

# Food and Hunger as Metaphors of Exploitation in Anand's Fiction

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## Abstract

This paper explores Mulk Raj Anand's use of food and hunger as metaphors of exploitation in his seminal novels *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936). Anand, known for his trenchant critique of social injustice, employs these motifs to illuminate the oppressive structures of caste and class in colonial India. In *Untouchable*, food operates as a potent symbol of caste exclusion, where Bakha's interactions with food reflect the dehumanizing practices of untouchability. His humiliation in receiving food from high-caste families underscores systemic inequality, while moments of solidarity—such as receiving tea from Christians—offer glimpses of resistance and alternative social possibilities. In *Coolie*, hunger becomes both a literal and existential reality for Munoo, whose relentless struggle for sustenance symbolizes the broader exploitation of labor under capitalist and industrial systems. Anand juxtaposes the abundance of the elite with the deprivation of the marginalized to reveal systemic inequities, while religious and cultural practices surrounding food further expose social hypocrisy. Beyond physical deprivation, hunger in Anand's fiction signifies a yearning for dignity, equality, and self-realization, making it a universal metaphor for human suffering and resilience. At the same time, the sharing of food becomes a site of resistance and solidarity, challenging exploitative hierarchies. By weaving these motifs into his narratives, Anand critiques entrenched socio-economic injustices while emphasizing the enduring need for empathy and systemic change. His works remain profoundly relevant in highlighting the intersections of caste, class, culture, and the existential dimensions of human survival.

**Keywords:** Food metaphor, hunger, caste discrimination, class exploitation, capitalism, resistance, solidarity, existential struggle.

## Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand was a fluent and trenchant spokesman for social injustice, embroidering the lines of poverty and caste to bring the exploitative structures of a society to deliberate issue, and even his keen portrayals of those downtrodden, those overcome by oppression. For the most part his novels grapple with these systemic inequalities under sanctioning norms of exploitation, through food and hunger as motifs foregrounding the existential struggles of his characters. These are metaphors not of a literal kind, but certainly applicable to some broader themes of dignity, power relations and human suffering in the socio-economic matrix of colonial and post colonial India. This chapter focuses on Anand's use of food and hunger as literary devices in his works *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) to critique the operation of the pervasive structures of caste, class, and capitalism as universal symbols of human struggle.

In *Untouchable*, food is symbolised with fierce potency as food of caste discrimination and social exclusion. Bakha, a sweeper boy, who is Anand's protagonist, is terribly humiliated and alienated while dealing with food. It explores the inhumanity of the caste oppression by making access to food, or the degradation of the same into a marker of pollution, the denial. At the same time, in *Coolie* hunger is a metaphor for the existential crisis of the poor who labor. Munoo's being in some spaces of exploitation, then some other places of exploitation and again some other places of exploitation, this demonstrates how hunger is so cyclical, so systemic, because it continues to marginalize the working class. Together these novels convey Anand's profound engagement with the socio-economic texture of his time by refracting the themes of food and hunger that interrogate and negate exploitation.

### **The Symbolism of Food in *Untouchable***

Food is used as potent symbol to lambaste caste-based discrimination and their divisions. Our hero, Bakha, is the lowest function of the caste system, cleaning latrines. As his relationship with food is one of literal and symbolic perpetual state of deprivation and exclusion, one can only deduce that this is who he is. This becomes evident when Bakha says ;

“Bread for the sweeper mother, bread for the sweeper.”

Anand's vivid depictions of how Bakha relates to food show you the dehumanizing consequences of untouchability. In the novel we find one of the most striking scenes in which Bakha receives food from a high caste woman. A measure of the difficult barriers of caste purity, the woman throws chapatis at him but from a distance, not wishing for physical connection. Picking up the chapati freshly ground and in this context not only calls attention to the indignity forced upon Bakha, but to the indignity itself as a means of humiliation and segregation. This symbolic laden instance examines the injustice of the caste system which further dehumanizes an individual such as Bakha.

Additionally, the novel interweaves Bakha's mediocre diet with the heavy gratification of their upper caste counterparts, to illustrate the socio-economic separation prevalent in the caste structure. Bakha and his family consume coarse minimal food, often scavenged and sometimes begrudged. Anand's subtle elaborations on the preparation and gustatory consumption of food by the upper castes add to Bakha's deprivation and serve to expose the massive political inequalities upon which such disparities rest.

As for Bakha's isolation, great place is also given to the cultural and religious connotations of food as in *Untouchable*, and they serve to magnify the sense of alienation it gives. Food, in Hindu tradition, is a site of purity and pollution: a prescribed, strict diet dictated by one's caste dictates what and how people can eat. On account of his very presence, Bakha is considered polluting so much that he can't participate in communal rituals revolving around food. The novel ideally poignantly captures this exclusion through food — a way to be nourished, as well as a site of power and control.

But Anand also foresees resistance and change through food. Instances like the time when Bakha gets food from Christians who refuse to respect caste order, the one who give him tea, whether Christian or not, hint that such a society is possible. Brief as they may be, they embody Anand's view of social improvement, food as a means to unite and be human together as opposed to divide.

### **Hunger as Existential Reality in *Coolie***

Anand, meanwhile, focuses on caste, but in *Coolie* he turns to class, and uses hunger as the main motif of the existential class struggle of the working class. Unfortunate, Munoo, a young boy, has to leave his village in search of work due to same sort of conditions that affect millions of hundreds of laborers in

the hands of merciless exploitation. Hunger is thus an actual thing and metonym for the insatiable voracity of the machinery of capitalism making human of the poor.

Munoo's passage through different sites of exploitation—a middle-class household where he serves as a domestic servant, the hard labor of a textile mill—is marked by the endless fight against hunger. Anand has brought out the physical hunger of Munoo as the very feel of poverty. In one heart-rending scene, Munoo searches for food in the rubbish thrown away by his masters, pointing to the insults piled upon the poor. His state of permanent hunger is turned into a sign of his vulnerability and the neglect the working class suffers at the hands of the system.

The setting of the novel in the industrial context heightens the metaphorical connotation of hunger. The factory where Munoo works is presented as a place of ruthless exploitation where workers are treated as dispensable commodities. The small rations that the laborers receive symbolize how the capitalist system devalues human life, making them instruments of profit. Anand elaborates on the canteen as a site of inadequacy and deprivation; it is the microcosm of greater socio-economic injustices propagated by industrial capitalism. Munoo brings this reality to light when he says;

“Oh God! That bread should be so dear and flesh and blood so cheap!”

On that count, Anand extended it, showing hunger as a weapon opening into the existential dimensions in Munoo's journey in the context of *Coolie*. It is transcendental hunger, here, hunger in the form of an epistemic yearning—an existent's craving for merely decent dignified survival, proper living, and selfcontented living. He feels very helpless in the midst of prevailing high level exploitation by people of both higher and lower classes; and the exploiters' insatiable needs indicate hunger on all sides of the class. This specie of appetite, however, remains uninfluenced, and, as we have noted above, meets with Munoo's tragedy because for the oppressed appetite uncontrolled remains uncontrolled.

Real disasters imposed by systemic exploitation have come full circle, to the point at which the novel ends, Munoo dying of tuberculosis, now compounded by malnutrition. But now, such inhuman structures were creating inequality and suffering in them and thus becoming the most caustic critique of such being only a dream unfinished and whatever was his life became only a dream unfinished, as if [it was] the most exhaustive critique of it being unsatiated hunger. And in *Coolie* it symbolizes both the material conditions of a poverty and a metaphor for the subjugated in that existential plight, the food of the commodified, the bodies on sale.

### **Interplay of Food and Class in Anand's Narratives**

Mulk Raj Anand's novels often juxtapose the abundance of the elite with the deprivation of the marginalized to underline the systemic exploitation perpetuated by class structures. For Anand, food is a more powerful imagery than sustenance, it is a symbol of privilege and oppression. Anand alerts us to the wide gap between levels of accessibility, quality and symbolism of food between the classes through *Untouchable* and *Coolie*.

In *Coolie*, the opulent feasts of the wealthy sharply contrast with Munoo's constant hunger. For instance, when Munoo works as a servant in a middle-class household, he observes the family indulging in lavish meals while he subsists on scraps. Anand meticulously describes the aroma and richness of the family's food to heighten the disparity. This vivid imagery is not just sensory but ideological, exposing the systemic neglect and devaluation of the laboring poor. Munoo's yearning for a full meal symbolizes the unattainability of a dignified life within an exploitative capitalist system.

Similarly, in *Untouchable*, the protagonist Bakha's interactions with food reveal the intersection of caste and class. The food that high-caste families waste or deem unworthy underscores their privilege, while Bakha and his family survive on what little they can procure. Anand describes scenes where Bakha is humiliated while receiving food; the act of throwing chapatis at him from a distance epitomizes his dehumanization. The unequal distribution and treatment of food serve as a microcosm of broader socio-economic inequalities, critiquing a system that sustains the hunger of many to preserve the comfort of a few. When Bakha requested a high class women for food, she throws the food upon him saying; "Vay Bakhya, take this. Here's yours bread coming down".

The commodification of food in Anand's narratives also reflects the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. In *Coolie*, the meager rations provided to workers in the textile mill symbolize their expendability. The factory canteen becomes a site of oppression, where inadequate food rations reinforce the workers' subjugation. Anand's portrayal of these settings critiques the industrial system's prioritization of profit over human well-being, illustrating how hunger is weaponized to control and exploit the working class.

### **Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Food in Anand's Works**

In Anand's fiction, food acts as a cultural and even religious metaphor, especially in relationship to India's deeply entrenched caste system. Through the cultural symbolism that surrounds food, Anand critiques rigid, hierarchical systems that perpetuate exile and inequality.

### **Food and Caste Purity in *Untouchable***

Food in the novel, *Untouchable*, from the start gets wrapped up in notions of contamination and defilement. Bakha's untouchability separates him not only from general human activity of eating together but also from the mere fact of being human. Any place he stands is seen as defilement. One example is when Bakha goes near some high caste food shops to get protection from doles the doles are fake on the ground a yard off his reaching hands. These are moments in which Anand uses to bring to the point of absurdity and cruelty of caste based discrimination The readers can comprehend this by the way bakha actually gets the jalebis as;

"He caught the jalebis which the confectioner threw at him like a cricket ball".

The act of preparing and consuming food in *Untouchable* is laden with ritualistic significance, reflecting Hindu notions of purity. High-caste characters meticulously guard their food from contamination by lower castes, reinforcing their dominance and Bakha's subjugation. Anand's critique extends to the religious justification of these practices, exposing their role in perpetuating inequality. Through Bakha's longing for respect and inclusion, Anand underscores the dehumanizing effects of such cultural norms.

### **Cross-Cultural Encounters in *Coolie***

In *Coolie*, Anand extends the cultural scope to contemplate food as a medium of cross-cultural exchange and exclusion. Munoo's vagabond existence exposes him to different eating habits, from the vegetarian meals of his Hindu employers to the more cosmopolitan cuisine of Anglo-Indian households. These exposures reveal both the diversity and divisiveness of food as a cultural symbol.

Anand shows how food would bring people together across divisions, at least for a brief amount of time. Munoo was sitting with workmen who were all from different sets of communities in India, and eating meals beside them were instances or instants not only of eating together, they were instances of unity. But all of these moments are short and there is a world made of structural hunger and exclusion. The

cultural meaning of food for *Coolie* then, is a symbol of unity, and a reminder of the things that oppose the oppressed.

### **Religious Hypocrisy and Food Practices**

It is an aspect of Anand's critique of religious hypocrisy that is very clearly shown in food practice. Caste purity is insisted upon in the way food is prepared, there is an insistence of that in the manner of food preparation, but very starkly as we are forced to look at the essential tasks: it is the task of cleaning, it is the task of scavenging, it is the task of washing clothes and not giving it to relatives, the task of ensuring that the family has adequate food and clothing, but more importantly, the task of ensuring that we don't share the food with. Despite Bakha's work cleaning the upper caste households he suffers a lack of dignity by not being invited to share their meals. This paradox points to a hypocrisy of a spiritually superior system, which is cruel.

For Munoo in *Coolie*, religious dietary restrictions further marginalize, and provide one of the many reasons why he does not appear to want to assimilate into the dominant culture. He is harshly reprimanded when he makes these inadvertently and these are used as a tool of control by way of making food. Anand critiques the rigidity, and exclusivity, of religious traditions, and calls for more inclusive and compassionate response to communal living, through his portrayal of these incidents.

Food and hunger in Mulk Raj Anand's fiction are powerful symbolic means with which to critique the socio economic and cultural systems which perpetuate exploitation. In *Untouchable* and *Coolie* the food speaks of the defining inequalities of colonial and postcolonial Indian society, the cultural and religious aspects of food emphasize the monumental role of caste and tradition. Anand's nuanced portrayings of these themes encourage readers to think critically about the persistence of present day's systemic injustices. Anand reveals through vitreous descriptions and incisive critique how food and hunger become universal metaphors of human conflict and perseverance, and where a new social value system to equity and compassion should be prioritized.

### **Food as Resistance and Solidarity**

Food and hunger do serve more often than not as signifiers of subjugation and injustice in the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand, but it is also a signifier of resistance and human comradeship. Communal meals shows the obliterated spring, are sparser and more imbued with human connectedness, moments of human resistance to exploitative structures. The use of food as a medium in Anand to create the bond of friendship to devise a possibility of social alternatives is reflected in the characters of Bakha in *Untouchable*, and Munoo in *Coolie*.

In *Coolie* there is the hint of how food might become a communitarian identity through the ways in which Munoo interacts with other coolies. Despite the legendary struggle of the workers in the factory canteen that are woefully short and inadequate, they are the times when workers come together to fight for survival. Such brief periods of contact during the course of dehumanising work provide the workers with a respite from dehumanisation: it becomes a way of remembering that they are humans after all, too. There is however, the times of Munoo to share a frugal meal of chapatis with fellow worker, which is a case of mutual succour in the midst of ceaseless exploitation. Anand stresses these incidents as means of resisting the atomization by capital with the method of eating together.

Similarly, in *Untouchable*, Bakha finds rare moments of dignity and acceptance through food. The Englishman who gives him tea—in a breach of caste etiquette—figures as an affront to the entrenched

hierarchies defining Bakha's world. If this is far from a revolutionary act, it does suggest a vision of a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Anand uses such examples to illustrate how the practice of love and solidarity through food serves to rupture oppressive structures and to assert the full humanity of those in subordinated positions.

“Bakha was dumb with amazement, carried away by confusion, feeling flattered, honoured by the invitation which had come from the sahib...”

These representations of shared meals demonstrate Anand's faith in the redemptive value of human touch. The sharing of food can symbolize resistance to being dehumanized even in the most desperate situation, or, alternatively, a harbinger of a different social arrangement.

### **Existential Implications of Hunger**

Hunger in Anand's works is larger than the physical, it becomes a metaphysical existential image. The hunger that those characters experience is more than exclusion from eating; it is a longing for dignity, equality, meaning – rights denied them in the world they inhabit.

The subject of *Coolie* is Munoo, eternally hungry as a metaphor for his existence. A system that commodifies human life, his physical starvation is a metaphor. Munoo's hunger is more than a physical deprivation, it represents also his unfulfilled hopes and aspirations and his overall inability to access self realization under conditions of an exploitative social order. Anand poignantly renders the final consequences of systemic neglect that of Munoo's untimely death due to malnutrition and tuberculosis. And this bleak ending spells it out: in terms of its existential being, hunger is this empty place, this void—an emptying of the unfulfilled potential, the emptying of humanity.

In *Untouchable*, Bakha's hunger extends far beyond food, to his hunger for respect, for acceptance. Begging for food is an object humiliation and this wider alienation from society is shown in this. Bakha's existential crisis is rendered as a metaphor for hunger that he experiences, thus stunning his psychological toll which Anand's narrative enunciates. The fact that the oppression is caste based dehumanises not only the victims, but also the perpetrators, by the constant denial of his basic needs, material and emotional.

Through these pictures, Anand raises hunger to a universal symbol of human suffering, and resilience. He puts this as the lens through which he critiques not only the socio economic structures of his time, but the existential condition of people who are not well accepted, not able to find their purpose, their recognition in society.

### **Conclusion**

Food and hunger in Mulk Raj Anand's fiction transcend their literal meanings to become powerful metaphors for exploitation, resistance, and human resilience. It serve as multifaceted metaphors that illuminate the intersections of caste, class, and culture in colonial and postcolonial India. From the degrading rituals surrounding food in *Untouchable* to the relentless hunger that defines Munoo's life in *Coolie*, Anand uses these motifs to critique the socio-economic structures that perpetuate inequality, exploitation and dehumanization. By weaving these metaphors into the fabric of his narratives, Anand not only exposes the harsh realities of marginalized lives but also calls for empathy and systemic change. At the same time, he highlights the potential of food to foster resistance and solidarity, offering glimpses of hope amid pervasive injustice.

Anand's nuanced exploration of these themes invites readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of his critique. In a world where hunger and inequality remain pressing issues, his works resonate as powerful calls for empathy and systemic change. By intertwining food and hunger with the existential struggles of his characters, Anand transcends the specificities of his historical context to address universal questions of human dignity and resilience.

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