The Voice of the Voiceless: A Study of Social Realism and Humanism in Mulk Raj Anand's Novels

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Abstract
This study examines Mulk Raj Anand's seminal contribution to Indian English literature by analyzing the interplay between Social Realism and Comprehensive Historical Humanism in his major novels, specifically *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud*. Anand, a lifelong socialist and a founding member of the Progressive Writers' Association, strategically employed Social Realism—a literary approach aimed at portraying socioeconomic reality—to transform his fiction into a platform for genuine social and political awakening. The investigation argues that Anand's success as the "voice of the voiceless" lies in his innovative utilization of modernist narrative techniques, such as the stream of consciousness, to grant profound psychological complexity and depth to subaltern protagonists like Bakha and Munoo. This approach effectively translated systemic oppression—whether rooted in caste, class, or colonialism—into compelling humanistic tragedy. The analysis further demonstrates that Anand's humanism, synthesized from Gandhian compassion, Marxist dialectic, and a pragmatic scientific approach, provided the necessary moral and philosophical structure to fight for the dignity of the marginalized, thereby cementing his enduring legacy.

Keywords: Social Realism, Humanism, Mulk Raj Anand, Caste, Class, Progressive Writers' Movement, Untouchable, Coolie

Introduction: Anand and the Architecture of Compassion
Mulk Raj Anand established himself as a central figure in Indian English literature through the creation of a vast body of work that transcended mere storytelling to become significant social commentary [10]. His novels are recognized equally as important literary artifacts and powerful social statements [1]. Anand is confirmed as a pioneer who chronicles the socioeconomic realities and universal issues concerning every man and every area of society [6]. His writing is characterized by a humanitarian undertone that makes his compositions captivating decades after they were first published [10].

The fundamental purpose of Anand's fiction was to expose the suffering and miseries of the downtrodden and underprivileged people inflicted upon them by the privileged classes [9]. His literary endeavors were deeply influenced by the events of his own life and his fervent belief in socialist principles [1]. The novels serve to articulate the "silent passions that burst in the hearts of the people who are forbidden to rise up and express themselves" [11]. This crucial act of granting a voice to the subaltern—the literal and symbolic "voiceless"—is profoundly rooted in his socialist and humanistic convictions [1].

The present investigation seeks to define the architecture of this compassion. This paper posits that Mulk Raj Anand's success as the "voice of the voiceless" stems from the calculated synergy between his rigorous application of Social Realism as a documentary critique of oppression, and his advocacy for a Comprehensive Historical Humanism that demands practical, material solutions for systemic injustice. The Social Realism provided the authentic, undeniable evidence of systemic abuse, while the Humanism supplied the moral framework and reformist urgency necessary for political and moral awakening [5].

Literature Review: Theoretical Foundations and Critical Context
Defining Social Realism in the Indian Context
Social realism, as a literary trend, seeks to portray the socioeconomic reality of the world [3]. Though the movement is typically traced back to 19th-century France, associated with writers like Flaubert and Balzac, its core concern has always been the commonplaces of everyday life among the middle and lower classes, where character is deeply shaped by societal forces [4]. In the context of Indian English Literature, Anand applied this trend to meticulously detail the suffering of the misused masses of Indian society, often focusing on poverty, starvation, hopelessness, and embarrassment [6].

Anand's commitment to this literary mode was institutionalized by his political ideology. He was a lifelong socialist [1] and a founding member of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), which solidified his conviction that politics and literature must remain inextricable from one another [1]. His method involved transforming verifiable "certainties into fictions" through careful organization of material to present a sensible, authentic vision of life [6]. This commitment ensured that his writing was not merely abstract narrative but a forceful depiction of social ills, intended to evoke genuine emotion in the hearts of conscientious readers [6].

The Nuance of Anand's Humanism

Anand is consistently categorized by academics and critics as a humanist, a designation owed to his belief that humanism is the "key that is needed to awaken the people's hearts, minds, and souls" [10]. His perspective is entirely humanistic, filled with compassion and empathy for the exploited masses.[10] This humanism is not passive; it is active and reformist, emphasizing the importance of reason, morality, and the pursuit of happiness while rejecting traditional, obstructive attitudes [13]. The essential linkage between Anand's realism and his humanism lies in their complementary objectives. Social Realism, by focusing relentlessly on the details of the lowest social strata [4], provides the necessary documentation of human suffering. This authentic depiction then serves the explicit moral aim of his humanism: to evoke generosity and compassion in the minds of the privileged sections of society [11] Without the rigorous realism, the emotional imperative for change would be muted.

Furthermore, Anand's humanism is defined by its syncretic philosophical framework, which he termed "comprehensive historical humanism." This theory integrates Indian religious and philosophical thinking with modern scientific principles [8]. He was influenced by seminal figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Karl Marx, and Guru Nanak Dev [10]. While appreciating Gandhi's profound compassion for the poor, Anand critiqued his capitalist ideals; similarly, he adopted Marx's analysis of class stratification but sought a balance between revolutionary goals and humanitarian empathy [8]. His adherence to a scientific and pragmatic approach, often aligning with the socialistic pattern advocated by Jawaharlal Nehru, underlines his focus on achievable material solutions rather than abstract spiritual sanctions [8].

Social Realism and the Caste Scourge: The Case of *Untouchable*

Documentation of Caste Oppression

Untouchable (1935) remains Anand's most potent application of social realism to the issue of traditional caste oppression. The novel functions as a powerful, uncompromising critique of Hindu orthodoxy and the institutionalized inequality that condemns individuals to profound suffering based solely on their assigned, stigmatized labor, such as sweeping and cleaning.[9] The narrative meticulously tracks the life of Bakha, the protagonist, over the course of a single day, exposing the unrelenting cycle of abuse he endures.[9] Anand demonstrates that the paralyzing and polarizing difference between various caste levels shapes Bakha's day and fuels the narrative [14] The novel reveals the hypocrisy of religious leaders who preach compassion while upholding oppressive practices, maintaining the caste hierarchy through emphasis on ritual purity [16].

The Dehumanizing Impact of Pollution

The climax of Bakha's humiliation occurs when he unintentionally brushes against a high-caste man while walking through the marketplace. The man verbally assaults him, demanding, "'Keep to the side of the road, ohe low-caste vermin!'" and striking him for having "defiled" him.[9] In another instance at the confectioner's stall, the sweets are thrown to Bakha "like a cricket ball" to avoid physical contact [9]. The physical act of being struck is compounded by the psychological trauma. Bakha's immediate internal response is one of paralysis: "He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralyzed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear of humility and servility" [9]. This incident forces him to recognize with shocking clarity his social position—that despite possessing "head and heart, and flesh and blood" like any other human being, he is fundamentally labeled as an untouchable in the eyes of the world [9]. The novel highlights the absurdity and cruelty of societal norms, noting the double standard that considers touching a bull a benediction but touching a human being like Bakha a malediction [9]. The most damning indictment of institutionalized religion is the Temple Incident, where Bakha is accused of polluting the premises despite his sincere, if hesitant, devotion [7]. The sudden, violent cry of, "Polluted! Polluted! Polluted!" [7]. shatters the holy atmosphere, illustrating the exclusionary nature of the religion he is desperate to embrace. High-caste individuals invoke the *Holy Books* to justify the necessary purification ceremony after Bakha merely stands on the steps, reinforcing the systemic exclusion [7]. When Bakha later learns that a high-caste priest attempted to outrage his sister Sohini's modesty, his "wild desire to retaliate" is instantly negated by the realization of the "futility" of confronting a system that has erected "barriers of convention to protect their excesses" [9].

Narrative Technique: Exposing the Interior Injury

Anand's commitment to humanism dictated that he do more than merely record the external events of oppression. He needed to prove the internal, shared humanity of the subaltern. To achieve this, *Untouchable* makes extensive use of the stream of consciousness (SOC) technique, making it one of the most prominent archaic examples in Indian English literature [7]. This narrative choice is essential to the humanistic project. By anchoring the narrative in the "interior life" and the "thinking trance of Bakha" [7], Anand shifts the emphasis from external action to the functioning of the protagonist's mind. This structural decision validates the consciousness of the subaltern, forcing the reader to recognize that Bakha's mind is complex, sensitive, and worthy of literary focus, contradicting his socially assigned worthlessness. The SOC technique is used to reveal the deep psychological injury that accompanies social exclusion, an injury characterized as fundamentally mental rather than merely physical [7]. Bakha's mind is "flashed backward or forward" [7], exploring his aspirations and anxieties. His internal monologues reveal his unfulfilled desire for self-education, his dream of reading Waris Shah's *Hir and Ranjah*, and his longing to speak "tish-mish, tish-mish English" [7]. The technique vividly conveys his turmoil, such as his confused soliloquy after being struck: "'Why was I so humble? I could have struck him!... But why couldn't I say something?... Why are we always abused?'" [7]. By bearing the "brushed mind and soul of Bakha," his fears, anxieties, and emotions are placed on the same level of tragic import as

the psychological suffering of any literary protagonist, achieving a profound humanistic statement of equality [7].

Humanism and the Class Struggle: From *Coolie* to *Two Leaves and a Bud*
The Shift to Class Consciousness
As Anand's literary imagination developed, his social realism expanded beyond the traditional confines of caste to address the burgeoning socioeconomic realities of colonial, industrializing India. In this context, class began to emerge as an "overriding pattern of oppression". Thematic analysis of *Coolie* (1936) confirms this transition, focusing on the evils of the class system, which the novel views as an even greater systemic evil than caste [11].

The title itself, *Coolie*, is suggestive of the universal identity of the exploited laborer across India [11]. This novel document the misery of poverty through the experiences of Munoo, the child-hero, demonstrating that economic exploitation transcends localized caste traditions, making the suffering structural and transferable.

The Exploitation of Munoo
Munoo's story is a picaresque narrative of economic victimization. He is relentlessly forced to suffer by the "wicked propensities of the adult world" [11]. His search for livelihood is a relentless, geographical progression through diverse, oppressive labor conditions: from domestic servant in an urban middle-class family, to child laborer in a factory, market coolie, cotton mill worker in Bombay, and finally, a rickshaw puller in Shimla [11]. This documentation of Munoo's transient, suffering existence demonstrates that poverty is the root cause of his tragedy, driving him until he meets his "doom" [11]. The universalization of Munoo's plight across different forms of labor fulfills the comprehensive scope of Anand's humanism. The central humanistic critique is starkly clear in the context of industrial capitalism: the poor are dehumanized to such an extent that a poor man's "flesh and blood is treated as cheaper than bread" [11]. In Bombay's cotton mills, Anand depicts unscientific working conditions and tyrannical foremen who treat Indian laborers "like animals"[11]. By detailing this wide-ranging structural abuse, Anand effectively universalized the experience of the voiceless, showing that millions suffer identically under economic and class stratification, regardless of their specific geographic or traditional origin [6].

Imperialism and Agrarian Exploitation in *Two Leaves and a Bud*
This novel (1937) marks Anand's explicit foray into critiquing British colonial capitalism. *Two Leaves and a Bud* is recognized as a powerful crusade against imperialism and capitalistic exploitation, specifically exposing the unending anguish of tea plantation laborers [11]. The title itself operates symbolically, standing in sharp contrast to the tragic realities of the workers. It represents the coolies as defenseless elements, like the leaves and the bud, that can be "easily plucked and crushed," becoming prey to the tyranny of power, greed, and exploitation under British rule [11]. Anand uses social realism to expose the ill-treatment of thousands of "wretched labourers" at the hands of arrogant British planters, such as Croft-cooke and Reggie Hint, and their complicit Indian sycophants [11]. The novel satirizes the capitalist concept of viewing poor workers as mere tools or "beasts of burden," used solely as economic units for selfish ends.[11]

Through this powerful, dramatic narrative of colonial exploitation, Anand extends his humanistic focus to the anti-imperialist front, documenting the systematic dehumanization inherent in the colonial labor structure [11].

Philosophical Synthesis: Materialism, Compassion, and Liberation
Navigating Ideological Paths
Anand's humanism is fundamentally a search for a viable path to liberation for the oppressed. He consciously attempts to navigate and synthesize the complex ideological landscape of mid-20th-century India, seeking a balance between the compassion advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and the materialist, anti-stratification goals preached by Karl Marx.[8] Though he appreciated Tagore's ethics and Gandhi's empathy, Anand stood firmly for a socialistic pattern of society combined with a scientific approach, viewing reason and pragmatism as essential elements for overcoming India's endemic problems.[8] This conflict of solutions is most evident in the ending of *Untouchable*, where Bakha encounters three proposed paths to emancipation: the Christian missionary's talk of sin and confession, Mahatma Gandhi's call for moral awakening among high-caste Hindus, and the technological solution of the water-closet, or flush system [9].

The Verdict of Pragmatism
Anand, through the narrative lens, scrutinizes the effectiveness of purely moral or spiritual remedies. While Gandhi's ideals of equality are juxtaposed with the realities of caste discrimination, exposing the gap between rhetoric and practice [16], the immediate and practical relief offered by infrastructure is emphasized. Bakha, confused by abstract concepts like sin, finds temporary comfort in Gandhiji's chastisement of caste Hindus and the long-term hope that social conscience will be roused.[9] However, the third solution—the flush system—is presented as the most convincing. It is described as "prosaic, straightforward," and entirely convincing when considered in the light of Bakha's daily suffering [9]. Bakha's mind is ultimately "raised with the hope that soon the flush system would come to the sweepers" [9].

Material Conditions as the Basis for Dignity
Anand's preference for the technological solution signifies the ultimate triumph of the materialist component within his humanism. His critique implies that dignity and liberation cannot be achieved through spiritual or purely moral transformation alone; they require a fundamental, structural alteration of the socio-material conditions defining the oppressed group. Bakha's untouchability is inextricably linked to his hereditary, stigmatized occupation of manual scavenging. By eliminating the need for this demeaning labor through modern sanitation technology, the structural foundation of his identity and suffering is directly attacked. This focus on scientific, material change over abstract religious or political appeals validates the Marxist-influenced demand for practical, fundamental transformation as the vehicle for human liberation. The consistency of Anand's critique across different forms of exploitation—traditional (caste), industrial (class), and colonial (imperialism)—demonstrates the systematic nature of his humanistic intervention, focusing always on the immediate needs and material suffering of the voiceless.

Table 1: Thematic Critique and Humanistic Proposals in Anand's Major Social Realist Novels

Novel	Primary Oppression (Social Realism Focus)	The Voiceless Protagonist	Narrative Technique Highlighted	Implicit Humanistic/Ideological Solution
Untouchable	Caste, Ritual Purity, Hindu Orthodoxy [9].	Bakha (Sweeper/Dalit) [9].	Stream of Consciousness, Internal Monologue [7].	Technological Reform (Flush System), Gandhian Moral Suasion [9].
Coolie	Economic Class System, Poverty, Urban/Industrial Exploitation [11].	Munoo (Orphan/Child Laborer) [11].	Picaresque Structure, Free Indirect Discourse	Marxist Interpretation of Class Solidarity, Worker Rights
Two Leaves and a Bud	Imperialism, Capitalistic Exploitation (Plantation System) [11].	Gangu (Tea Plantation Coolie) [11].	Direct Political Crusade, Satire/Juxtaposition [11].	Anti-Imperialism, Socialist Equity, Dignity of Labor [11].

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Anand's Humanism

Mulk Raj Anand successfully utilized Social Realism not merely as a descriptive style but as a rigorous documentary tool, exposing the systematic suffering caused by deeply entrenched socioeconomic structures in colonial India. This realism was governed by a powerful moral compass—his Comprehensive Historical Humanism—which provided the imperative for change and ensured that the dignity of the individual remained paramount [11]. Anand's genius lay in his application of narrative innovation, particularly the stream of consciousness technique in *Untouchable* and the picaresque structure in *Coolie*, to provide psychological depth to subaltern protagonists. By anchoring the narrative in the internal lives of characters like Bakha and Munoo, Anand structurally validated their complex consciousness, ensuring that their narratives—their fears, aspirations, and torments— entered the mainstream literary consciousness, thus effectively raising the "voice of the voiceless". This aesthetic choice was a powerful articulation of human equality.

Ultimately, Anand's progressive philosophy argued that liberation must address material reality. His work synthesized compassion with a pragmatic demand for scientific and social change, suggesting that fundamental dignity requires the elimination of the structures of oppression, whether through technological advancement or anti-imperialist action. His novels remain potent social statements, demanding that society recognize the inherent dignity and shared humanity of those who have been "oppressed, repressed, dispossessed, disinherited, defrauded, downtrodden, discriminated and dehumanized" [11]. Mulk Raj Anand's legacy provides a vital model for the use of literature as a catalyst for genuine moral and political transformation.

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