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Social Realism, Humanism, and the Representation of the Marginalized in Mulk Raj Anand's Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the intertwining of social realism and humanism in the works of Mulk Raj Anand, one of the pioneering figures of Indian English literature. Anand's fiction reflects his deep concern for the marginalized and the oppressed, capturing the struggles of peasants, laborers, and outcasts in colonial and early postcolonial India. By analyzing novels such as *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Road* (1961), and *Across the Black Waters* (1940), the study highlights how Anand blends Marxist ideals with Gandhian ethics, creating a unique narrative that champions dignity, justice, and compassion. His use of realism, colloquial speech, and psychological depth presents Indian society with stark honesty while insisting on the fundamental humanity of his characters. The paper argues that Anand's commitment to humanism elevates his social critique beyond mere protest, turning his novels into enduring calls for empathy and reform.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, Social Realism, Humanism, Indian English Literature, Marginalized Voices

1.Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a foundational place in the canon of Indian English literature, particularly for his pioneering use of social realism as a narrative mode to foreground the lives of the marginalized. Writing in the turbulent decades of the 1930s and 1940s, Anand emerged as a literary voice deeply engaged with the political and social upheavals of his time—British colonial rule, the nationalist struggle, and the reformist impulses of the Progressive Writers' Association. His fiction departs from the elitist traditions of Indian English writing by centering sweepers, coolies, peasants, plantation workers, and soldiers—figures historically excluded from literary representation. In novels such as *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), and *Across the Black Waters* (1940), Anand employs realism not simply to describe external conditions but to evoke the texture of lived experience under oppression. His use of plain prose, interspersed with Indian idioms, allows his narratives to resonate with authenticity and accessibility. At the same time, his realism functions as a powerful tool of critique, exposing the mechanisms of caste, class, and colonial exploitation that structure Indian society. Literature,



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for Anand, was not merely aesthetic expression but a form of intervention—an instrument to challenge social injustices and awaken moral responsibility.

Yet, what makes Anand's fiction distinctive is that his realism is always balanced by a profound humanism. While his characters endure humiliation, poverty, and systemic violence, they are never reduced to victims without agency. Instead, Anand invests them with dignity, resilience, and emotional depth, ensuring that readers encounter not abstract social categories but fully realized human beings. Bakha in *Untouchable*, Munoo in *Coolie*, and Gangu in *Two Leaves and a Bud* are individuals whose struggles embody the broader suffering of their communities, yet whose dreams, joys, and yearnings affirm the irreducible value of human life. Anand's humanism was shaped by a fusion of influences—Marxist critiques of exploitation, Gandhian ethics of compassion and reform, and his own personal encounters with caste-based discrimination. This combination allowed him to craft narratives that expose systemic inequities while still holding space for hope, reform, and solidarity. In his later works, such as *The Road* (1961), this balance becomes more pronounced, with collective struggle and reformist visions tempering the bleakness of social reality. Anand's legacy, therefore, lies not only in his role as a chronicler of India's marginalized but also in his ability to weave empathy and justice into the very fabric of his storytelling. His novels embody the dual imperative of social realism and humanism, making his work both historically significant and ethically urgent in understanding the trajectory of modern Indian literature.

2. Historical and Literary Context: Colonial India and the Rise of Social Realism

The 1930s in India were marked by turbulence and transformation, as colonial oppression intensified and the struggle for independence gathered unprecedented momentum. Alongside political agitation, there was also a cultural awakening that sought to redefine Indian identity through literature, art, and philosophy. Writers were no longer content with romantic escapism or mythological retellings; instead, they began to confront the stark realities of colonial exploitation, caste oppression, and social inequality. This climate of urgency and activism created fertile ground for the rise of social realism in Indian literature. Inspired partly by Western traditions of realism and naturalism, Indian writers absorbed and adapted these influences to narrate the lived experiences of their people. For them, literature was not merely a medium of aesthetic pleasure but an instrument of social critique and transformation.

Mulk Raj Anand emerged as one of the foremost voices of this movement, producing novels that directly engaged with questions of caste, labor, and poverty. His works such as *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) challenged the complacency of colonial elites and middle-class readers by presenting characters from the margins—sweepers, servants, and peasants—as central protagonists. Anand's association with the Progressive Writers' Association further positioned him within a global network of writers committed to anti-colonialism and leftist struggles. This



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collective sought to dismantle entrenched hierarchies through the power of the written word. In this sense, Anand's fiction cannot be separated from its historical context: it is the product of a moment when literature was a weapon in the fight against injustice, and when realism became the chosen mode to represent the raw, everyday struggles of India under colonial rule.

3. The Philosophical Foundations of Anand's Humanism

At the core of Anand's literary vision lies a profound humanism, a philosophy deeply rooted in empathy, equality, and the dignity of labor. This humanism was nourished by multiple intellectual and personal influences. On one hand, Anand engaged deeply with Marxist critiques of exploitation and class oppression, which sharpened his awareness of economic inequalities. On the other, Gandhian ideals of compassion, reform, and non-violence resonated with his own ethical sensibilities, particularly in their insistence on the moral worth of the most oppressed. Anand's personal encounters with poverty and caste-based discrimination further transformed these abstract ideas into lived convictions. Having grown up in a society stratified by caste hierarchies, he intimately understood the pain of exclusion and the denial of basic dignity to large sections of Indian society.

Anand's humanism is thus not detached or merely philosophical; it is a lived ethics embodied in his fiction. His novels foreground characters like Bakha in *Untouchable* or Munoo in *Coolie*, who embody both suffering and resilience. By narrating their daily humiliations, aspirations, and small joys, Anand invites readers to recognize their humanity in defiance of structures that reduce them to mere "untouchables" or "coolies." He insists that these individuals are not social categories but human beings with dreams, emotions, and agency. In doing so, Anand shifts the discourse from abstract social reform to intimate encounters with marginalized lives. His humanism is therefore radical: it demands not charity but recognition, not pity but solidarity. Literature, for Anand, became a vehicle to restore dignity to the dehumanized and to awaken moral responsibility in his readers. This synthesis of Marxist critique, Gandhian ethics, and personal empathy forms the philosophical bedrock of his humanism.

4. Language, Style, and the Craft of Realism

Anand's commitment to realism is most evident in his language and narrative style. Rejecting ornate prose and elitist English idioms, he employed a plain and direct style that conveyed the immediacy of everyday life. His inclusion of vernacular words, idioms, and cultural references infused his works with authenticity, capturing the cadences of Indian speech and grounding his characters in their social contexts. This stylistic choice also signaled Anand's resistance to colonial literary norms, as he sought to craft an English that was not foreign but organically tied



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to Indian realities. His writing balances clarity with cultural specificity, making his texts both accessible to common readers and resonant with local experiences.

Beyond language, Anand's realism extends to his careful construction of characters and settings. His protagonists are never abstract symbols but flesh-and-blood individuals shaped by material and psychological circumstances. They inhabit villages, cities, and workplaces that Anand describes with vivid attention to detail, evoking both physical environments and emotional landscapes. In *Untouchable*, for example, the humiliations faced by Bakha are narrated with such empathy that readers feel his inner turmoil as acutely as his external degradation. The straightforward narrative style ensures that his social critique is not lost in stylistic obscurity but communicated with urgency and power. Moreover, Anand's use of description is never ornamental; it reveals the structures of oppression and the emotional worlds of his characters simultaneously. This integration of language, style, and realism enabled Anand to craft novels that were not only socially engaged but also artistically compelling, situating him firmly as a pioneer of socially conscious Indian English fiction.

5. *Untouchable* (1935): The Dignity of the Oppressed

Mulk Raj Anand's debut novel *Untouchable* (1935) is a landmark in Indian English fiction, narrating a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper boy trapped within the rigid confines of caste hierarchy. The novel starkly depicts the daily humiliations he endures—from verbal abuse and physical segregation to systemic exclusion from social and religious life. Anand's realism manifests in the unflinching portrayal of these everyday degradations, emphasizing how caste is not an abstract concept but a lived experience inscribed upon the body and psyche of the marginalized. The novel's narrative economy—focusing on twenty-four hours—intensifies the sense of suffocation, as Bakha's existence becomes a microcosm of an entire community's oppression.

Yet, alongside this realism, Anand weaves in his deep humanism. Bakha is not merely an object of pity but a complex individual with desires, frustrations, and a profound inner life. His sensitivity to beauty, his yearning for dignity, and his instinctive sense of justice elevate him beyond the stereotype of the oppressed. Gandhi's influence is evident in the ethical discourse of reform that permeates the novel, particularly in the emphasis on compassion and social uplift. However, Anand complicates this moral framework by introducing Marxist critiques of structural inequality. While Gandhian thought suggests moral reform and self-purification, Anand hints at the necessity of systemic change to dismantle caste oppression. In doing so, *Untouchable* becomes both a cry of protest and a work of profound empathy, a novel that insists on the humanity of those most dehumanized by society.

6. *Coolie* (1936): Child Labor, Poverty, and Exploitation



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In *Coolie* (1936), Anand broadens his exploration of social injustice by focusing on Munoo, a young boy whose life becomes emblematic of the systemic exploitation of child laborers in colonial India. Forced into servitude after his parents' deaths, Munoo drifts through a succession of exploitative environments: as a domestic servant, a factory worker, and finally as a laborer on the tea plantations of Assam. Each stage of his journey reveals another layer of India's entrenched poverty and the brutal machinery of colonial capitalism, which thrives on cheap and disposable labor. Anand's realism lies in the vivid detail with which he depicts Munoo's experiences, from the physical exhaustion of factory work to the indignities of servitude. The novel is relentless in its exposure of how structural poverty robs children of childhood, choice, and future.

At the heart of *Coolie* is Anand's humanistic vision. Munoo is portrayed not as a faceless victim but as a spirited, curious boy whose vitality clashes tragically with the oppressive systems that consume him. His openness to friendship, his small moments of laughter, and his longing for care underscore his humanity, even as his circumstances erode his chances of survival. The tragic ending—Munoo's untimely death from tuberculosis—becomes a symbol of a society that allows its most vulnerable to perish under systemic neglect. Anand's Marxist sympathies are evident here, as the novel critiques not only individual cruelty but the broader structures of colonial exploitation that commodify human lives. In presenting Munoo's story, Anand compels readers to confront the moral urgency of addressing child labor and poverty, making *Coolie* not just a narrative of one boy but a testament to the silent suffering of millions.

7. *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937): Colonialism and Plantation Workers

With *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), Anand shifts his focus to the plight of Indian plantation workers under British colonial rule, situating exploitation within the global structures of imperial capitalism. The protagonist, Gangu, a peasant uprooted from his village, is lured by promises of work but soon finds himself trapped in the exploitative system of the Assam tea plantations. The novel's realism is striking in its depiction of brutal working conditions: long hours, meager wages, and the constant threat of violence at the hands of colonial overseers. Anand highlights how the plantation economy, designed to enrich the Empire, systematically dehumanized workers, treating them as replaceable cogs in an imperial machine. By detailing the physical toll of labor and the indignities suffered, Anand creates a powerful document of social protest against colonial exploitation.

Yet, as in his earlier novels, Anand infuses his narrative with humanism, allowing Gangu to emerge not only as a victim but as a figure of resilience and dignity. Despite poverty, oppression, and eventual tragedy, Gangu's humanity persists in his love for his family and his quiet endurance. Through him, Anand insists that dignity can survive even under the most



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dehumanizing conditions. At the same time, the novel does not shy away from portraying the futility of individual resistance in the face of systemic colonial power, making Gangu's struggle simultaneously heroic and heartbreaking. By combining realism with a moral vision, Anand transforms *Two Leaves and a Bud* into both a social critique and a tribute to the resilience of the oppressed. It exemplifies Anand's conviction that literature must bear witness to injustice while affirming the human spirit that resists erasure.

8. *Across the Black Waters* (1940): Indian Soldiers and War Realities

In *Across the Black Waters* (1940), Mulk Raj Anand shifts his canvas from the familiar terrains of caste and labor to the global stage of World War I, portraying the experiences of Indian soldiers who were deployed to fight in Europe. The novel follows Lalu, a peasant-turned-soldier, who journeys across seas to serve in the imperial army. Through his perspective, Anand presents the irony of colonial subjects sacrificing their lives for an empire that denies them dignity and equality in their homeland. The novel's realism lies in its vivid depictions of the battlefield: the mud, the trenches, the ceaseless bombardments, and the psychological toll of mechanized warfare. Anand does not romanticize war but lays bare its brutality, showing it as a machinery of destruction that consumes ordinary men caught in geopolitical struggles beyond their control.

Anand's humanism emerges through his focus on the soldiers' longing for recognition and dignity amidst the horrors of war. While they fight under the Union Jack, their sacrifices are overlooked, and their humanity is diminished by racial prejudice and colonial hierarchies. Lalu's innocence and his yearning for home give the novel an emotional core, reminding readers that behind every uniform lies a vulnerable human being. By placing Indian soldiers within a European battlefield, Anand disrupts the Eurocentric narratives of war literature, asserting the significance of colonial subjects in global history. The novel thus functions as both a critique of imperial exploitation and a testament to the resilience of ordinary soldiers, reinforcing Anand's conviction that even amidst devastation, literature must recover and affirm the humanity of the marginalized.

9. *The Road* (1961): Caste, Labor, and Collective Struggles

Published in 1961, *The Road* reflects Anand's continued preoccupation with caste oppression, while also signaling his growing emphasis on collective resistance and social reform. The novel revolves around Bhikhu, a road worker condemned to untouchability, who faces discrimination in both personal and public spheres. Through his struggles, Anand revisits the persistent realities of caste even in post-independence India, underscoring the resilience of oppressive structures despite political change. The novel's realism is evident in its detailed portrayal of labor: the sweat, exhaustion, and camaraderie of road workers engaged in physically taxing work. Anand



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anchors caste oppression within the broader context of economic labor, showing how both intersect to trap the marginalized in cycles of exclusion and deprivation.

What distinguishes *The Road* from Anand's earlier works is its emphasis on solidarity and collective action. While novels like *Untouchable* and *Coolie* often portrayed individuals crushed by systemic forces, *The Road* emphasizes the possibility of reform through unity and collective struggle. Bhikhu's interactions with fellow workers create moments of shared resilience that point toward hope rather than inevitable tragedy. Anand's humanism here evolves into a more explicitly reformist vision, emphasizing not only empathy for the oppressed but also faith in their agency to demand change. The novel reflects Anand's matured perspective, combining realism with a utopian impulse toward social justice. In doing so, *The Road* bridges his earlier works of protest with a more constructive outlook, aligning literature with the broader project of nation-building in a newly independent India.

10. Anand's Short Stories: Snapshots of Everyday Humanism

Beyond his novels, Anand's short stories form an equally vital component of his literary oeuvre, offering concentrated glimpses into the lives of India's marginalized. Stories like *The Lost Child* and *Duty* demonstrate his ability to compress empathy, realism, and social critique into brief yet powerful narratives. *The Lost Child*, though centered on an innocent theme of a child separated from his parents at a fair, resonates with Anand's larger humanistic concerns by evoking universal feelings of vulnerability, longing, and love. *Duty*, on the other hand, examines the crushing weight of social expectations and poverty, reflecting Anand's consistent interest in the struggles of ordinary lives. His realism in these stories lies in the authenticity of detail: the fairs, the villages, the humble homes, and the textures of daily existence, all rendered with unembellished clarity.

At the same time, Anand's short stories shine with the same humanism that defines his novels. His characters—children, laborers, peasants—are depicted with dignity and emotional depth, even in the briefest sketches. He does not idealize them, but neither does he reduce them to stereotypes; instead, he captures their aspirations, fears, and contradictions. The brevity of the short story form allows Anand to distill his vision of empathy into sharp, poignant moments, making each story a snapshot of human resilience amidst adversity. Collectively, his short fiction complements his longer works by reinforcing the central themes of oppression, dignity, and justice, while also showcasing his versatility as a writer. In these narratives, one can see Anand's lifelong commitment to using literature as a means of bearing witness to suffering and affirming the humanity of those most often ignored.

11. Social Realism vs. Idealism: A Balance in Anand's Fiction

One of the most remarkable features of Mulk Raj Anand's fiction is his ability to balance stark social realism with an underlying sense of idealism. His narratives are rooted in the everyday



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struggles of marginalized characters—sweepers, coolies, peasants, and plantation workers—whose lives expose the harsh inequities of caste, class, and colonial exploitation. Anand's realism prevents any romanticization of poverty or oppression. He depicts humiliation, violence, and deprivation with unflinching honesty, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about Indian society and colonial modernity. By grounding his works in authentic details and lived experiences, Anand ensures that literature becomes a mirror reflecting the conditions of the dispossessed.

Yet, Anand's vision does not culminate in despair. His deep humanism infuses his works with moments of hope, dignity, and resilience. Characters such as Bakha, Munoo, or Gangu, while often crushed by oppressive systems, are portrayed as profoundly human—capable of love, joy, and moral strength. This humanistic idealism tempers his realism, offering glimpses of possible transformation through empathy, solidarity, and reform. In later works such as *The Road*, his emphasis on collective struggle points toward a hopeful vision of change, reflecting his belief in literature's role as a catalyst for social justice. Thus, Anand's fiction achieves a rare equilibrium: it neither sentimentalizes suffering nor surrenders to despair. Instead, it insists on both recognizing reality and imagining better futures—a balance that defines his enduring literary contribution.

12. Comparative Perspectives: Anand and His Contemporaries (Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan)

Within the celebrated “trinity” of early Indian English novelists—Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao—Anand distinguished himself through his unyielding commitment to social realism. While Narayan's fiction often revolved around the small-town world of Malgudi, characterized by gentle irony and explorations of middle-class life, Anand chose to center his narratives on the marginalized and dispossessed. Similarly, Raja Rao's novels engaged deeply with India's philosophical traditions, spirituality, and metaphysical concerns, offering allegorical and symbolic treatments of national identity and cultural heritage. In contrast, Anand's works remained grounded in the material conditions of the poor, using literature as an instrument of protest and reform.

This divergence in focus broadened the scope of Indian English fiction. By foregrounding untouchability, child labor, and colonial exploitation, Anand turned the English novel into a medium for social critique and transformation. His contemporaries, though equally important, addressed different aspects of Indian life: Narayan through cultural satire and human comedy, Rao through philosophical depth, and Anand through radical empathy for the oppressed. Together, they presented a multifaceted image of India, but it was Anand who most directly linked fiction with activism. His association with the Progressive Writers' Association further underscored his political orientation, distinguishing him from Narayan's apolitical detachment and Rao's philosophical introspection. In this comparative frame, Anand's realism emerges not



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only as his hallmark but as his unique contribution to shaping Indian English literature as a socially engaged form.

13. Reception and Criticism of Anand's Works

The reception of Anand's works has been marked by both admiration and criticism, reflecting the complexity of his literary project. Admirers celebrated his courage in confronting taboo subjects such as untouchability, child labor, and colonial exploitation, subjects that had been largely ignored in Indian English fiction before him. His empathy for the marginalized, his ability to give voice to the voiceless, and his blending of realism with humanism earned him recognition as a pioneering figure in socially conscious literature. For many readers and critics, novels like *Untouchable* and *Coolie* were groundbreaking in their insistence that the English novel could address Indian social realities with both authenticity and urgency.

At the same time, detractors accused Anand of didacticism, oversimplification, and a lack of aesthetic refinement. Some critics argued that his novels leaned too heavily on message-driven narratives, occasionally sacrificing artistic subtlety for ideological clarity. Others viewed his prose as too plain, lacking the stylistic sophistication of his contemporaries like Raja Rao. Despite these criticisms, Anand's position in Indian literary modernity remains secure. His works are studied not only for their literary merit but also for their historical and cultural significance, as they document the intersection of colonialism, caste, and class in twentieth-century India. The debates surrounding his style and purpose underscore the dual role he played: as a novelist committed to craft and as an activist committed to reform. In this sense, even his criticisms reflect the centrality of his role in shaping Indian English fiction.

14. Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction stands as a defining moment in the evolution of Indian English literature, bringing social realism to the forefront as a means of confronting the harsh realities of colonial India. His novels such as *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, and *Across the Black Waters* reflect his unwavering commitment to exposing systemic injustices rooted in caste, class, and colonial exploitation. Anand's realism is not confined to surface detail; it penetrates the lived experiences of the marginalized, offering unflinching portrayals of humiliation, poverty, and exploitation. By situating his characters—sweepers, coolies, peasants, and soldiers—at the center of his narratives, he overturned literary hierarchies that had long excluded such figures. His descriptive clarity, use of colloquial speech, and insistence on representing everyday struggles established him as a pioneer of socially engaged fiction, where literature functioned as a mirror of society's deepest inequities.

Yet Anand's contribution lies equally in his humanism, which tempers his realism with empathy, dignity, and hope. Even when his protagonists face defeat or tragedy, they are never stripped of



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their humanity. Through Bakha's yearning for dignity, Munoo's vitality, or Gangu's endurance, Anand insists on the resilience of the human spirit amidst oppression. His humanism emerges not as abstract philosophy but as lived ethics grounded in solidarity, compassion, and the demand for justice. It is this balance—between exposing the brutality of social structures and affirming the possibility of transformation—that defines Anand's legacy. His novels are not merely works of protest but also of affirmation, bridging despair with hope, critique with vision. In combining realism with humanism, Anand transformed the Indian English novel into a powerful cultural instrument for empathy, reform, and social change, leaving behind a body of work that remains both historically significant and morally urgent.

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