoo as a

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mere passive victim. His constant search for livelihood and dignity signals a latent consciousness, an unarticulated resistance that emerges through his very survival. Munoo's death brings Anand's critique of economic exploitation to its tragic climax. "*Munoo lay unconscious, coughing blood... his body a husk, consumed by the hunger of the world*" (*Coolie* 345). As C. D. Narasimhaiah observes, Anand's protagonists "may die defeated, but they die with an awareness that gives them a tragic dignity" (192). Here, Anand's socio-cultural realism critiques not only individual exploitation but also the structural logic of class oppression.

Two Leaves and a Bud: Colonialism, Capitalism, and Resistance

In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand extends his exploration of exploitation into the domain of colonial plantations. The novel depicts the plight of Gangu, a Punjabi peasant lured into working on a tea plantation in Assam, only to encounter deception, bonded labor, and eventual death. Here, Anand interweaves class oppression with colonial exploitation, demonstrating how imperial capitalism intensifies local forms of economic dependency. Gangu's story resonates as a parable of colonial modernity: the promise of prosperity collapses into the reality of coercion and dispossession. Gangu's own words testify to the coercion of plantation labor. "We are bound here like cattle, sahib... for a few annas we are tied to this plantation" (*Two Leaves and a Bud* 118). The tea plantation, with its brutal overseers and exploitative practices, serves as a microcosm of imperial domination. Yet Anand injects moments of resistance into this bleak landscape. Gangu's protective concern for his family, his attempts to negotiate with overseers, and his tragic defiance against injustice embody the human will to contest domination. The novel's title itself—*Two Leaves and a Bud*—ironically contrasts the idyllic image of tea cultivation with the dehumanizing conditions of plantation workers. Anand's realism here functions as a decolonial critique, exposing the moral bankruptcy of imperial narratives of "civilizing" progress. The irony of the title is underlined by a worker's bitter remark. "Two leaves and a bud—that is what they pluck, but with it they pluck our very lives" (*Two Leaves and a Bud* 132). As Harish Raizada insists, Anand's fiction is always directed towards awakening reform: "Anand's novels are not content with exposing social evils; they are meant to generate awareness that can lead to reform" (Raizada 54).

Realism, Consciousness, and the Role of the Writer

Across *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand emerges as a writer deeply committed to social transformation. His socio-cultural realism combines documentary detail with ethical urgency, compelling readers to recognize the humanity of the marginalized. Unlike detached realism, Anand's realism is suffused with compassion, an empathy that arises from his own background and political convictions. At the same time, Anand does not romanticize the oppressed. His characters are flawed, vulnerable, and often defeated. Yet, through their struggles, he articulates the possibility of consciousness—an awareness of oppression that gestures toward change. This is evident in Bakha's questioning, Munoo's resilience, and Gangu's defiance. Anand's narratives thus operate not only as literary texts but as interventions in the broader discourse of social reform.

Theoretical and Critical Perspectives

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Critical engagement with Anand's work has long acknowledged his role as a pioneering figure in projecting Indian social realities onto the world stage. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that Anand "enlarged the scope of Indo-Anglian fiction by his unswerving focus on the underdog, the oppressed, and the marginalized" (336). This focus not only distinguishes Anand from his contemporaries like R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, who were more concerned with metaphysical or middle-class experiences, but also positions him within a transnational lineage of social realists such as Maxim Gorky and Charles Dickens. Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that Anand's realism was never mechanical but deeply moral, rooted in "an imaginative engagement with the lives of those whom history had ignored" (78). Anand's refusal to sentimentalize his characters, while still imbuing them with dignity, demonstrates his balance between documentation and creative sympathy. His works thus negotiate a middle ground: they refuse both escapist romanticism and cold sociological detachment. Further, Anand's realism is not merely a reflection of Indian society but an intervention in its socio-political discourse. Harish Raizada emphasizes that Anand "sought to transform indignation into awareness, and awareness into action" (54). This transformative dimension explains why Anand's novels often end ambiguously: the narrative closes, but the consciousness it arouses remains active in the reader.

The Intersections of Caste and Class

One of the most compelling features of Anand's socio-cultural realism is his exploration of the intersections between caste and class. While caste is specific to the Indian context, functioning through notions of ritual purity and hereditary occupation, class as an economic category becomes more prominent with colonial industrial capitalism. Anand's novels frequently demonstrate how these categories intersect and reinforce one another. In *Untouchable*, Bakha's humiliation stems from his caste identity as a sweeper. Yet, his exploitation is also economic, for his family's labor is indispensable to the functioning of the town, though it yields neither dignity nor mobility. Anand thereby demonstrates that caste oppression is not only a matter of ritual exclusion but also of economic subjugation. Similarly, in *Coolie*, Munoo's degradation stems from poverty rather than caste, yet he is subjected to a quasi-caste stigma of laboring classes. Anand portrays how poverty itself becomes a "caste" under industrial capitalism, producing new hierarchies of exploitation. In this sense, caste and class are not separate; they overlap and mutate, revealing the adaptability of oppressive structures. By showing how caste and class create compounded systems of marginalization, Anand reveals the persistence of oppression even amidst the promise of modernity. His socio-cultural realism therefore critiques both the traditional Hindu social order and the exploitative mechanisms of colonial capitalism.

Consciousness as Resistance

A crucial dimension of Anand's realism is his emphasis on consciousness—the awareness of oppression that emerges within his characters and his readers. While Anand's protagonists often suffer tragic fates, they do not remain inert. Instead, their very experiences of degradation trigger reflection, indignation, and latent defiance. Bakha, for instance,

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contemplates the injustice of untouchability even as he internalizes shame. His admiration for the British military's discipline reflects his yearning for a social order based on equality rather than caste hierarchy. Similarly, Munoo, despite being crushed by exploitation, constantly seeks dignity and freedom. His very journey across diverse labor sites becomes a metaphor for the restless consciousness of the exploited masses. C.D. Narasimhaiah notes that Anand's protagonists "stand at the threshold of change, torn between defeat and the nascent awareness of their humanity" (Narasimhaiah 192). This liminal consciousness, even when not articulated in revolutionary terms, opens space for imagining resistance. Anand's realism is thus not fatalistic but generative, offering the possibility of transformation through awareness.

Anand's Realism and the Writer's Role

Anand's socio-cultural realism cannot be understood apart from his personal and political commitments. Born into a family of coppersmiths, Anand had firsthand experience of social stratification and colonial oppression. His involvement with leftist circles in London, his admiration for Gandhi, and his engagement with internationalist ideas shaped his conviction that literature must intervene in social realities. For Anand, the writer's role was not to escape into aestheticism but to embrace responsibility. In his essays, he repeatedly insisted that "art must justify itself by serving the needs of humanity" (Anand, *Apology for Heroism* 112). His fiction embodies this conviction by turning narrative into a tool for consciousness-raising. In this regard, Anand departs from the modernist detachment of contemporaneous Western writers. His novels may not exhibit the formal experimentation of Joyce or Woolf, but their strength lies in moral urgency. As G.S. Balarama Gupta observes, "Anand's realism is realism with a cause—it seeks not only to portray life but to heal it" (Gupta 214).

Critiques of Anand's Realism

While Anand's contribution to Indian literature is undeniable, his realism has not been without criticism. Some critics argue that his reliance on melodrama and didacticism weakens the artistic integrity of his novels. E.M. Forster, who wrote the preface to *Untouchable*, praised the novel's sincerity but noted its "flawed artistry" (Forster x). Similarly, Meenakshi Mukherjee has observed that Anand's tendency to sermonize occasionally disrupts narrative subtlety. Yet such criticisms must be weighed against Anand's explicit agenda. His purpose was not merely to produce polished art but to provoke social reform. As Harish Raizada contends, "If Anand sometimes preaches, it is because the urgency of his moral vision refuses silence" (Raizada 60). In fact, the tension between art and advocacy in Anand's fiction is precisely what renders his work historically significant.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's novels embody a socio-cultural realism that refuses complacency. By focusing on the marginalized—the sweeper, the orphaned laborer, the peasant worker—Anand redefined the possibilities of Indian English fiction. His exploration of caste and class as intersecting categories of domination anticipates later theoretical frameworks of intersectionality. His insistence on consciousness as the seed of resistance foregrounds literature as a site of ethical transformation. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar summarizes Anand's

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lifelong project succinctly. He writes, “. . . Anand’s significance lies in his consistent sympathy for the underdog and his bold exposure of the cruelties of caste and class” (*Indian Writing in English* 336). Though criticized for didacticism, Anand remains indispensable because he wrote with an urgency that mirrored the crises of his time. His novels are not just stories of individual suffering but narratives that dramatize systemic oppression while awakening social awareness. In giving voice to the voiceless, Anand forged a literary realism that was also a moral act. His socio-cultural consciousness thus remains vital for contemporary readers seeking to understand how literature engages with structures of power and the possibilities of resistance.

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