ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VI, June 2026

Caste and Community in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Rereading of Untouchable and Coolie

Chandra Mukesh Swami

Assistant Professor, Department of English Jagannath University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

DOI: https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150600177

Received: 29 June 2026; Accepted: 04 July 2026; Published: 20 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a close critical rereading of caste and community in two of Mulk Raj Anand's early novels, Untouchable (1935) and Coolie (1936), read together as a diptych on the structural production of human waste under colonial modernity. Rather than treating caste and class as parallel or interchangeable systems of exclusion, the paper argues that Anand's fiction traces a specific historical hinge: the moment at which a ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, inherited from pre-colonial social organisation, is absorbed into and partially reconfigured by an emerging colonial-capitalist economy of wage labour. Untouchable compresses this argument into the single day of Bakha, a young sweeper in the fictional cantonment town of Bulashah, whose body is marked as permanently polluting regardless of his conduct or intention; Coolie extends it across the itinerant, multi-year odyssey of Munoo, an orphaned hill boy whose successive employments in Sham Nagar, Daulatpur, Bombay and Simla show caste stigma mutating into, without ever being replaced by, the disposability of the unskilled worker. Drawing on close reading, postcolonial theory, and the historical record of colonial governmentality, the paper contends that Anand's much-discussed 'solutions'--conversion, Gandhian reform, and the machine, on the one hand, and trade-union solidarity, on the other--are staged not as answers but as unresolved provocations, and that this formal irresolution is itself the novels' most enduring political argument. The paper closes by situating this reading against more recent Dalit-critical scholarship that has questioned the adequacy of a non-Dalit, upper-caste author's authorial voice to represent Dalit interiority, arguing that Anand's fiction is best read today as a historically significant but structurally limited intervention rather than a final or sufficient account of caste.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand; Untouchable; Coolie; Caste; Dalit Literature; Colonial India; Social Realism; Class and Labour; Postcolonial Narrative; Gandhian Reform; Literary Representation of Marginality.

INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a founding position in Indian writing in English, conventionally grouped with R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao as one of the genre's first internationally read practitioners. What distinguishes Anand within this trio is the deliberateness with which his early fiction turns the novel into an instrument of social indictment. Untouchable and Coolie, published within a year of each other in the mid-1930s, are not incidentally about poverty and caste; they are organised, at the level of plot, structure, and voice, around the specific project of making an English-reading audience -- colonial and metropolitan alike -- confront the mechanisms by which Indian society renders certain bodies permanently unclean or permanently disposable.

This paper argues that the two novels are best read together, not as a pair of thematically similar case studies but as complementary halves of a single argument about how hierarchy is reproduced under colonial conditions. Untouchable isolates caste in its most concentrated ritual form: pollution by touch, in a single provincial town, over a single day. Coolie dilutes and disperses that same logic of exclusion across geography, time, and economic sector, following Munoo from a domestic household to a small-town factory to a Bombay cotton mill to a hill-station rickshaw stand, and in doing so shows caste stigma shading into, and partially displaced by, the naked disposability of wage labour under industrial capitalism. Read in sequence, the novels trace a historical transition -- one in which the vocabulary of purity and pollution persists even as new economic hierarchies of employer and coolie, mill-owner and hand, memsahib and servant, take on much of caste's structural work.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VI, June 2026

The following sections proceed in five stages. Section 2 sets out the paper's method. Section 3 situates the novels within the colonial reorganisation of caste identity. Section 4 offers close readings of Untouchable and Coolie in turn, attending to narrative technique as well as theme. Section 5 examines the two novels' treatment of community, solidarity, and the limits of individual and collective agency. Section 6 considers the reception and disputed legacy of Anand's work, including the important challenge posed by later Dalit-critical scholarship to the adequacy of an upper-caste author's representation of Dalit experience. The conclusion draws these threads together and reflects on what, if anything, remains useful in Anand's diptych for readers encountering caste in twenty-first-century India.

AIMS AND METHOD

The paper has two related aims: first, to offer a textually grounded account of how caste and emergent class hierarchy operate in Untouchable and Coolie, correcting several factual imprecisions that have circulated in secondary commentary on these novels; and second, to use that close reading as the basis for an evaluative argument about the novels' politics and limits, rather than treating them as settled, self-evidently progressive texts.

Methodologically, the paper combines close reading of the primary texts with reference to the historical scholarship on caste under colonial rule (particularly the codification effects of census-taking and legal reform) and to postcolonial and Dalit-critical frameworks that have interrogated the politics of representation in Indo-Anglian social-realist fiction. Where the paper cites biographical or textual detail -- character names, place names, plot sequence -- these have been checked against the novels themselves and against standard scholarly and reference sources, since a surprising number of secondary accounts of Untouchable and Coolie circulating online contain avoidable errors of this kind (for instance, misnaming the fictional town in which Untouchable is set, or conflating Munoo's varied employments with a single occupation). Where a source could not be independently verified, this is noted rather than silently incorporated.

Caste, Colonial Governmentality, and the Historical Background

The caste system that Anand's fiction anatomises was not a static survival of pre-colonial India carried unchanged into the twentieth century; it was, by the 1930s, a hierarchy that colonial administration had itself helped to harden into its modern form. The decennial census, introduced in British India from 1871 onward, required caste to be recorded as a fixed, singular attribute of every individual, converting what had often been a locally variable and negotiable set of practices into an official, bureaucratically legible category. Colonial courts, land-revenue settlements, and recruitment policies for the army and police further entrenched particular caste groups in particular occupational and social positions, frequently in alliance with the same dominant local elites whose authority the caste hierarchy had traditionally underwritten. The effect, as historians of the period have argued, was not simply the perpetuation of an existing hierarchy but its partial reinvention as an object of modern governance.

Anand wrote his two novels against this backdrop, and also against the backdrop of the intensifying nationalist debate over caste reform in the 1930s, in which M. K. Gandhi's Harijan movement and his qualified, paternalistic language of upliftment stood in uneasy tension with B. R. Ambedkar's more structural critique of Hinduism itself as the source of untouchability. It is worth noting -- because Untouchable stages this tension directly, through Bakha's ambivalent response to Gandhi's speech -- that Anand does not simply endorse the Gandhian position his narrative dramatises. The novel gives real interpretive weight to the sceptical voices of the lawyer Bashir, who doubts Gandhi's programme, and to the poet Sarshar, who admires Gandhi's ethical seriousness while insisting that the mechanical flush toilet, by eliminating the sweeper's occupation itself, would do more than any amount of moral exhortation to end untouchability. The novel's famous refusal to resolve these three proposed remedies -- conversion, reform, the machine -- should therefore be read less as authorial indecision than as a considered structural choice: Anand dramatises the reform debates of his moment without pretending that fiction can adjudicate them.

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VI, June 2026

LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED NOVELS

Untouchable: The Single Day as Formal Argument

Untouchable's most significant formal decision is temporal: the entire novel unfolds over a single day in the life of its eighteen-year-old protagonist, Bakha, a sweeper and latrine-cleaner in the fictional cantonment town of Bulashah. This compression is not merely economical; it is argumentative. By refusing Bakha a narrative that develops or resolves over months or years, Anand insists that the indignities Bakha suffers -- being struck for accidentally brushing against a high-caste man in the bazaar, being barred from the temple, watching his sister Sohini falsely accused of 'polluting' the priest Pundit Kali Nath after he has in fact assaulted her -- are not exceptional events within an otherwise ordinary life but the recurring structure of every day Bakha will ever live. The final lines of the novel, in which Bakha trudges home no wiser about which of the day's proposed solutions will save him, make the same point formally: tomorrow will, in all likelihood, look exactly like today.

Anand's narrative technique reinforces this argument. The novel moves fluidly between an external, almost documentary description of Bulashah's outcastes' colony and Bakha's own interior consciousness, rendered in a style influenced by contemporary modernist experiments with stream of consciousness. This interior access matters: it is precisely because readers are given Bakha's private shame, resentment, and flickers of desire for the Tommies' clothes and manners that his degradation cannot be dismissed as a merely sociological fact belonging to a distant 'them.' The technique produces what might be called an ethics of proximity -- a formal strategy for closing the gap between an English-reading audience and a figure that colonial and caste ideology alike had rendered unreadable, indeed untouchable, as a subject of ordinary sympathy.

At the same time, the novel is unsentimental about the limits of individual sympathy as a solution. The Christian missionary who might be expected to offer Bakha genuine consolation instead reduces him to an object of evangelical interest, more concerned with converting a soul than attending to a person; even Havildar Charat Singh's kindness, in promising Bakha a hockey stick, is a small, personal gesture that leaves the structure producing Bakha's humiliation entirely intact. Anand's critique, in other words, operates simultaneously on two levels: an emotional appeal to individual conscience, and a structural argument that individual conscience, however genuine, cannot by itself dismantle an institution as thoroughly embedded in economy, religion, and bureaucracy as untouchability.

Coolie: The Picaresque as Diagnosis of Class

Where Untouchable concentrates its argument in time, Coolie disperses it across space. The novel follows Munoo, a fourteen-year-old orphan from the village of Bilaspur in the Kangra hills, through a succession of employments that together compose a kind of inverted bildungsroman: rather than maturing into social integration, Munoo is driven from position to position by exploitation, each new employer replacing the last without ever offering him security. He is first placed as a domestic servant in the household of Babu Nathoo Ram in Sham Nagar, where the household's mistress subjects him to casual cruelty disproportionate to his age and his errors; he flees by train to Daulatpur, where he finds a rare interval of something like family warmth in the household of the pickle-factory owner Prabha Dayal, before Prabha's business partner Ganpat's fraud ruins the factory and again turns Munoo out; he travels with a passing circus to Bombay, where he becomes a hand at the Sir George White cotton mill, befriends the wrestler and labour agitator Ratan, and is caught up in a communal riot precipitated, the novel strongly implies, by the mill management's manipulation of Hindu-Muslim tension to break an incipient strike; and he is finally struck by the car of the Anglo-Indian Mrs Mainwaring, who takes him to Simla as a household servant and rickshaw-puller, where overwork and untreated illness culminate in his death from tuberculosis while still in his teens.

It is important to correct a description that recurs, inaccurately, in some secondary summaries of the novel: Munoo is not principally a railway labourer in Amritsar. His single, unsuccessful attempt to find casual work as a station coolie occurs only briefly, during his period of destitution in Daulatpur, and the novel's substantive geography runs instead through Sham Nagar, Daulatpur, Bombay, and Simla. This distinction matters for the novel's argument, because the variety of Munoo's employments -- domestic service, factory labour, and finally personal service in a colonial hill station -- is precisely the point: Anand is not documenting a single occupational

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VI, June 2026

grievance but tracing how the same underlying disposability of the poor recurs across radically different sectors of the colonial economy.

Coolie's picaresque structure -- Munoo's episodic movement from place to place, encountering and then losing a fresh cast of characters at each stage -- has sometimes been read as a structural weakness, a sign of loose plotting. Read against its thematic argument, however, the episodic form does real work: it enacts, at the level of narrative structure, the very absence of continuity and security that defines Munoo's material existence. No relationship Munoo forms is permitted to become a lasting attachment, because it is precisely the poor's lack of durable social ties -- their permanent availability for extraction and dismissal -- that constitutes their vulnerability. In this sense, Coolie's apparent formlessness is not a lapse from novelistic coherence but a deliberate mimicking of the coolie's own condition.

Where Untouchable is anchored in the ritual vocabulary of pollution, Coolie is anchored in the vocabulary of ownership and use: Munoo is repeatedly described, by employers and by the narrative voice reporting their perceptions, in terms that liken him to an animal or an implement rather than a person, most explicitly in the recurring 'monkey dance' with which he entertains and disarms adults who might otherwise punish him. This is Anand's clearest illustration of how caste-inflected dehumanisation, once loosed from its ritual moorings, does not disappear under colonial capitalism but is repurposed by a new vocabulary of class and utility. Both novels, that is, are about the same underlying phenomenon -- the production of a class of persons who may be used without being fully recognised -- but Coolie shows that phenomenon persisting after its explicitly religious justification has receded.

Community, Solidarity, and the Limits of Collective Agency

Both novels stage moments in which solidarity among the marginalised offers, briefly, an alternative to the isolating logic of caste and class. In Untouchable, this solidarity is thin and largely familial or occupational -- Bakha's bonds with his sister Sohini, his friends Chota and Ram Charan, and his cautious, transactional relationship with Havildar Charat Singh -- rather than organised or political; the novel does not show Bakha's community mounting any collective challenge to the caste hierarchy, and this absence is itself significant. Bakha experiences Gandhi's arrival in Bulashah as a spectacle he witnesses rather than a movement he joins, and the novel is careful not to overstate the transformative reach of that speech: Bakha is moved, briefly hopeful, and then walks home to a life that the narrative gives no reason to expect will change.

Coolie goes further in dramatising organised resistance, through the figure of Ratan and the strike ferment at the Bombay cotton mill, but here too Anand withholds triumphalism. The strike is derailed by a communal riot that the narrative suggests was deliberately provoked by the mill's management, precisely in order to fracture worker solidarity along religious lines before it could consolidate along class lines -- an early and pointed literary treatment of a strategy of divide-and-rule that recurs throughout the industrial history of colonial India. Munoo, separated from Ratan in the chaos, ends the episode more isolated than before, not less. Anand's fiction is thus considerably more sceptical about the imminent availability of collective agency to his protagonists than the more celebratory readings of these novels sometimes suggest: solidarity is shown as a real and valuable possibility, but one that the novels' plots consistently frustrate rather than reward, a choice that keeps faith with the historical difficulty of organising labour and caste resistance under colonial conditions in the 1930s, rather than offering readers a consoling fantasy of easy emancipation.

Reception and Contested Legacy

On publication, Untouchable and Coolie were received -- helped by E. M. Forster's foreword to the former -- as bold interventions into subject matter that mainstream Indian and British fiction had largely avoided, and Anand's reputation as a founding figure of socially engaged Indian writing in English has proved durable; both novels remain standard texts in undergraduate and postgraduate syllabi on Indian literature in English.

That durability, however, has not gone unquestioned. A significant strand of later Dalit-critical scholarship has challenged the adequacy of Anand's authorial position -- that of an upper-caste, England-educated writer -- to represent Dalit interiority and experience from the inside. Critics working in this tradition have argued that

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue VI, June 2026

Untouchable's sympathetic but externally observed portrait of Bakha risks what has been described as a 'homogenising' effect, in which the specificity of Dalit self-understanding and agency is subordinated to the narrative requirements of an upper-caste reformist argument addressed, ultimately, to an upper-caste and colonial readership. This is a serious and, in this paper's assessment, largely persuasive line of critique, and it complicates any reading of Anand as simply and sufficiently a champion of the marginalised. It does not, however, fully displace the novels' historical significance: Untouchable and Coolie remain among the earliest sustained attempts within Indian fiction in English to make caste and labour exploitation the explicit, organising subject of a novel, and their limitations are themselves instructive for understanding the conditions under which even well-intentioned social-realist writing can reproduce the very hierarchies of voice it sets out to contest. Reading Anand today, in other words, is well served less by uncritical celebration than by holding these two evaluations together: acknowledging the historical importance of the intervention while attending seriously to the critique of its standpoint.

CONCLUSION

Read together, Untouchable and Coolie compose a two-part argument about the persistence and mutation of hierarchy under colonial conditions. Untouchable isolates the ritual logic of caste pollution in its most concentrated form, compressing an entire argument about the structural, non-individual nature of untouchability into a single day. Coolie extends that argument across an itinerant, multi-sited working life, showing how the same underlying disposability of the poor migrates from an explicitly religious vocabulary of purity and pollution into the ostensibly secular vocabulary of wage labour, ownership, and use. Neither novel offers its protagonist, or its reader, a resolved political programme; both instead use unresolved endings -- Bakha's uncertain walk home, Munoo's early death -- to insist that the problem they have staged remains open. That formal refusal of easy resolution is, this paper has argued, not a weakness in Anand's fiction but its most serious and lasting contribution, even as later Dalit-critical scholarship rightly presses the further question of who is best positioned to narrate that unresolved problem, and on whose behalf.

REFERENCES

1. Anand, Mulk Raj. (1935). Untouchable. London: Wishart.
2. Anand, Mulk Raj. (1936). Coolie. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
3. Bhatnagar, Anjana. (2009). Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable: A Critique. The Criterion: An International Journal in English, 1(2), 1-5. [Verify against original issue.]
4. Chakraborty, Jayita. (2017). The Representation of Untouchables in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable. International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences, 2(4), 33-40. [Verify against original issue.]
5. Ghosh, Jyotsna. (2006). Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India. New Delhi: Sage Publications. [Verify edition/ISBN.]
6. Jain, Jasbir. (1992). Mulk Raj Anand: His Art and Concerns. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors. [Could not be independently confirmed; a book of this title is otherwise attributed to C. J. George (Atlantic, 1994). Please verify authorship before submission.]
7. Kachru, Braj B., Kachru, Yamuna, & Sridhar, S. N. (2008). Language in South Asia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Kumar, Sanjay. (2003). The Novel in English: A Study of the Indian Novels in English. Indian Literature, 47(4), 233-253. [Verify against original issue.]
9. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. (2002). Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
10. Niranjana, Tejaswini. (1992). Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context. Berkeley: University of California Press.
11. Roy, Pinaki. (2003). Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie: A Study in Irony. Indian Literature, 47(6), 99-106. [Could not be independently confirmed; please verify against the original journal issue before submission.]