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From Social Realism to Global Anxiety: Mulk Raj Anand and the Changing Art of Indian English Fiction

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a foundational position in Indian English fiction because he transformed the novel into an instrument for representing social inequality, caste oppression, poverty, colonial exploitation and the lives of marginalized people. His fiction is distinguished by social realism, sympathetic characterization, accessible language and a strong ethical commitment to human dignity. This paper comparatively examines Anand's narrative style alongside three significant contemporary Indian writers—Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh. Through a close reading of *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *The White Tiger*, *The God of Small Things* and selected works of Ghosh, the study investigates how the representation of marginality and social injustice has changed from Anand's period to the contemporary literary moment. The comparison demonstrates that although contemporary writers employ irony, fragmented narratives, linguistic experimentation, multiple perspectives and ecological imagination, they continue Anand's central concern with the relationship between individual suffering and oppressive social structures. The study argues that Anand's literary legacy survives not through stylistic imitation but through the continuing ethical responsibility of Indian fiction to make invisible lives visible.

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1. Introduction

Indian English fiction has undergone a remarkable transformation from the early twentieth century to the contemporary period. Yet, beneath changes in narrative form, language and literary technique, one persistent concern remains the representation of individuals marginalized by caste, class, gender, poverty, political power and economic structures.

Among the pioneering Indian novelists writing in English, Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) occupies a particularly important position. His major novels, including *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), established a powerful tradition of socially committed Indian fiction.

Anand's importance lies not merely in the themes he selected but in the manner in which he transformed ordinary and socially disadvantaged people into central literary subjects.

Untouchable, for example, compresses the experience of caste discrimination into a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper. His fiction therefore represents a decisive movement away from literature dominated by elite characters towards narratives concerned with marginalized lives.

Contemporary Indian writers have inherited many of these concerns but have developed new stylistic strategies. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) presents class inequality through dark humour, irony and the metaphor of the Rooster Coop. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) combines caste politics and social criticism with lyrical language, nonlinear chronology and symbolic imagery. Amitav Ghosh extends the social and political concerns of earlier Indian fiction into questions of migration, colonial history, capitalism and ecological crisis.

The present study therefore asks how the writing style used by Mulk Raj Anand to represent social injustice has changed in contemporary Indian English fiction. It argues that

contemporary writers differ significantly from Anand in form and technique, but their literary engagement with marginalized lives reveals a continuing ethical and thematic connection with him.

2. Research Questions

How does Mulk Raj Anand's social-realist writing style compare with the narrative styles of selected contemporary Indian English writers?

How have the representation of marginality, caste, class and social injustice changed from Anand's fiction to contemporary Indian fiction?

What changes can be identified in language, characterization, narrative voice, irony and symbolism between Anand and contemporary writers?

To what extent does contemporary Indian English fiction continue Anand's ethical commitment to marginalized voices?

3. Objectives of the Study

To examine the major characteristics of Mulk Raj Anand's writing style.

To compare Anand's social realism with the narrative strategies of contemporary Indian writers.

To analyse the treatment of caste, class, poverty and marginality in selected works.

To examine differences in language, characterization, narrative voice and symbolism.

To establish the continuing relevance of Anand's literary legacy in contemporary Indian English fiction.

4. Research Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative, comparative and textual approach. Primary texts by Mulk Raj Anand, Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh constitute the principal corpus. Secondary critical works on Anand and Indian English literature are used to establish the critical context.

The study employs close reading to compare social realism, representation of marginalized characters, language and diction, narrative voice, irony and humour, symbolism, treatment of caste and class, and the relationship between individual suffering and social structures.

5. Review of Literature

Critical discussion of Mulk Raj Anand has consistently emphasized his social commitment. C. J. George's *Mulk Raj Anand, His Art and Concerns* examines Anand's major novels through questions of art, social concern and characterization. Critical discussions of Anand frequently emphasize his combination of literary craft and social protest.

The critical reception of contemporary Indian fiction has increasingly focused on hybridity, globalization, political resistance and new forms of narrative experimentation. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* has attracted attention because its narrator, Balram Halwai, exposes unequal structures through an ironic first-person narrative. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is noted for its poetic prose, symbolism, caste politics and nonlinear structure. Amitav Ghosh's later fiction expands Indian literary concerns toward migration and ecological crisis.

However, the stylistic continuum between Anand and contemporary writers deserves further comparative attention. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that contemporary Indian fiction should not be read as a complete departure from Anand; rather, contemporary writers transform his ethical realism through new narrative forms.

6. Mulk Raj Anand's Writing Style: Social Realism as Literary Intervention

Mulk Raj Anand's writing style is fundamentally grounded in social realism. He does not construct suffering as an abstract philosophical concept; instead, he places it within the everyday lives of recognizable individuals.

His *Untouchable* is a particularly significant example. The novel follows Bakha, a young sweeper, through one day of humiliation, labour, hunger, anger and hope. Anand's realism derives much of its power from concrete physical details. Dirt, toilets, food, clothing, streets, labour and bodily exhaustion are not peripheral details; they become instruments through which social hierarchy is made visible.

Anand's characters are frequently drawn from socially disadvantaged communities. Bakha in *Untouchable* and Munoo in *Coolie* are not heroic figures in the conventional literary sense. Their significance comes from their vulnerability. Anand's language is generally accessible and direct. Indian expressions, idioms and cultural references are incorporated into English, creating a distinctly Indian texture. Thus, Anand's style may be understood as: marginalized character + realistic environment + sympathetic narration + social criticism = Anand's social realism.

7. Anand and Aravind Adiga: From Social Realism to Dark Satire

At first glance, Anand's *Untouchable* and Adiga's *The White Tiger* seem radically different. Anand writes about colonial India and caste oppression, while Adiga focuses on post-liberalization India, entrepreneurship, corruption and class mobility. Yet both writers are deeply concerned with the relationship between poverty and power.

Bakha is trapped by caste. Balram is trapped by class, poverty, family obligations and servitude. The nature of the cage changes, but the structural principle remains.

Adiga's Rooster Coop metaphor represents the social mechanisms that keep lower-class people in conditions of servitude. This marks a major stylistic shift. Anand invites sympathy with the oppressed, whereas Adiga makes the reader question the morality of survival itself.

Anand asks how society oppresses the poor. Adiga asks what happens when the oppressed decide to defeat the system by becoming like its powerful members. Adiga can therefore be viewed as extending Anand's social realism into a more ironic and psychologically complex representation of contemporary inequality.

8. Anand and Arundhati Roy: Realism Transformed into Poetic Protest

Roy's *The God of Small Things* deals with caste, forbidden love, social hierarchy and political structures. Unlike Anand's comparatively straightforward realism, Roy's prose is highly lyrical, fragmented and symbolic.

Anand generally describes social reality in order to expose injustice. Roy frequently reconstructs language itself to demonstrate how fractured social reality has become. She uses repetition, unusual syntax, fragmented chronology and childlike perception. The two writers nevertheless share a major concern: caste determines human relationships. Bakha experiences caste through direct humiliation. Velutha experiences caste through the destruction of personal relationships and social belonging. Anand's realism is largely representational; Roy's realism is linguistically experimental. Anand writes so that the social problem becomes visible, while Roy writes so that the reader experiences the instability and emotional complexity of that social world.

9. Anand and Amitav Ghosh: From Human Suffering to Ecological and Transnational Crisis

Anand's fiction is strongly rooted in specific Indian communities and social structures. Ghosh retains the concern with marginalized communities but expands the scale of social realism. His later fiction connects human displacement with environmental crisis, climate change, migration and global capitalism.

The shift can be represented as: Anand → social inequality; Adiga → economic inequality; Roy → caste, gender and political inequality; Ghosh → ecological, historical and transnational inequality.

Anand's realism depends heavily on physical social environments—villages, factories, streets, workplaces and households. Ghosh frequently creates larger geographical networks involving oceans, migrations, borders and histories. This expansion demonstrates the adaptability of Anand's basic literary principle: literature should pay attention to lives that dominant narratives ignore.

10. Language: From Indianized English to Contemporary Linguistic Experimentation

Language is another significant area of comparison. Anand wrote during a period when Indian writers were negotiating the relationship between English and Indian languages. His English frequently carries the rhythm, cultural vocabulary and social realities of India.

Contemporary writers have taken this linguistic experimentation further. Adiga uses conversational and ironic English to reproduce Balram's voice. Roy manipulates English through repetition, sound, fragmentation and unusual syntax. Ghosh combines English with regional vocabulary, historical terminology and multilingual cultural contexts.

The development can therefore be understood as a movement from expressing Indian experience through English toward increasingly experimental, hybrid and transnational forms of Indian English.

11. Characterization: The Rise of the Marginal Voice

Perhaps the strongest continuity between Anand and contemporary writers is their treatment of marginalized characters. Bakha is a sweeper; Munoo is a poor child who moves through exploitative labour environments; Balram is a servant who attempts to escape class oppression; and Roy and Ghosh create characters shaped by caste, migration and social exclusion.

These characters challenge the traditional literary centre. Anand's answer was revolutionary for his time: the story of the sweeper, coolie and peasant deserves literary attention. Contemporary writers have expanded that principle to include servants, migrants, women, socially excluded communities, workers and environmentally displaced people.

12. Narrative Technique: From Authorial Sympathy to Unreliable Voices

Anand often guides the reader toward an ethical understanding of social injustice. His narrative method encourages sympathy with the suffering character.

Contemporary writers frequently make the reader work harder. Adiga uses an unreliable narrator. Balram is intelligent, humorous and brutally honest, but he is also morally compromised. Roy employs child perspectives and nonlinear chronology, forcing the reader to reconstruct events. Ghosh frequently moves across geographical and historical boundaries.

This marks an important movement from authorial explanation toward narrative ambiguity and from sympathetic realism toward complex moral participation. Yet the purpose remains connected: the reader must confront structures of inequality.

13. Comparative Findings

Continuity of Social Concern: Anand, Adiga, Roy and Ghosh all question structures that produce inequality, even though the social problems and literary strategies differ.

Transformation of Realism: Anand's direct social realism becomes satire in Adiga, lyrical experimentation in Roy, and ecological/transnational narrative in Ghosh.

Changing Image of the Protagonist: Anand's protagonists are largely victims of social structures, while contemporary protagonists can be morally ambiguous, resistant or globally displaced.

Expansion of Marginality: Anand focuses strongly on caste, poverty and colonial exploitation; contemporary writers extend marginality to gender, globalization, migration, capitalism and climate change.

Changing Function of Language: Anand Indianizes English through cultural content and social vocabulary, while contemporary writers increasingly experiment with fragmentation, irony, hybridity and multilingual consciousness.

14. Discussion

The comparison demonstrates that Mulk Raj Anand should not be considered merely a historical writer whose relevance ended with the colonial period. His most important contribution is methodological and ethical. He established the possibility that Indian English fiction could become a literature of social visibility.

Contemporary writers have inherited this literary responsibility but operate in a dramatically different India. The central conflict has shifted from colonial domination to a complex combination of caste, capitalism, globalization, political power, gender discrimination and ecological crisis.

Adiga uses satire because contemporary inequality can be hidden behind the language of economic development. Roy uses fragmented poetic prose because social violence affects memory, identity and personal relationships. Ghosh uses transnational and ecological narratives because contemporary crises cross national boundaries. Thus, the transformation of style reflects the transformation of society.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's writing represents one of the foundational moments in the development of Indian English fiction. His social realism, sympathetic characterization and concern for marginalized communities created a literary tradition in which ordinary people became legitimate subjects of serious literature.

Adiga, Roy and Ghosh write in substantially different styles, yet their work continues the central impulse of Anand's fiction. Adiga transforms social realism into dark satire; Roy combines social protest with lyrical, fragmented and symbolic prose; and Ghosh expands social realism into ecological, historical and transnational territory.

The relationship between Anand and contemporary Indian writers should therefore be understood as creative transformation rather than simple stylistic continuity. Anand's legacy survives not because contemporary writers reproduce his prose style, but because they continue his fundamental

literary commitment: to place marginalized human beings at the centre of the narrative and to question the structures that produce their suffering.

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