Mulk Raj Anand's narrative realism: a stylistic and thematic analysis of his representation of Indian society

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Abstract
Mulk Raj Anand, a pivotal figure in the development of Indian writing in English, constructed a socially motivated literary framework defined by his concept of the "concave mirror". This model posited that art not only reflects life but actively refracts it with an ideological perspective, establishing Anand's narrative realism as fundamentally didactic. This paper executes a stylistic and thematic analysis of his foundational trilogy—*Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *Two Leaves and a Bud*—to examine how this purposeful realism engaged with the layered oppressions of colonial India. Stylistically, Anand employed Free Indirect Discourse (FID) to access interiority and deployed an "Indianized English" to capture vernacular reality and resistance.[2] Thematically, his work exposed the systemic cruelty of caste, as seen in the cyclical suffering of Bakha, and the dehumanizing effects of colonial capitalism and feudalism, evident in the exploitation of Munoo and Gangu. This analysis reveals a critical tension: while Anand successfully forced the English-educated elite to confront subaltern trauma, his narrative methodology, particularly the occasional use of rhetorical intrusion, is critiqued for structurally overriding the protagonist's emancipatory agency and thereby perpetuating certain "Brahmanical regimes of representation" in his handling of untouchability. The study concludes that Anand's enduring legacy rests on the successful establishment of literary form as a political tool, even as the specific limitations of that form remain a key site of postcolonial critical scrutiny.

Keywords: Narrative realism, Mulk Raj Anand, Postcolonial studies, Free indirect discourse, Indian English, Caste struggle, Class conflict, Subaltern agency

Introduction: Anand and the didactic imperative of Indian social realism

Mulk Raj Anand is universally acknowledged as a foundational architect of the modern Indian novel in English, utilizing the form to articulate radical social critiques during the anti-colonial era. His primary literary objective was explicitly political: to transform literature into an instrument for social and economic transformation [6]. Anand, a key ideologue of the Progressive Writers' Movement, was driven by the imperative of compelling the "English-educated elite" of India to confront the stark trauma inflicted upon subaltern groups—the victims of endemic caste and class atrocities—who had historically been rendered invisible [6].

Anand's aesthetic philosophy provides the essential theoretical anchor for understanding his narrative choices. He described his realism not as passive mimesis but as an ideological refraction, stating that, "to be sure, creative arts reflect life in a mirror. But the concave mirror is also a mirror" [1]. This "concave mirror" metaphor, analyzed by critics such as Ulka Anjaria (2012), defines Anand's approach. His realism is not merely a faithful depiction of society; it is an active, purposeful distortion designed to foreground injustice and elicit a response [1]. This nuanced approach established his project as inherently didactic, aiming for political effect rather than pure aesthetic representation.

This paper examines the complexity and contradictions inherent in Anand's socially engaged realism, focusing on the dual thematic critique of caste oppression in *Untouchable* (1935) and the class oppression central to *Coolie* (1936) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) [4]. The analysis integrates a close stylistic examination of his narrative techniques—specifically the deployment of Free Indirect Discourse and the innovative use of Indian English—with a thematic assessment of his representation of subaltern agency. This critical intersection reveals that while Anand successfully anchored his political themes in vernacular reality, his didactic imperative often created a structural contradiction between the objective depiction of the characters' reality and the authorial desire to impose ideological resolution.

The central contention of this study is that Anand's narrative realism, while profoundly successful in initiating social awareness, is a complex and contested project. The study demonstrates that the author's stylistic innovations, intended to grant voice to the marginalized, inadvertently created friction with his ideological goals, revealing crucial limitations regarding the representation of autonomous subaltern political agency, a tension rigorously detailed by scholarly interventions [3].

Literature review: contextualizing the debate on Anandian realism
Formal and ideological grounding

Mulk Raj Anand's fiction is situated within the broader trajectory of the twentieth-century novel in India, a genre grappling with the challenges of realism in a colonial context. Theoretical works, such as Ulka Anjaria's *Realism in the*

Twentieth-Century Indian Novel (2012) and her subsequent work in *A History of the Indian Novel in English* (2015), define Anand's literary project as navigating this complex terrain [8]. His work is often characterized by its grand, often Lukácsian, epic scope, focused on encompassing total social reality [11]. However, as critics note, this convention of the modern novel in India begins to disintegrate and fracture under the pressure of the colonial context and the demands of representing contradictory historical presents [11]. The tension identified in the "concave mirror"—the idea that the work simultaneously reflects life and offers a politically inflected perspective of its own—is fundamental to this theoretical grounding [1]. The debate on the efficacy of Anand's realism remains vital, extending to broader theoretical discussions on postcolonial literary form and the 'Realism's Futures' as explored by scholars such as Colleen Lye (2016).

Furthermore, Anand's engagement with socio-economic injustice ensures the continued relevance of Marxist critique. His novels, particularly the early trilogy, are consistently analysed through a Marxist lens, focusing on themes of labor exploitation, class struggle, and anti-capitalism [4]. Scholars emphasize that Anand's works highlight the dehumanizing contradictions within colonized Indian society, where foreign colonialism is compounded by layers of local feudalism and indigenous capitalism, enhancing the gap between the "haves and the haves-not" [4]. This system of layered oppression creates a harsh reality for the working class and justifies the Marxist call for a classless, equal society [5].

The critical turn: representation and agency

While Anand's commitment to social justice is undisputed, scholarship dating from 2011 onward has moved towards a more critical assessment of the political efficacy and representational success of his realism, particularly concerning caste. A fruitful area of critical re-evaluation centers on contextualizing *Untouchable* within the triangular political tensions of its setting: colonial modernity, Gandhian nationalism, and the emergent Ambedkarite anti-caste radicalism [12].

A central intervention in this period is K. W. Christopher's (2014) pointed critique of the novel. Christopher argues that Dalits, historically victims of Brahmanical social structures, have subsequently become "victims of Brahmanical regimes of representation" in literary and academic forms, including postcoloniality and subaltern studies [7]. From this perspective, *Untouchable*, despite its canonical status as the premier novel on untouchability, is alleged to "fail to comprehend and articulate the lived experience of Dalits' struggle for equality and justice" [7].

Instead of portraying autonomous resistance, Christopher suggests that the novel perpetuates the hegemony of Gandhian reformism [7]. This critique is deeply rooted in the historical Gandhi-Ambedkar debate on untouchability. The novel's concluding scene—where the protagonist, Bakha, frustrated by extreme social segregation, encounters the Mahatma—is seen as reinforcing the idea that the untouchable must wait for external salvation. Christopher notes that when Dalits were actively asserting political will in the 1930s, Anand's novel presents them as "incapable of an emancipatory will and waiting to be saved by someone" [7]. This line of scholarly inquiry established the critical standard against which Anand's sympathetic realism is now measured: the representation of subaltern struggle must demonstrate political agency rather than reliance on external ideological solutions.

Key critical interventions in Mulk Raj Anand studies

Author/Source	Year (Publication)	Focus Text(s)	Primary Scholarly Argument	Significance to Realism Debate
Anjaria, U. [1]	2012	General/Theory	Defines Anand's "concave mirror" realism within colonial difference, emphasizing ideological refraction over pure mimesis.	Provides the core theoretical justification for analysing stylistic tension.
Christopher, K. W. [7]	2014	*Untouchable*	Critiques the novel for failing to articulate Dalit emancipatory will; perpetuates Gandhian reformism; part of "Brahmanical regimes of representation."	Central challenge to Anand's thematic representation and efficacy of sympathetic realism regarding caste politics.
Barat, R. [44]	2014-2020 Context	*Coolie, Two Leaves...*	Marxist analysis detailing layered oppression (capitalism, feudalism, caste) requiring proletarian rebellion; identifies explicit use of Marxist mouthpieces.	Confirms Anand's success in applying realism to class struggle and Marxist didacticism, contrasting with the caste narrative complexity.
Narrative Analysis [3]	2012 Context	*Untouchable*	Analysis of stylistic shift from FID to external rhetoric, noting the aestheticizing of the protagonist's body and the use of language "clearly not Bakha's."	Links the thematic critique (lack of agency) directly to a stylistic contradiction in narrative voice, highlighting problematic authorial control.

Stylistic mechanisms: language, subjectivity, and narrative control

Indianized English as a political statement

Anand's realism is intrinsically linked to his linguistic innovation. Recognizing the need to represent authentic local culture and consciousness, Anand consciously adopted and adapted English, creating an "Indianized English" style. This deliberate modification of English grammar, syntax, and technicalities was a political and stylistic maneuver intended to root the narrative in authentic vernacular realities [2]. By

infusing the colonial language with Indian rhythms and idioms, Anand transformed the medium itself into a tool of cultural resistance. This linguistic choice challenged the traditional hegemony of Standard English by asserting a unique, localized literary voice [14]. This practice served as a powerful "indirect speech act," enabling a thorough stylistic analysis that reveals contextual implicatures vital for understanding postcolonial settings [14]. The capacity to narrate Indian stories without colonial bias, customizing the language according to the setting and background of the characters, was crucial for his project of social awareness [13].

Free Indirect Discourse (FID) and subaltern interiority
To fully capture the subjective experience of the marginalized, Anand utilized Free Indirect Discourse (FID) as a primary stylistic tool, most notably in *Untouchable* [3]. FID allows the narrator to merge their voice with the character's thoughts and speech, granting the reader direct, intimate access to the character's consciousness without explicit quotation marks or introductory phrases. In the case of Bakha, the young untouchable protagonist, FID is employed extensively throughout his day-in-the-life narrative to present his "defeated subjectivity" [3]. This technique makes the psychological and emotional impact of constant, dehumanizing caste treatment palpable. The faithful rendering of Bakha's internal struggle—his shame, his aspirations, and his despair—represents the most mimetic aspect of Anand's realism, successfully achieving the "mirror" component of his aesthetic metaphor. By immersing the elite reader in the consciousness of a character perpetually at the beck and call of others, Anand forced an emotional confrontation with the systemic violence of caste [3].

Narrative intrusion and the paradox of empowerment
A critical analysis of Anand's style reveals that this access to subjectivity through FID is not maintained uniformly. Scholars have identified moments where the narrative departs abruptly from the sustained use of Bakha's consciousness [3]. These departures feature a strong, omniscient narrative voice that intervenes to inject didactic rhetoric, typically aimed at offering an explicit path toward resolution or empowerment. This shift creates a pronounced "juxtaposition" within the novel, where the narrator contests the protagonist's dehumanization using a sophisticated, external rhetoric, employing a language "clearly not Bakha's"[3].
This stylistic contradiction—the oscillation between the character-driven interiority of FID and the author-driven didacticism of direct address—is the technical core of the thematic critique raised by contemporary scholarship. The narrative's fidelity to Bakha's internal life, achieved through FID, reveals a consciousness that is ultimately frustrated, psychologically defeated, and unable to articulate an autonomous, revolutionary solution. Consequently, the authorial voice feels compelled to step in, providing the necessary ideological closure (be it Gandhian or Socialist). This narrative intrusion, however, has the critical effect of aestheticizing the body and experience of the laborer while delivering the author's desired message, thereby structurally overriding Bakha's agency [3].

The structural choice to introduce external philosophical solutions, mediated by the narrator's intrusion, directly reinforces the critique that the protagonist is left "waiting to be saved by someone"[7]. The narrative architecture itself, therefore, demonstrates the fundamental challenge of Anand's sympathetic realism: the tension between authentically documenting a victimized subaltern consciousness and the ideological demand to prescribe an emancipatory outcome.

Thematic analysis I: caste, the crisis of agency, and *untouchable*
Caste as endemic social stagnation
Untouchable provides a searing depiction of the institutional cruelty of the caste system in colonial India. The structure of the novel, which meticulously documents a single, cyclical day in Bakha's life, emphasizes the entrenched, stagnant nature of untouchability. Anand positioned Bakha's plight—cleaning latrines and enduring constant humiliation—at the very center of his narrative to demonstrate the urgent need to dismantle oppressive belief systems and social structures [6]. The novel also serves as a study of the non-rational beliefs and superstition [16] that uphold the caste structure in Indian society. The novel's thematic landscape is situated in the acute political and ideological conflict of the 1930s. The narrative reflects the tension between colonial systems, the emerging, sometimes contradictory, approaches of Gandhian nationalism, and the powerful, yet nascent, energy of Ambedkarite anti-caste radicalism [12]. Anand's work was instrumental in compelling the English-educated elite to confront the endemic inequities and trauma inflicted on subaltern groups [6].

The politics of representation: Gandhi and reformism
The key thematic challenge facing *Untouchable* in recent scholarship revolves around the politics of its resolution and representation. As established by Christopher (2014), the novel's conclusion is heavily scrutinized for its structural implications concerning subaltern agency [7]. Bakha, after a day of unremitting trauma, overhears two proposed solutions to his misery: the adoption of the flush toilet (technological change) and Mahatma Gandhi's call for religious purification and internal reform (Gandhism) [7].
The critical argument is that by positioning Bakha as utterly frustrated and reliant on these external ideas, Anand's narrative inadvertently "perpetuates the hegemony of Gandhian reformism"[7]. The structural choice to introduce the Mahatma at the novel's climax, suggesting a spiritual or technological solution, detracts from the possibility of internal, autonomous Dalit political assertion. The novel, consequently, is seen by some scholars as failing to recognize or articulate the growing political will and resistance asserted by Dalit communities at that time [7].
This narrative choice is critical because it validates the finding that Anand's political message, while powerfully sympathetic, struggled with the representation of an internally generated emancipatory consciousness. When the protagonist's subjectivity is authentically rendered (via FID) as a defeated consciousness, the didactic imperative of the "concave mirror"

forces the author to introduce an outside ideological structure (Gandhi) to provide the necessary sense of potential hope or resolution, thereby confirming the novel's limitation regarding the articulation of radical Dalit agency.

Thematic analysis II: class, capitalism, and the dialectic of exploitation
Mapping layers of oppression

In novels such as *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Anand shifted his focus from the caste-specific injustice of Bakha to the universalized economic exploitation of the Indian working class, framing his critique within a rigorous Marxist dialectic[4]. These novels demonstrate a nuanced understanding of how oppression in colonial India was multi-layered, showing that the misery was not solely attributable to foreign colonialism but was compounded by indigenous feudalism and an internal, nascent capitalism [4]. This analysis reveals "layers of colonialism and bourgeoisie within the Indian community"[4], where local moneylenders and landlords act as "mini-capitalists," collaborating implicitly with the dominant ruling class [5]. This system develops intra-communal clashes that further deepen the chasm between the haves and the have-nots, leading directly to poverty, cruelty, and intensified class conflict [4]. The experience of Munoo in *Coolie* provides a critical framework for analyzing the effects of capitalism's combined and uneven development on the peripheral metropolis [15].

The proletariat's suffering in *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*

Coolie traces the tragic trajectory of Munoo, a protagonist whose life is a relentless cycle of exploitation across various socio-economic settings. Munoo starts as a victim of feudal oppression and moneylenders in his village, only to become subjected to the brutalizing forces of industrial and urban capitalism in cities like Bombay [5]. Anand uses Munoo's plight to depict how colonial and capitalist systems force workers to function like "machines" in the hands of employers [5]. This universalization of suffering confirms Anand's consistent humanistic objective as the "voice of the voiceless" [17] for the working class.

Two Leaves and a Bud provides an even more concentrated portrait of capitalist-colonial exploitation, specifically focusing on the tea plantation workers in Assam. The pathetic story of Gangu and his family under the British management of the Macpherson Tea Estate vividly illustrates the domination of the ruling class and the miserable condition of the coolies [5]. Set against the backdrop of the colonial era, this novel explicitly details how economic exploitation is a complex political phenomenon that legitimizes processes of domination [4].

Didacticism and class resolution

In contrast to the ambiguity and deferred agency at the close of *Untouchable*, Anand's class novels demonstrate a greater confidence in prescribing a definitive ideological resolution. *Two Leaves and a Bud* is particularly illustrative of this didactic approach. Anand utilizes the character of Dr. John de la Havre

not merely as a sympathetic observer, but as a direct "mouthpiece of Marxism"[5]. Dr. Havre functions to express the author's own "anger and indignation at the brutal exploitation of the coolies" and explicitly argues for the establishment of a classless, equal society through proletarian rebellion and revolution [5].

The narrative resolution in the class-focused novels, therefore, is more overt and less ambiguous than the caste novel. This difference suggests a critical distinction in Anand's political framework. He was stylistically and structurally willing to insert an explicit, revolutionary Marxist ideology (via mouthpieces and direct commentary) when dealing with universal class struggle. However, when faced with the representation of caste-specific identity and struggle, particularly the tension between Gandhi and Ambedkar, the didactic necessity to impose a resolution was more fraught, leading to the narrative intervention that ultimately undermined the protagonist's individual agency [7]. Thus, the success of Anand's social realism is shown to be variable, achieving clarity and revolutionary prescription in the realm of class, while remaining contested and problematic in the representation of caste emancipation.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's narrative realism represents a defining achievement in Indian English literature, establishing the literary form as a potent political weapon. His works successfully compelled the Indian elite to confront the reality of subaltern suffering and initiated a crucial period of social consciousness during the anti-colonial movement [6]. Stylistically, his pioneering use of Indian English served to vernacularize the narrative, rooting his didactic project in authentic cultural experience, while the utilization of Free Indirect Discourse granted unprecedented psychological access to the marginalized protagonist's internal world [2]. However, the enduring legacy of Anand's work must be viewed through the lens of its internal contradictions, rigorously explored by scholarship from 2011 to 2020. The fundamental limitation of Anand's sympathetic realism lies in the persistent tension between the author's ideological objective and the autonomous representation of the protagonist's agency. Anand's "concave mirror," while powerfully illuminating injustice, introduced an "impurity"—the authorial didacticism—that often structurally sacrificed the character's independent path toward emancipation [1].

The critique detailed by K. W. Christopher (2014) regarding the perpetuation of "Brahmanical regimes of representation" in *Untouchable* remains central to this assessment [7]. By substituting Bakha's nascent political will with the promise of Gandhian reform, the narrative reveals a structural hesitancy to depict autonomous Dalit assertion. This stylistic mechanism—the shift from the intimacy of FID to the prescriptive voice of the omniscient narrator [3]—is the technical manifestation of the narrative's ideological constraint. In conclusion, Anand's project defined the necessary engagement of literature with social reality, but simultaneously outlined the complex representational challenges inherent in speaking for the

oppressed. His novels established the template for social critique in Indian English fiction, paving the way for subsequent postcolonial writers who would inherit and further challenge the representational politics of subaltern voice and agency.

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