

Exiled to the Edge: Survival, Suffering and Social Injustice in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*

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Abstract

This seminar paper examines the storyline of **Sufferings and Social Injustice** experienced by Bakha, Munoo and Ganjun in *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* by Mulk Raj Anand. Through these three socially marginalized protagonists, Anand articulates a powerful critique of the oppressive structures of **caste hierarchy, class exploitation, colonial domination, and economic inequality** in pre-independence India. In *Untouchable*, Bakha's life as a sweeper unfolds the brutal realities of **untouchability, social exclusion, humiliation, and denial of human dignity**. Similarly, *Coolie* records Munoo's tragic journey through domestic servitude, industrial labor, and urban poverty forced him into exploitative labour making him a victim of **poverty, child labor, capitalist exploitation, class discrimination, and colonial industrialism**. Ganju's journey follows the pattern in which false promises of better wages uprooted him from his native village and he and his fellow labourers find themselves trapped in a regime of economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and inhuman working conditions in *Two Leaves and a Bud*. Through their collective suffering, Anand exposes the dehumanizing impact of imperialism and critiques the structural violence embedded within colonial capitalism. The paper examines how Anand employs **social realism and humanism** to foreground the voices of the oppressed and to challenge systems that perpetuate inequality, dehumanization and systematic injustice.

Keywords: Sufferings, Social Injustice, Caste System, Untouchability, Poverty, Exploitation, Marginalization, Human Dignity,

Humanism in Mulk Raj Anand made him toe the line of other humanitarian writers' of 1930s and tried to champion the cause of the suffering masses. He devoured the happenings concerning them and articulated the contemporary social issues in his works. His *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* recorded the lives of the voiceless and underdogs of the society who were meted out inhuman treatments just because of their low birth and social status. Anand made the saga of the marginalised as the raw materials of his selected novels with an aim to draw the attention of the society at large to the pathetic conditions of the underdogs who were the very part of that society and as such deserved better treatment.

In *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* Mulk Raj Anand presents a powerful portrayal of social injustice and human suffering in colonial India. Through the characters of Bakha, Munoo and Ganju Anand exposes the cruelty of the caste system and the exploitation of the poor.

Bakha, the young sweeper boy in *Untouchable*, endures humiliation and degradation solely because of his birth into the “untouchable” caste. Forced to clean latrines and live on the margins of society, he is constantly reminded of his supposed impurity. A single accidental touch invites abuse and violence, revealing the deep-rooted prejudice embedded in society. His suffering is not just physical but psychological, as he struggles with shame, anger, and a longing for dignity.

Similarly, Munoo in *Coolie* represents the oppressed working class. Orphaned and vulnerable, he moves from place to place, subjected to exploitation, starvation, and cruelty. Whether in domestic service or factory work, Munoo is treated as disposable labour. His life reflects the harsh realities of poverty and class discrimination.

In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Mulk Raj Anand portrays the profound sufferings and systemic injustice endured by Ganju and other tea plantation labourers under British colonial rule. Uprooted from their native villages by poverty and false promises of better wages, they find themselves trapped in a regime of economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and inhuman working conditions. The labourers are subjected to low wages, physical exhaustion, unhealthy living environments, and constant surveillance, with no legal or social protection against the authority of the British planters. Ganju’s tragic fate epitomizes the vulnerability and powerlessness of the colonized poor, highlighting the brutal indifference of colonial administration and the entrenched hierarchy that denies them dignity and justice. Through their collective suffering, Anand exposes the dehumanizing impact of imperialism and critiques the structural violence embedded within colonial capitalism.

Through Bakha, Munoo and Ganju, Anand highlighted the interconnected injustices of caste, class, and colonial rule, offering a compassionate critique of a society that denied basic human dignity to its most vulnerable members.

Mulk Raj Anand had a firsthand knowledge of the lives of the untouchables and the inhuman treatment meted out to them by the caste-Hindus. His observations of the humiliations meted out to the underdogs pricked his conscience and made him articulate their poignant stories into his novels. In *Untouchable* he articulated whatever he experienced to unfold the whole saga of suffering of the underdogs in the novel. Man's inhumanity towards his fellow beings and the prevalent social evils pricked him the most.

The very depiction of the outcastes’ colony at the outset of the novel unfolded the miserable life of the untouchables. The novelist retorted: There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer man, the barbers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane. Once with crystal-clear water, now soiled. By the dirty and filth of the public latrine situated about it, the odour of the hides and the skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of the donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. The absence of drainage system had through the rains of various seasons, made the quarters a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of the little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within, it made it an uncongenial place to live in.

To unfold the pathetic saga of the marginalised, the have-nots and the outcastes eclipsed by the contemporary social evils, Anand rightly chose Bakha, a low-born boy of eighteen-years as the protagonist of his novel who despite having physical prowess, intellectual powers and potential for growth endured all forms of humiliations in the society.

The novel very realistically charted out the proceedings of ‘a single day’ designing a series of humiliations and sufferings in the life of Bakha, the protagonist. It is the prevalent evil practice of

untouchability that deprived him of the just space in the society which used to be enjoyed by the other social beings placed in higher social ladder. Through the saga of Bakha the novelist articulated the pathetic plight of the outcastes who were subjected to inhuman social humiliations only because of their birth in the caste of untouchable and thus justified the evils of untouchability distancing man from man, negating the whole caste the fundamental right to live with dignity and equal social status. A series of humiliating incidents such as the Bazaar Incident, the Temple Incident, the Hockey Match Incident and the Well Incident outlined in the novel truly drew a picture of the miserable condition the untouchables had to undergo in the caste-ridden Indian Hindu Society. The segregating differences among the various castes shapes Bakha's day and structures the narrative. In the novel caste plays a significant role in every incident and happening and interaction Bakha got involved over the course of the day. A definite set of societal rules curbing the rights of the untouchables made Bakha and his fellow beings belonging to the same caste concede humiliations and abuses. In the Bazaar Incident it was witnessed that when Bakha desired to smoke cigarette and went to a shopkeeper to buy a packet of cigarette, he was treated like a dog by the shopkeeper who threw a packet towards him and sprinkled water over the coins given by Bakha to purify those. Likewise in another case when Bakha went to sweep the market on behalf of his father he forgot to call out "Posh, Posh, sweeper coming" and accidentally touched a caste Hindu, a Lala who slapped him on the charge of polluting him. This incident revealed the pathetic plight of the Underdogs in the society as Bakha. The incident made him suffer psychologically and he pondered over the humiliating segregation of man from man. He had the potential to take revenge but his anger turned into passivity when he realised the fact that all the outcastes were subjected to the sub-human treatment he was given.

The Temple Incident highlighted that the untouchables like Bakha had no right and sanctity to enter the Temple premises due to low caste. The incident exposed the injustices faced by marginalised communities and their limited access to religious and social spaces. The outburst of Bakha highlighted below captures the dehumanizing condition of the untouchables in the caste-ridden society in India:

Why are we always abused/
They always abuse us/
They hate dung I
hate it too/ I am a sweeper,
Untouchable!
Untouchable I am an Untouchable/ (Anand, Untouchable 43)

Anand with all his humanistic bent of mind tried to arrest the mass attention to the fact that the likes of Bakha were ill-treated and reduced to sub-human status only because of their low birth. They were treated inhumanly as if they were animal, devoid of any human status.

In this respect Rama Jha observed:

"Untouchable is Anand's first novel in which he is concerned with the evil of untouchability in Hindu society. Anand is the first Indian novelist to have depicted in the novel form, the stigma of this evil which isolates man from his own society creating an archetypal image of the untouchable. This novel portrays an individual's struggle to release himself from the customs and beliefs of the community he belongs to. However the individual here, a victim of his traditional Hindu culture fails to do so. The novel's emphasis

on an individual's attempt to emancipate himself from the age old evil of untouchability.... Anand projects his theme through characterisation.”(Khan 6)

The Hockey Match Incident dejected Bakha for being accused of defiling the wounded boy on the ground whom he had picked up in his arms, carried him to the hall of his house. But gesture of kindness showed by Bakha resulted in abuse and threatening .The mother of the wounded boy abused him instead of showering gratitude upon him. The mother surprisingly reacted that the outcaste like Bakha ought to be wiped off the surface of the earth.

Further, the Well Incident which recorded how the anxious lower caste people had to depend on the mercy of some upper caste people to get their pitcher filled with water unfolded the fact that the untouchable had no option but to remain at the mercy of the upper castes to fulfill their very basic needs for survival. They were not only denied footsteps at the platform surrounding the well but also threatened access to the near-by brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream . They had no well of their own because it cost at least a thousand rupees in such a hilly town in Bulashah. They had no choice left and had to gather at the foot of the caste Hindus' well and depend on the mercy of some their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. So they used to wait for chance to bring some caste Hindu to the well.

Again the incident of Sohini, Bakha's sister on the verge of getting molested by one of the caste Hindu Pandit Kali Nath while cleaning the courtyard of his house outlined helpless condition of the low caste people . Sohini , in this case, shouted to protect herself from the ill-motive of Kali Nath but was outshouted by the molester with the false cry “Polluted”, “Polluted” as if she had defiled him by her touch. Thus the exploiter and offender become offended here ironically. These incidents vividly unfolded the agony the untouchables and the lower caste suffered and the magnitude of humiliations they undergone.

The miserable plight of the small family of Lakha, the Jamedar of the sweepers showcased not only the abject poverty and sufferings of the untouchables but also their cursed lineage of belonging to the low-caste; the lowest of the lowly.

To articulate the magnitude of the sufferings undergone by the untouchables in the novel

Dr. K.R. Rao observes:

“ Anand is merciless in his exposure of the evil elements in the social structure and his sociological indictment has a disturbing logic which admits no timed caveats of gradualistic liberalism Bakha's quest for identity in a world which refused to recognise him, has been traced by the novelist with a touch of sympathy as well as lacerating irony.

Anand's condemnation of untouchability derives its strength from the passionate involvement in, and identifications with, the problems of the socially- boycotted individuals. He shows the utter futility of attracting a tag and wants us to recognize the fact that the untouchable is primarily a human being, who is “the flesh of our flesh and the blood of our blood.”(Rao 18)

Bakha, the protagonist of the novel and the other low caste people became the victims of Polluted social structure that thwarted individual and so called lower castes self as well as societal graduation on the basis of religious orthodoxy and social regimentation. Bakha stood both a representational figure and an individual who tried to cope with the forces of religious orthodoxy and social regimentation. He was just one among the millions who crawled and existed without any identity.

Coolie is another novel in which Anand tried to articulate the hardships of the low caste people, caught in the net of social determinism. Anand continued his crusade against all forms of evils, poverty, cruelty

and of social exploitation of the have-nots in this novel. In this novel Anand broadened the scope of the novel and made it a veritable microcosm of Indian life. It dealt with the life of a single individual called Munoo, a poor sturdy hill boy who struggled to regain his self-esteem and discover self-identity in a world that winked its eye towards the have-nots. The novel dealt with the class struggle in India. If Untouchable dealt with man's inhumanity to man under the hegemony of the caste system, Coolie dealt with the pernicious class system grounded on money power and social inequality, and a gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' the capitalists and the labourers.

The novel is divided into five chapters. The first chapter portrayed Munoo, the orphan of dispossessed parents, as an innocent little boy of a rural village of Bilaspur in the Kangara hills. The second chapter penned his tenure as a servant in the household of a bank clerk Babu Nathoo Ram in Sham Nagar. The third chapter recorded his his experiences in the feudal city of Daulatpur as a worker in a small pickle factory and as a Coolie fighting for work in the city market. The penultimate chapter described his life as a labourer in Bombay at the British- owned Sir George White Cotton Mills. The last chapter detailed him as a servant and rickshaw Coolie in the employ of a lady called Mrs. Mainwaring, in Shimla. By making him drift from one job to another; from his native hills to the cities of the plains, the whole saga of his sufferings was unfolded. The novel recorded how Munoo had to encounter different types of exploitation in different stages of life such as feudal exploitation at the hands of the zaminder, social exploitation at the hands of the Babu class people, represented by Nathoo Ram and his wife, capitalistic and industrial exploitation at the hands of the British industrialists in the form of leading a sub-human life in unhygienic slums. The novel also recorded how communalism divided workers and coolies allowing the hegemonic imperialism flourish. Munoo's beginning is typing of the underprivileged class. Having been entrapped by debt to a landlord his father conceded a slow death leaving him and his mother suffer more. In search of earning a livelihood he left his village and moved to the plains of Sham Nagar and started serving at the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, a sub-accountant. There Bibiji made his life a hell, hurling abuses at him frequently. He had to encounter a dreadful routine of domestic servility; From early morning till late in the evening he had to undergo servility which made him contemplate his position in the world and came to a conclusion that money is everything and his suffering was due to his poverty.

Munoo ran away from the place and arrived in a town called Daulatpur He took a job in a pickle factory and went on working hard in the dark suffocating atmosphere; full of intense heat of blazing furnaces. Munoo and other workers had to work long hours highlighting the pathetic conditions of the workers and their plight in the society. Thereafter his employment in a large British owned Cotton Mill just multiplied his agonies. The small and dingy room in which he was put up with eight of his colleagues was nothing sort of a living hell. His working at the Cotton Mill just exposed the exploitation of the Indian proletariat by the British imperialist. Munoo found himself one of the herd of anonymous labourers cheated by the English masters. They were even denied the basic amenities. There was no washroom, there was no place to go for a meal, Much in the manner of Dickens, Anand articulated the sordid facts of Indian social life. The description of the bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered rags. Some were curled up in knots, others lay face downwards on folded arms, others were flat on their chests, billowing their heads on their bundle of boxes, others crunched into corners talking, others still huddled together at the doorsteps of closed shops, or lay on boards, in a sleep which looked like death, but that it was broken by deep sighs paints a pathetic picture of the lives of the

coolies. Anand blamed the hegemonic role of the Britishers and the process of Rapid Industrial Revolution in India as the root causes of the social denudation of the labourers.

Two Leaves and a Bud by Mulk Raj Anand is a powerful social protest novel that unmasked the harsh realities of colonial exploitation and class oppression in India. Through the tragic story of Gangu, a poor Punjabi peasant, Anand articulated the intense sufferings and social injustices encountered by the marginalised in British India. The novel through its storyline seemed to make a critique of imperialism, capitalism, and the unjust treatment meted out to the marginalized communities.

Economic exploitation stands as the primary suffering of the underdogs in the novel. Gangu, driven by poverty and famine in his village, migrated to Assam to work on a British-owned tea plantation. He dreamt of earning enough to support his family, but instead, he found himself trapped in a cycle of debt and low wages. The plantation owners deliberately offered miserable living conditions and meager salaries to the workers to maximize profit.

The workers were treated as cheap labor rather than human beings. They were paid insufficient wages, forced to work long hours, and are denied basic rights. The British planters manipulated accounts and imposed fines, ensuring that laborers remain perpetually indebted. Anand thus highlighted how colonial capitalism thrived on the systematic exploitation of the poor.

Tempted by the false promises to have a better life Ganju along with his family started to work at the Macpherson Tea Estate in Assam. There the unhygienic hut, the heat, inadequate food, scarcity of drinking water and filthy living condition gave birth to physiological disorder. Moreover, the manual labour, ill-treatment and the unhygienic working condition worsened the living for Ganju and the coolies. Diseases spread rapidly, and the laborers were reduced to a subhuman existence. Ganju's wife fell prey to malaria and died in Ganju's arm crying for medicine. Ganju who was unable to buy medicine was also unable to arrange funeral rituals which needed money. Ganju approached Shashi Bhushan to talk to the manager to get a loan at his behest. He pleaded:

“ Babuji, I promise to give you some of the money which the sahib may give me if you talk to him in ‘angrezi’ and get me the loan I want.....my wife died last night .” (Anand 1998 : P. 111- 12)

Later when the manager did not sympathize with Ganju, he approached Buta with the request :

“Can you give a loan of money for the cremation?” Said Ganju, “ I have not a penny and the body has been lying in the house for two days .” (ibid : P.111-13)

The pleads made by Ganju very vividly unfold the deplorable conditions of the workers in the Tea Estate who were reduced to sub-human status.

A central issue of the novel was racial injustice. The British officials considered themselves superior and treated Indian workers with contempt and cruelty. Characters like Reggie Hunt embodied colonial arrogance, racism, and moral corruption. They exercised unchecked power over the laborers, reinforcing a rigid racial hierarchy.

The colonial masters believed that Indians were inferior and deserving of harsh treatment. This racial prejudice justified violence and exploitation. Anand sharply criticized this mindset, exposing the hypocrisy of the so-called “civilizing mission” of the British Empire.

The novel also exposed the vulnerability of women among the underprivileged. Gangu's daughter, Leila, became a victim of sexual exploitation at the hands of the plantation manager Reggie Hunt who approached Ganju's daughter Leila with lust as she kept on plucking tea leaves alone and followed her to her house. When Ganju tried to prevent him from inflicting sexual assault on her, Reggie shot him dead. A trial began but just to deliver an injustice. The jury under Mowberley found Reggie not guilty of the

charges of murder and acquitted him. This act symbolized the ultimate abuse of power by the colonizers. The incident unmasked the ugly face of the prevalent legal system that protected the oppressor and silenced the oppressed.

Beyond physical hardship, Anand emphasized psychological suffering. The constant humiliation, fear, and powerlessness destroyed the workers' self-respect. Gangu began with hope and optimism, but by the end, he was disillusioned and broken.

The underdogs were denied not only economic security but also their basic human dignity. Anand's portrayal evoked deep sympathy and moral outrage in the reader.

In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Mulk Raj Anand presented a moving indictment of colonial exploitation and social injustice. Through the tragic fate of Gangu and other plantation workers, he exposed the cruelty of imperial rule and the suffering of the marginalized. The novel stood as a powerful voice for the underdogs, urging readers to recognize the humanity of the oppressed and to question systems built on inequality and injustice.

Anand's realistic narrative and compassionate tone made the novel a timeless work of social protest literature, emphasizing that true progress is impossible without justice and human dignity.

In the long run it seems that Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* bear the signature of poignant sufferings of the socially outcastes and underdogs of the pre-independent India in which the likes of Bakha, Munoo and Ganju had to encounter the deep-rooted injustices and inequalities prevalent in the then society. These novels draw our attention to the lives experienced by the marginalised communities in the present society as well which need to be bettered and uplifted for making a just society.

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