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The Representation of Social Inequality in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand

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ABSTRACT

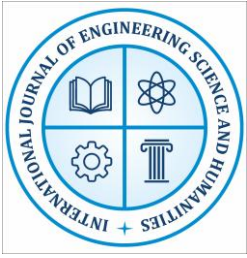
Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) stands as one of the most significant figures in Indian English literature, distinguished by his unflinching portrayal of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the dehumanized in colonial and early post-colonial India. His novels constitute a sustained literary engagement with the systemic injustices embedded in Indian society — caste discrimination, class exploitation, gender subjugation, and the brutalizing effects of colonial rule. Drawing upon his socialist convictions, his exposure to Marxist thought during his years in England, and his personal witnessing of poverty and oppression, Anand transformed the English novel into a vehicle for radical social critique. This research paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of the representation of social inequality in Anand's fiction, with particular focus on his landmark novels *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), and *The Village* (1939). The paper analyses how Anand employs narrative technique, characterization, language, and symbolism to expose the violent hierarchies of caste, class, and colonial power. It argues that Anand's novels are not mere sociological documents but deeply humanistic works that reconfigure the politics of sympathy and demand structural transformation. The paper further situates Anand's literary project within the broader contexts of Marxist aesthetics, Gandhian social reform, and the global anti-colonial movement of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Social Inequality, Caste Discrimination, Class Conflict, Marginalized Communities, Humanism in Mulk Raj Anand.

1. INTRODUCTION

The social novel as a literary form finds one of its most committed practitioners in Mulk Raj Anand, whose fiction relentlessly exposes the fault lines of a society structured by inherited inequality. Born in Peshawar in 1905 and educated at the universities of Punjab, London, and Cambridge, Anand occupied a unique vantage point: an Indian intellectual deeply immersed in European socialist and humanist thought, yet rooted in the lived realities of his homeland. His encounters with Mahatma Gandhi, his friendship with E.M. Forster — who wrote the preface to *Untouchable* — and his association with the Progressive Writers' Association collectively shaped a literary sensibility that was simultaneously local and international, personal and political.

Anand's fiction is animated by what may be called a poetics of outrage — a sustained moral fury at the conditions that reduce human beings to instruments of labor or objects of contempt. Across more



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than a dozen novels, he returns insistently to the same central questions: What does it mean to be denied one's humanity by the society into which one is born? How do caste, class, and colonial power intersect to produce and reproduce social suffering? And what are the possibilities for resistance, dignity, and transformation available to those at the bottom of India's social hierarchies?

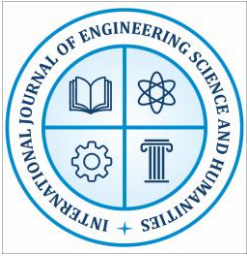
The significance of Anand's contribution to Indian English literature cannot be overstated. Writing in a language that was itself a colonial imposition, he repurposed the English novel to bear witness to the experiences of those whom the colonial and nationalist elites alike preferred to overlook — the untouchable, the coolie, the tea-garden laborer, the peasant. In doing so, he inaugurated a tradition of socially engaged Indian fiction that would later find expression in the works of R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, and, in our own time, writers such as Arundhati Roy and Dalit authors writing in regional languages.

This paper examines the representation of social inequality in Anand's novels through several interconnected lenses. Section two provides a biographical and historical context for understanding Anand's political commitments. Sections three through six offer detailed textual analyses of his major novels, focusing on caste oppression, class exploitation, colonial dehumanization, and gender inequality respectively. Section seven situates Anand's work within broader theoretical frameworks — Marxism, humanism, and postcolonial theory. The paper concludes with a reflection on the enduring relevance of Anand's social vision.

2. BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To understand the nature and intensity of Anand's engagement with social inequality, it is necessary to situate his life and work within the historical moment in which they were produced. The India of Anand's youth was a society undergoing simultaneous transformation and stasis: a colonial polity in which the machinery of British rule was beginning to face organized resistance, yet in which traditional structures of caste, patriarchy, and landlordism remained deeply entrenched. The contradictions of this moment — between colonial modernity and indigenous tradition, between nationalist aspiration and social conservatism — permeate Anand's fiction.

Anand's political education was shaped by a remarkable convergence of influences. His exposure to the writings of Karl Marx and the socialist circle he encountered in London during the 1920s and 1930s gave him the analytical tools to understand Indian social inequality not merely as cultural or religious backwardness but as a form of structured economic exploitation. His friendship with members of the Bloomsbury Group, particularly E.M. Forster, introduced him to the liberal humanist tradition with its emphasis on empathy and the intrinsic worth of individual human beings. His encounters with Gandhi deepened his commitment to the dignity of manual labor and the necessity of confronting untouchability, even as he remained critical of Gandhi's ultimate reliance on moral suasion rather than structural change.



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The founding of the Progressive Writers' Association in London in 1935, in which Anand was centrally involved, marked a significant moment in the development of a politically committed literature in the Indian subcontinent. The Association's manifesto called for a literature that would confront the realities of poverty, caste discrimination, communalism, and imperialism. Anand's major novels of the 1930s — *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, and *The Village* — are the most sustained literary expressions of this progressive vision.

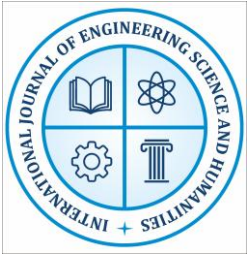
It is also important to note that Anand's engagement with social inequality was not purely intellectual. His father had been a coppersmith and soldier, and his family's experience of caste prejudice — his aunt had been excommunicated for sharing a meal with a Muslim cobbler — gave him a direct, emotionally charged encounter with the mechanisms of social exclusion. This personal dimension lends his fiction a quality of felt urgency that distinguishes it from more academic or detached social criticism.

3. CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY: UNTOUCHABLE (1935)

Untouchable, Anand's debut novel, remains his most celebrated work and one of the most powerful literary treatments of caste discrimination in the English language. Set over the course of a single day in the life of Bakha, an eighteen-year-old sweeper and latrine-cleaner in a north Indian town, the novel traces the series of humiliations and degradations that Bakha endures as a consequence of his untouchable status. The novel's temporal compression — its action confined to a single day — lends it an almost classical intensity, reminiscent of Joyce's *Ulysses* in its focus on the interior life of a protagonist moving through a hostile social environment.

Bakha is a figure of considerable complexity. He is, at one level, a victim of a social system that has assigned him the most polluting forms of labor and denied him the right to physical proximity with caste Hindus. He cannot enter temples, cannot draw water from public wells, and must cry 'posh' — 'keep away' — as he walks through the streets to warn upper-caste passersby of his polluting presence. The very sight of his shadow falling upon a Brahmin is sufficient to occasion a violent assault. Yet Bakha is not a passive sufferer. Influenced by his observations of British soldiers whose bodily ease and material culture he admires, he aspires to a different kind of life, one marked by cleanliness, health, and self-respect. This aspiration constitutes both the novel's emotional engine and its ideological dilemma.

Anand's representation of caste inequality in *Untouchable* operates through several narrative strategies. The most important of these is free indirect discourse, through which the narrator inhabits Bakha's consciousness while maintaining an external perspective that allows for implicit ironic commentary. When Bakha is struck by a Brahmin after accidentally brushing against him, the narrative registers both his immediate physical pain and his bewildered attempt to process the logic of a system that condemns him for an inadvertent contact. The disconnect between Bakha's humanity



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— his warmth, his filial love, his aesthetic sense — and the social category to which he has been consigned is rendered with devastating precision.

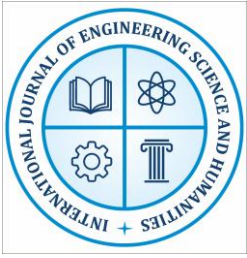
The novel's climax, in which Bakha encounters three potential paths to liberation — Gandhi's advocacy of the moral transformation of upper-caste Hindus, a Christian missionary's offer of conversion and formal equality, and a poet's vision of a flush toilet that will render the sweeper's labor obsolete — raises fundamental questions about the adequacy of available responses to structural injustice. Anand's ironic juxtaposition of these three solutions reflects his own political ambivalence: Gandhi's approach, while morally admirable, relies on the goodwill of the oppressors; Christianity offers formal equality but at the cost of cultural identity; and the technological solution is ultimately evasive in its displacement of the political problem onto the terrain of hygiene engineering. None of these solutions, the novel implies, addresses the root cause of untouchability in the social relations of production and the ideology of purity and pollution that sustains them.

Scholars of Dalit literature have engaged critically with *Untouchable*, noting that Anand, as a caste Hindu writing from outside the experience of untouchability, inevitably constructs Bakha from an external perspective that sometimes slips into a form of liberal patronage. B.R. Ambedkar, whose radical critique of caste was far more thoroughgoing than Gandhi's, is conspicuously absent from the novel's concluding debate, a lacuna that reflects both the limits of Anand's own politics and the blindspots of the progressive movement of which he was a part. Nevertheless, *Untouchable* remains a landmark text in the literary representation of caste, one that introduced the reality of untouchability to an international readership and compelled a confrontation with one of India's most enduring social evils.

4. CLASS, LABOR, AND CAPITALISM: COOLIE (1936)

If *Untouchable* focuses on the most ancient form of social inequality in India — the caste system — *Coolie* turns to the more modern forms of exploitation produced by industrial capitalism and colonial economic structures. The novel follows Munoo, a hill boy from Kangra who migrates from domestic service to the cotton mills of Bombay in search of work and self-improvement. His journey — from the domesticity of an upper-class home to a rickshaw driver's death-by-exhaustion in Simla — traces the routes along which surplus labor is extracted in colonial India and the multiple, intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and race that determine the conditions of that extraction.

Coolie is, in important respects, a Bildungsroman turned inside out: rather than tracing the protagonist's development and social integration, it maps his progressive degradation and destruction. Munoo's energy, intelligence, and appetite for experience are all ultimately consumed by a system that reduces him to a unit of labor-power to be exploited until exhausted. The novel's structure mirrors this process: each section of Munoo's life in service or in the factory reveals a new dimension of class exploitation, from the casual cruelties of domestic employment to the organized brutality of industrial capital.



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Anand's representation of the Bombay cotton mills draws extensively on his research into actual labor conditions and reflects his engagement with Marxist political economy. The factory sequences in *Coolie* constitute some of the most vivid and technically precise descriptions of industrial labor in Indian English fiction. The deafening noise of the looms, the cotton dust that fills the workers' lungs, the discipline of the factory clock, the arbitrary authority of the foreman — all are rendered with an attention to material detail that insists on the physical reality of exploitation. Anand refuses the abstraction that might allow a reader to contemplate class inequality from a comfortable distance; instead, he forces a sensory encounter with the conditions of labor.

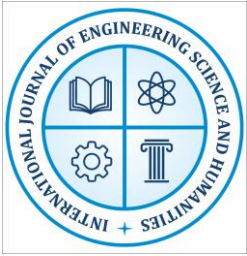
The character of Mrs. Mainwaring, the Englishwoman who employs Munoo as a rickshaw boy in Simla, introduces the racial dimension of colonial class relations. Her casual disregard for Munoo's health — she insists he run her rickshaw in the heat despite his worsening tuberculosis — is a precise embodiment of what Fanon would later call the colonial relation: the reduction of the native to an instrument for the satisfaction of settler desires. Her distress at the prospect of being without a competent boy is presented in ironic counterpoint to Munoo's dying, making visible the moral callousness that colonial privilege requires and produces.

The novel ends with Munoo's death from tuberculosis, collapsed over his rickshaw. This conclusion is not merely a melodramatic device but a structural argument: the system of colonial capitalism, Anand insists, is lethal for those at its base. The coolie's body is the site where imperial economics and caste-based labor division converge to produce premature death. In this respect, *Coolie* anticipates the later theoretical literature on social determinants of health and the ways in which structural inequality is inscribed on the body.

5. COLONIAL POWER AND RACIAL INEQUALITY: TWO LEAVES AND A BUD (1937)

Two Leaves and a Bud extends Anand's analysis of colonial capitalism to the tea plantations of Assam, where the protagonist, Gangu, a peasant from the United Provinces, migrates in search of economic survival following a crop failure. The title refers to the method of tea-picking — two leaves and a bud, the tender top of the tea plant — which serves as an emblem of the precision and care with which labor is extracted within a system that otherwise regards laborers as entirely disposable.

The plantation world Anand depicts is a microcosm of colonial racial capitalism in its most naked form. The British planters occupy a position of absolute authority, enforced by a combination of legal mechanisms — the contract system that binds laborers to the estate — and naked physical violence. The Indian manager, Buta Singh, represents the collaborating middle tier of the colonial hierarchy: complicit in the exploitation of his fellow Indians, yet himself subject to the contempt and condescension of the British planters. This triangulated structure of domination — European planter, Indian overseer, Indian laborer — allows Anand to map the racial, class, and national dimensions of colonial inequality with considerable analytical precision.



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The sexual politics of colonial exploitation receive significant attention in *Two Leaves and a Bud*. The rape of Gangu's daughter Leila by the British planter Reggie Hunt is the novel's central act of violence, and Anand's treatment of it reveals the intersection of gender, class, and racial domination that characterizes the plantation system. The sexual availability of Indian women to European men is presented not as an aberration but as a structural feature of colonial power — one that is enabled by the economic vulnerability of laboring families, the legal impunity of planters, and the racial ideology that positions Indian women as both inferior and available.

Anand's representation of colonial inequality in *Two Leaves and a Bud* has been criticized for its didactic quality — for the directness with which its political message is delivered. The British planters are drawn with a satirical sharpness that borders on caricature, and the novel's ending, in which Gangu is murdered after protesting his daughter's violation, has the quality of a political parable. Yet this very directness reflects Anand's understanding of the political function of fiction: in a context in which colonial violence was systematically normalized and naturalized, the unambiguous naming of that violence was itself a political act.

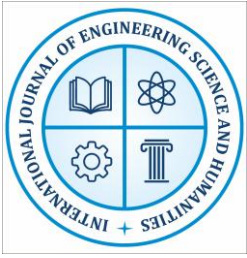
6. VILLAGE POVERTY AND FEUDAL HIERARCHY: THE VILLAGE (1939)

The Village, the first part of Anand's *Lalu* trilogy (continued in *Across the Black Waters* and *The Sword and the Sickle*), marks a shift in scale from the individual protagonists of the earlier novels to a more panoramic social vision. Set in a Punjabi village in the years before the First World War, the novel traces the life of Lal Singh (*Lalu*), a young peasant caught between the feudal authority of the landlord class, the extractive mechanisms of colonial revenue collection, and his own inchoate aspirations toward freedom and dignity.

The village in Anand's fiction is never the idealized community of nationalist mythology. It is instead a space saturated with power relations — between landlords and tenants, between upper and lower castes, between men and women, between moneylenders and debtors. The detailed attention Anand pays to the economic mechanisms of village life — the crop-sharing arrangements that dispossess the cultivator, the interest rates that ensure permanent indebtedness, the ceremonial obligations that drain the resources of poor families — reflects his insistence on the material basis of rural inequality.

Lalu is a more politically conscious protagonist than *Bakha* or *Munoo*, and *The Village* registers the emergence of nationalist and socialist ideas in the Indian countryside as an incipient challenge to feudal and colonial authority. Yet Anand is too honest a social observer to present this political consciousness as unambiguously transformative. The weight of tradition, economic dependency, and internalized deference ensures that the village's subaltern classes remain largely incapable of organized resistance. The novel thus captures both the conditions that produce political consciousness and the structural obstacles that prevent its translation into collective action.

The representation of gender inequality in *The Village* deserves particular attention. Women in Anand's village are subject to a double oppression: the class and caste hierarchies that oppress their



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male relatives, and the additional burden of patriarchal authority within the household and community. The purdah system, child marriage, the vulnerability of widows, and the sexual exploitation of lower-caste women by landlords are all registered in the novel's social landscape. Anand does not sentimentalize his female characters; he presents them as active agents within the severely constrained spaces available to them, while refusing to minimize the violence of those constraints.

7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: MARXISM, HUMANISM, AND POSTCOLONIALISM

7.1 Marxist Dimensions

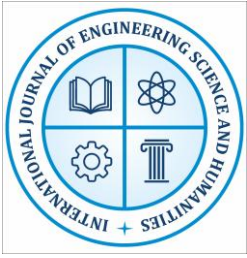
The Marxist dimensions of Anand's social vision are evident throughout his fiction. His attention to the material conditions of production — the factory, the plantation, the village field — and his insistence on the relationship between economic exploitation and social degradation reflect his engagement with historical materialism. Yet Anand's Marxism is not schematic or reductive. He does not reduce his characters to class types or his novels to ideological demonstrations. Instead, he uses Marxist analysis as a tool for uncovering the structural foundations of individual suffering, while insisting on the full complexity of his characters' inner lives.

The concept of alienation is central to Anand's representation of labor. Whether in the cotton mills of Bombay, the tea gardens of Assam, or the latrine-cleaning work of Bakha, Anand depicts labor that is not self-expression but self-negation — work that diminishes rather than fulfils the human beings who perform it. This alienation is not merely economic but existential: it involves the denial of the laborer's claim to humanity, beauty, and self-determination. In this respect, Anand's fiction resonates with the early Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts more than with the structural analysis of Capital, though elements of both are present.

7.2 Humanist Ethics

Running alongside and sometimes in tension with the Marxist dimension of Anand's work is a strong humanist ethical commitment. This commitment is most evident in his insistence on the full humanity of his protagonists — their capacity for love, beauty, humor, and aspiration — in the face of social systems that reduce them to functional categories. Anand's humanism is not the abstract universalism of liberal political philosophy but a particularized, embodied humanism that insists on the dignity of specific individuals in specific social situations.

E.M. Forster's influence is most visible in this humanist dimension of Anand's work. Forster's famous formulation — 'only connect' — finds a social-political application in Anand's fiction, where the barriers of caste, class, and race are represented as failures of human connection, as the refusal of recognition that violence requires and produces. Anand's protagonists are most fully themselves — most recognizably human — in those moments of connection that transcend social hierarchy: in Bakha's relationship with the Sikh soldier who befriends him, in the solidarity that briefly emerges



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among workers in the mill. These moments of connection are fragile and temporary, but they point toward the possibility of a different social order.

7.3 Postcolonial Perspectives

From a postcolonial perspective, Anand's novels raise complex questions about the politics of representation and the relationship between the writer and his subjects. Writing in English — the language of the colonial power — about the most marginalized members of Indian society, Anand inevitably occupies a position of structural privilege relative to his protagonists. Critics, particularly those associated with the Subaltern Studies school and with Dalit literary criticism, have noted the ways in which this structural position inflects his representations: the tendency to view the subaltern from above and outside, to emphasize pathos over agency, and to position the educated progressive male narrator as the mediating consciousness through which the reader accesses the experience of the oppressed.

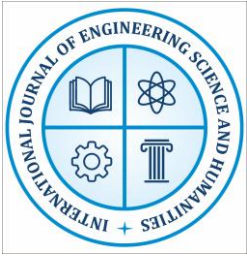
These are valid criticisms, and they alert us to the real limitations of Anand's representational project. Yet they should not obscure the extent to which Anand was, within the constraints of his historical and social position, engaged in a genuinely radical act. To insist, in 1935, that the life of a sweeper was worth a novel — that it constituted legitimate literary material of the highest order — was to challenge not only the social hierarchy that condemned Bakha to his degradation but also the literary hierarchy that reserved the novel as a form for the representation of upper-class and upper-caste experience.

8. LANGUAGE, STYLE, AND THE POLITICS OF FORM

Anand's narrative technique is inseparable from his political project. His use of a modified English that incorporates elements of Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu syntax and vocabulary is not merely a stylistic experiment but a political statement: an insistence that the colonial language can be made to accommodate the speech patterns and sensibilities of those whom colonialism sought to silence. The resulting hybrid idiom — what critics have sometimes called 'babu English' — has been criticized for its occasional awkwardness, but it represents a genuine attempt to render in English the specific textures of north Indian working-class experience.

Anand's use of free indirect discourse, noted earlier in relation to *Untouchable*, is his most important technical innovation. By inhabiting the consciousness of his protagonists while maintaining a degree of authorial distance, he is able to register both the subjective experience of social inequality — the shame, anger, bewilderment, and aspiration of those who suffer it — and the objective social structures that produce those experiences. This technique creates a productive tension between empathy and analysis, between the pull of identification with the suffering individual and the need for a structural understanding of the conditions that produce that suffering.

The use of symbolism in Anand's novels deserves attention. Objects — the flush toilet in *Untouchable*, the two leaves and a bud of the tea plant, the village plow — are invested with both



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material and symbolic significance. The flush toilet that the poet envisions at the end of *Untouchable* is simultaneously a practical technological solution to the problem of sanitation and a symbol of the broader social transformation that would render the untouchable's work — and therefore the untouchable's degraded status — obsolete. This double function of objects — as material facts within a specific social-economic system and as symbols of that system's contradictions and possibilities — is characteristic of Anand's realist method.

9. LIMITATIONS AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

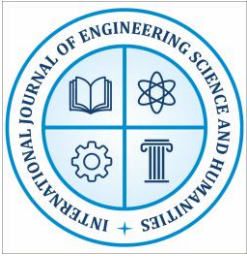
Any honest assessment of Anand's representational project must acknowledge its limitations alongside its achievements. The most frequently noted limitation is the paternalistic quality of his gaze. His protagonists are typically observed and pitied rather than allowed to speak for themselves in their full complexity. The narrative voice, however sympathetically it inhabits the consciousness of a Bakha or a Munoo, retains an educative distance that positions the reader — implicitly assumed to be educated, progressive, and outside the world of caste and colonial labor — as the addressee of a social lesson. This pedagogical structure, while politically motivated, limits the novels' capacity to do what the best fiction does: unsettle our assumptions about where we stand in relation to the social worlds we inhabit.

The representation of women in Anand's fiction has also been subject to feminist criticism. While Anand is acutely aware of the gendered dimensions of social inequality, his female characters are frequently defined by their victimization and their relationship to male protagonists. The active, self-determining woman is largely absent from his fictional world, a lacuna that reflects both the patriarchal assumptions of his historical moment and the limits of his own feminist imagination. His later novel, *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts* (1938), shows greater sensitivity to the psychology of female characters, but does not substantially revise this pattern.

Critical reception of Anand's work has been mixed. British reviewers of the 1930s tended to praise his novels as authentic documents of Indian social life while sometimes condescending to their literary artistry. Indian critics, particularly after independence, were divided between those who celebrated his political commitment and those who questioned the adequacy of English as a medium for the representation of Indian social experience. More recently, scholars working within Dalit studies and postcolonial theory have offered more searching critiques of the representational politics of his fiction, while also acknowledging his pioneering role in bringing the experience of India's most marginalized communities to international literary attention.

10. LEGACY AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The enduring relevance of Anand's social vision is attested to by the persistence of the inequalities he documented. Caste discrimination, while formally outlawed by the Indian Constitution, continues to shape the life chances of millions of Dalits in contemporary India. Class exploitation, far from being ameliorated by post-independence development, has in many respects been intensified by the



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integration of the Indian economy into global capitalism. Colonial racism has been succeeded by new forms of racial and ethnic discrimination both within India and in the Indian diaspora. Against this background, Anand's insistence on the necessity of confronting structural inequality — rather than merely ameliorating its most visible symptoms — retains its political urgency.

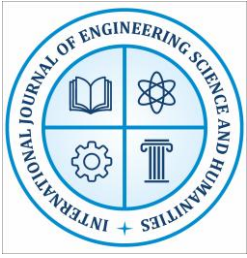
Anand's influence on subsequent Indian writing in English is substantial. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), with its central focus on the love affair between a Syrian Christian woman and an untouchable, can be read as a meditation on the enduring power of caste boundaries; Roy's novel owes something to the tradition of socially engaged fiction that Anand helped to establish. The explosion of Dalit literature in regional languages over the past three decades — works by Namdeo Dhasal, Om Prakash Valmiki, Bama, and others — represents a transformation and deepening of the project Anand began, as writers from within the experience of untouchability take up the representational task he attempted from outside.

Anand's work also invites productive comparison with other traditions of socially engaged fiction. His representation of industrial labor parallels Emile Zola's naturalist treatment of the French mining proletariat in *Germinal*; his attention to the psychology of the colonized resonates with Frantz Fanon's theoretical analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks*; his use of fiction as a vehicle for political education connects him to the tradition of committed literature that extends from Upton Sinclair to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. These comparative contexts remind us that Anand's project, while rooted in the specific conditions of colonial India, belongs to a broader international tradition of literature as social critique.

11. CONCLUSION

Mulk Raj Anand's novels constitute one of the most sustained and committed literary engagements with social inequality in the history of Indian literature. Through the lives of sweepers, coolies, tea-garden laborers, and peasants, he mapped the multiple, interlocking hierarchies — caste, class, gender, and colonial race — that structured Indian society in the first half of the twentieth century. His literary method — the combination of socialist analysis with humanist empathy, of material attention to the conditions of labor with sensitivity to the interior lives of his protagonists — produced a body of fiction that remains indispensable to our understanding of India's social history and its literary culture.

The limitations of Anand's representational project are real and deserve continued critical attention. The paternalistic gaze, the limited representation of female agency, the occasional didacticism — these are genuine weaknesses that reflect both the historical moment of his writing and the social position from which he wrote. But these limitations should not diminish our recognition of what he accomplished: the introduction, into the mainstream of Indian English fiction, of the lives and experiences of those whom both colonial and nationalist culture had rendered invisible and unspeakable.



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In an era in which social inequality continues to intensify globally, and in which the politics of representation — of who gets to speak, about whom, and in what language — remains as contested as ever, Anand's literary project retains its relevance. His novels remind us that literature has a responsibility to bear witness to social suffering, to refuse the consolations of aestheticism and the evasions of political neutrality, and to insist, with all the formal resources at its disposal, on the full humanity of those whom social systems seek to diminish. This insistence is Anand's most enduring legacy, and it is one that readers, critics, and writers continue to engage with and build upon.

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