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Social Concerns and Their Contemporary Relevance in the Selected Novels of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the early writers of Indian English fiction. His novels show the tough realities of Indian society during the colonial period. His stories focus on the lives of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized in society. Through his realistic narrative and humanistic vision, Anand exposes social evils such as untouchability, poverty, class discrimination, labour exploitation, and colonial oppression. This paper examines the major social concerns reflected in the selected novels *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud*. It also explores the contemporary relevance of these issues in the twenty-first century. Although India has witnessed significant social, economic, and political changes since independence, many of the problems depicted by Anand continue to exist in different forms. The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis to investigate how Anand's novels challenge social injustice and advocate equality, dignity, and human values. The paper argues that Anand's humanistic philosophy remains relevant in contemporary society, where caste discrimination, economic inequality, labour exploitation, and social exclusion continue to affect millions of people. Thus, Mulk Raj Anand's novels are not merely historical documents but enduring literary texts that inspire readers to strive for a more just and humane society.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, Social Concerns, Untouchability, Poverty, Humanism, Colonialism, Labour Exploitation, Contemporary Relevance.

Introduction

Indian English literature has played a significant role in bringing to the readers across the world the cultural, social, political and economic realities of India. Mulk Raj Anand occupies a unique place among the early pioneers of Indian English fiction on account of his deep concern for the suffering of the ordinary people. Unlike many writers who wrote of the lives of the educated and privileged classes, Anand devoted his novels to the poor, the oppressed and the socially neglected

sections of the society. His literary career has been characterized by a strong commitment to social justice, equality and human dignity.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905 – 2004) was famous novelist in colonial India and witnessed various forms of social discrimination, including caste oppression, poverty, and economic exploitation. These experiences profoundly influenced his literary imagination. His association with progressive intellectual movements further strengthened his belief that literature should serve society by exposing injustice and promoting humanitarian values. Hence, his novels combine artistic excellence with social commitment, making him one of the most influential novelists in Indian English literature.

The present study focuses on three of Anand's most celebrated novels—*Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937). These novels collectively portray different dimensions of social oppression in colonial India. *Untouchable* exposes the in human practice of caste based discrimination through the life of **Bakha**, a young sweeper. *Coolie* narrates the tragic experiences of **Munoo**, whose life represents poverty, child **labour**, and class exploitation. *Two Leaves and a Bud* presents the exploitation of plantation workers under the British colonial system, revealing the harsh realities of imperial domination and economic injustice.

Although these novels were written nearly a century ago, their themes continue to resonate in modern society. Issues such as caste discrimination, economic inequality, labour exploitation, migration, unemployment, and social exclusion remain significant challenges in contemporary India and many other parts of the world. Anand's vision of an egalitarian society based on justice, compassion, and human dignity therefore remains highly relevant.

This paper aims to analyze the major social concerns depicted in the selected novels of Mulk Raj Anand and examine their contemporary relevance. By highlighting the continuity of these social issues, the study demonstrates that Anand's fiction continues to provide meaningful insights into present-day social realities. His novels encourage readers not only to understand the roots of injustice but also to promote equality, social harmony, and respect for human dignity.

Review of Literature

Mulk Raj Anand has received considerable critical attention for his realistic portrayal of Indian society and his commitment to social reform. Critics such as K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, M. K. Naik, and Meenakshi Mukherjee have acknowledged Anand as one of the pioneers of Indian English fiction. His novels are widely appreciated for their depiction of the lives of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized sections of society.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that Anand's fiction combines artistic realism with a profound humanitarian vision. M. K. Naik highlights Anand's concern for the underprivileged and his criticism of social injustice. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that Anand's novels present a realistic picture of colonial India while simultaneously advocating social equality and human dignity. Although several scholars have examined Anand's treatment of caste, poverty, and colonialism, there is still scope to explore the continuing relevance of these issues in the context of contemporary society. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by analysing how the social concerns depicted in Anand's selected novels continue to influence present-day India.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the major social concerns portrayed in the selected novels of Mulk Raj Anand.
2. To analyze Anand's humanistic vision and commitment to social justice.
3. To evaluate the contemporary relevance of the issues presented in his novels.
4. To assess Anand's contribution to Indian English literature as a socially committed novelist.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and analytical research method. It is primarily based on textual analysis of three selected novels **Untouchable**, **Coolie**, and **Two Leaves and a Bud**. Both primary and secondary sources have been consulted. The primary sources include the novels themselves, while secondary sources consist of books, journal articles, and critical essays related to Mulk Raj Anand and Indian English literature. The study follows the MLA 9th edition style for citation and documentation.

Social Concerns in Untouchable

The Novel *Untouchable* (Published in 1935) is one of the best examples of social realism in Indian English literature. The novel narrates a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper boy belonging to the so called "untouchable" community. Through Bakha's experiences, Anand exposes the inhuman practice of caste discrimination and reveals its devastating impact on an individual's identity and self-respect.

Bakha is portrayed as hardworking, intelligent, and sensitive. However, despite possessing these qualities, he is repeatedly humiliated because of his caste. He is denied equal treatment in public places, insulted by members of the upper castes, and forced to perform degrading occupations. Anand demonstrates that caste discrimination is not merely a social practice but a systematic denial of human dignity.

Another significant concern highlighted in the novel is the lack of sanitation and the exploitation of manual scavengers. Bakha's profession symbolizes the unequal distribution of labour in traditional Indian society. Anand strongly criticizes a social system that assigns dignity to certain occupations while degrading others solely on the basis of birth.

The novel also presents education and social awareness as instruments of change. Bakha's desire for a better life reflects the aspirations of millions of marginalized individuals seeking equality and respect. Anand does not merely expose social evils; he also encourages readers to question discriminatory traditions and embrace humanitarian values.

The relevance of *Untouchable* remains undeniable even in the twenty-first century. Although legal measures have abolished untouchability, caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, manual scavenging, and unequal access to opportunities continue to affect many communities. Incidents of caste violence and discrimination reported in different parts of India indicate that Anand's concerns remain relevant. Therefore, *Untouchable* continues to inspire discussions on human rights, equality, social justice, and constitutional values. The novel reminds readers that true social

progress is possible only when every individual is treated with dignity, irrespective of caste or social status.

Social Concerns in *Coolie*

The Novel *Coolie* (Published in 1936) is one of Mulk Raj Anand's most famous social novels. It highlights the brutal life of Munoo, an orphaned boy who is forced to struggle for survival in a deeply unequal society. Through Munoo's journey from one place to another, Anand exposes a realistic picture of poverty, child labour, industrial exploitation, and social injustice.

Poverty is the central concern of the novel. Munoo is compelled to work from an early age because he has no economic support or family protection. Instead of receiving education and care, he becomes a victim of exploitation by employers who treat him merely as a source of cheap labour. Anand illustrates how poverty deprives individuals of opportunities and forces them into a continuous cycle of suffering.

Another significant issue highlighted in the novel is child labour. Munoo works in households, factories, and mills under extremely harsh conditions. He receives low wages, faces physical and emotional abuse, and is denied basic human rights. Anand strongly criticizes a society that exploits children instead of ensuring their education and well-being.

The novel also exposes the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Wealthy employers enjoy luxury and comfort, while laborers' struggle to secure food, shelter, and healthcare. Through this contrast, Anand reveals the structural inequalities that sustain social injustice. Munoo's tragic death from illness symbolizes the neglect of the poor and the failure of society to protect its most vulnerable members.

The themes of *Coolie* remain highly relevant today. Despite legal reforms and economic development, poverty, child labour, unemployment, migration, and labour exploitation continue to exist in many parts of the world. Millions of workers still face insecure employment, inadequate wages, and unsafe working conditions. Thus, Anand's novel serves as a powerful reminder that economic progress must be accompanied by social justice and respect for human dignity.

Social Concerns in *Two Leaves and a Bud*

The Novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* (Published in 1937) examines the exploitation of Indian plantation workers during British colonial rule. The novel tells the story of Gangu, a poor farmer who joins a tea plantation in Assam with the hope of improving his family's condition. However, instead of finding security and prosperity, he encounters oppression, exploitation, and violence under the colonial system.

The novel primarily focuses on colonial and economic exploitation. Plantation owners treat Indian laborers as disposable workers whose lives have little value. They are paid meagre wages, forced to work under difficult conditions, and denied basic rights. Anand exposes the inhumanity of a colonial system that prioritizes profit over human welfare.

Another important concern is the misuse of power. British officials and plantation managers exercise absolute authority over workers, leaving them with no opportunity to seek justice. Their oppressive behaviour reflects the unequal power relations that characterized colonial India. Anand

portrays the psychological and physical suffering experienced by ordinary people under imperial domination.

The novel also highlights the vulnerability of poor families. Gangu's hopes for a better future are gradually destroyed by exploitation and violence. His tragic fate demonstrates that poverty and oppression are closely interconnected. Anand suggests that true freedom cannot exist unless economic justice accompanies political independence.

The contemporary relevance of *Two Leaves and a Bud* extends beyond the colonial period. Although colonial rule has ended, many workers around the world continue to experience exploitation in plantations, factories, and other industries. Low wages, unsafe working conditions, forced migration, and corporate exploitation remain pressing global concerns. Anand's criticism of injustice therefore continues to resonate in discussions on labour rights, ethical business practices, and social equality.

Taken together, *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud* reveal Mulk Raj Anand's unwavering commitment to humanism. Through realistic characters and socially engaged narratives, he challenges discrimination, exploitation, and inequality. His novels encourage readers to question oppressive systems and to work towards a society founded on equality, justice, compassion, and respect for every individual.

Contemporary Relevance

Although Mulk Raj Anand wrote his works during the colonial era, the themes and issues presented in them remain relevant even today. India has made tremendous progress in the fields of education, technology, industry, and constitutional democracy. However, many of the problems experienced by Mulk Raj Anand still exist in different forms, which reveals that his novels can still evoke interest in the twenty-first century.

Among the most important themes present in Mulk Raj Anand's work is caste discrimination. Although the Constitution of India guarantees equality in front of the law and prohibits untouchability, caste-based discrimination and violence have still been reported. Social exclusion, unequal access to resources, and discriminatory practices in education and employment are also given as evidence of the fact that the struggle for social equality is not complete.

Similarly, the problems of poverty and labour exploitation depicted in *Coolie* remain relevant today. Economic inequality, unemployment, child labour, and the exploitation of migrant workers continue to challenge developing societies. Globalization has created new employment opportunities, but it has also exposed many workers to insecure jobs, low wages, and poor working conditions. Anand's concern for the rights of workers and marginalized communities continues to inspire debates on inclusive development and social justice.

The exploitation of workers presented in *Two Leaves and a Bud* also reflects contemporary realities. In many parts of the world, labourers still experience unsafe workplaces, inadequate wages, and unequal treatment. Anand's criticism of economic exploitation encourages modern societies to promote ethical employment practices, corporate responsibility, and respect for workers' rights.

Above all, Anand's humanistic philosophy remains timeless. He believed that every individual deserves equality, compassion, and respect irrespective of caste, class, religion, or economic status. His novels encourage readers to challenge injustice and participate in building a society based on democracy, social harmony, and human dignity. Therefore, Anand's fiction continues to serve not only as literary achievement but also as a guide for creating a more equitable and humane world.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand holds a special place in the realm of Indian English literature because of his dedication to social realism and humanitarianism. With his novels including *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand shed light on terrible realities of caste, poverty, child labour, colonialism, and social inequality.

From the present research work, it is apparent that Anand's novels are not restricted to the historical context of colonial India. On the contrary, his work is of great relevance in today's world as well where society is plagued with caste system, exploitation of labour, economic disparity, and social exclusion.

In fact, the contributions made by Mulk Raj Anand's writings promote universal ideas like equality, justice, compassion, and human dignity. His works enable the readers to spot the agonies of the underprivileged and strive for a society where an individual has equal rights and opportunities.

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