

## Cast and Casteism through the Lens of Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Study with Ambedkar, Spivak, and Bhabha

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### Abstract

*Caste is one of the most enduring and complex systems of social stratification in India, deeply embedded in religious ideology, economic structures, and cultural consciousness. It is not merely a division of labour but a hierarchical system of graded inequality that regulates identity, dignity, and access to resources. In literary discourse, caste has been a recurring theme, particularly in Indian English fiction, where writers have attempted to represent its lived realities. Among the earliest and most significant voices addressing caste oppression is Mulk Raj Anand, whose novels bring the lived experiences of marginalised communities into English literary consciousness. Works such as *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) expose the brutality of caste-based exclusion and its intersections with colonialism and class exploitation. This essay critically examines caste and casteism through Anand's literary representation, supported by theoretical insights from B. R. Ambedkar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. While Anand provides emotional realism, Ambedkar offers structural critique, Spivak interrogates representation, and Bhabha explores cultural hybridity. Together, they create a multidimensional understanding of caste as both material and discursive violence.*

### Keywords:

***Caste System, Casteism, Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchable, B. R. Ambedkar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Subaltern Studies, Dalit Representation, Postcolonial Criticism***

### INTRODUCTION

The caste system has remained one of the most enduring and complex social structures in South Asia, shaping identities, opportunities, and power relations across centuries. While colonialism, modernisation, and constitutional reforms have transformed many aspects of Indian society, caste continues to influence social interactions, political representation, economic mobility, and cultural production. Literature has played a crucial role in exposing the realities of caste oppression and interrogating the ideological foundations that sustain social hierarchies. Among the early Indian English novelists, Mulk Raj Anand occupies a distinctive position for his sustained engagement with marginalised communities and his powerful critique of social discrimination. His novel *Untouchable* (1935) remains a landmark text in Indian literature because it foregrounds the lived experiences of a young sweeper, Bakha, whose existence is shaped by the violence of caste-based

exclusion. Through Anand's literary imagination, caste ceases to be an abstract sociological category and becomes a lived reality characterised by humiliation, silence, and resistance. Examining Anand's representation of caste through the theoretical frameworks of B. R. Ambedkar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha reveals the multidimensional nature of caste oppression and the possibilities of subaltern agency, cultural negotiation, and social transformation.

Anand wrote during a period marked by anti-colonial nationalism, social reform movements, and increasing debates concerning caste inequality. Unlike many nationalist narratives that emphasised a unified Indian identity, Anand focused on the contradictions within Indian society itself. His concern was not merely political independence but also social justice. In *Untouchable*, the narrative follows a single day in the life of Bakha, a young latrine cleaner who faces repeated instances of discrimination because of his caste status. The novel demonstrates how caste operates not only through formal structures but also through everyday interactions, language, bodily practices, and spatial segregation. The repeated reminders of Bakha's "polluting" presence expose the internalisation of caste ideology among both oppressors and victims. Anand's realism compels readers to confront the psychological and material consequences of caste discrimination rather than treating it as a distant social problem [1].

The relevance of Ambedkar's thought to Anand's work is profound. Ambedkar argued that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers, sustained through religious sanction, social control, and systematic exclusion [2]. His critique challenged the notion that caste represented a benign social organisation. Instead, he identified it as a mechanism of graded inequality that prevented genuine democracy and human dignity. Bakha's experiences exemplify Ambedkar's analysis. The protagonist is denied equality not because of his abilities or moral character but because of his inherited social status. His exclusion from public spaces, his inability to access basic rights, and his constant fear of contamination accusations illustrate the structural nature of caste oppression. Anand's narrative thus aligns closely with Ambedkar's insistence that caste functions as a system of institutionalised discrimination rather than isolated prejudice.

Ambedkar's concept of social democracy is equally significant for understanding the novel. He maintained that political democracy cannot survive without social and economic equality [3]. In *Untouchable*, colonial modernity introduces new technologies, educational opportunities, and political ideas, yet caste remains deeply entrenched. Bakha's fascination with British soldiers and Western clothing symbolises his desire for dignity and recognition. However, these aspirations cannot erase the structural barriers imposed by caste. Anand thereby reveals the limitations of modernisation when social hierarchies remain intact. This insight resonates with Ambedkar's argument that genuine liberation requires radical social transformation rather than superficial reform.

The novel also anticipates questions central to subaltern studies and postcolonial theory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" interrogates whether marginalised subjects can truly represent themselves within dominant systems of knowledge and power [4]. Spivak argues that the voices of the oppressed are often mediated, translated, or appropriated by elite discourses. This framework raises important questions regarding Anand's representation of Bakha. As an upper-caste intellectual writing about an untouchable protagonist, Anand occupies a complex position. On one hand, he gives visibility to a community that had

largely been excluded from mainstream literary representation. On the other hand, the narrative inevitably reflects the author's interpretive framework.

Bakha's voice in the novel is significant yet constrained. He experiences oppression directly, but his capacity to articulate a coherent political response remains limited. Much of the novel's critique emerges through the narrator's perspective rather than through Bakha's autonomous speech. Spivak's framework encourages readers to examine this tension between representation and self-representation. While Anand challenges dominant caste ideologies, he simultaneously illustrates the difficulties faced by marginalised individuals in making their voices heard within structures designed to silence them [5].

Nevertheless, it would be reductive to dismiss Anand's project as merely paternalistic. The novel demonstrates a genuine effort to humanise a community that had long been dehumanised. Bakha is not portrayed as a passive victim; he possesses desires, frustrations, aspirations, and emotional complexity. His reflections reveal a consciousness struggling against social constraints. In this sense, Anand creates a literary space in which the subaltern becomes visible, even if complete self-representation remains elusive. The novel can therefore be read as an important transitional text that anticipates later Dalit autobiographies and writings that would more directly foreground subaltern voices [6].

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity provide another productive lens for analysing Anand's work. Bhabha argues that colonial subjects often engage in forms of imitation that simultaneously reproduce and destabilise dominant authority [7]. Bakha's fascination with British culture exemplifies this dynamic. He admires the clothing, manners, and perceived equality associated with colonial modernity. His attempts to emulate British soldiers reflect a desire to escape the stigma of caste. Yet this mimicry is inherently ambivalent. While it offers a symbolic challenge to traditional hierarchies, it cannot fundamentally alter Bakha's social position.

Bhabha's notion of hybridity is equally relevant. Bakha inhabits a space between traditional caste structures and emerging modern influences. He is neither fully integrated into colonial modernity nor entirely confined within traditional social roles. This liminal position generates both opportunities and anxieties. Anand's portrayal of Bakha reveals how marginalised individuals negotiate multiple systems of power simultaneously. Caste oppression intersects with colonial domination, producing a complex social reality that cannot be understood through a single framework [8].

The relationship between caste and colonialism in Anand's work deserves careful attention. Some colonial administrators criticised caste practices as evidence of Indian backwardness, while simultaneously benefiting from existing social divisions. Anand avoids simplistic binaries by showing that colonialism and caste are distinct yet interconnected systems of power. The British presence introduces new possibilities for social mobility and critique, but it does not eliminate caste discrimination. Bakha's admiration for colonial culture reflects both resistance to caste oppression and vulnerability to colonial ideology. Through this ambiguity, Anand demonstrates the limitations of viewing colonialism as a straightforward force of liberation [9].

Language plays a crucial role in the novel's critique of caste. Anand's use of Indianized English allows him to capture the rhythms, expressions, and cultural contexts of everyday life. Linguistic choices reveal how caste operates through discourse as well as social institutions. Terms of abuse,

commands, and ritual prohibitions reinforce hierarchies by shaping perceptions of self and other. The repeated injunctions concerning purity and pollution illustrate how language naturalises social inequality. From a postcolonial perspective, Anand's linguistic strategy challenges the dominance of standardised colonial English while creating a space for indigenous experiences within global literary discourse [10].

The symbolic significance of the body is another important dimension of the novel. Caste ideology frequently associates bodily contact with notions of purity and pollution. Bakha's body becomes a site upon which social anxieties are projected. His physical labour is essential to the functioning of society, yet his presence is simultaneously stigmatised. This contradiction exposes the hypocrisy of caste structures. The community depends upon the labour of untouchables while denying them dignity and recognition. Ambedkar's critique of caste as a system of institutionalised humiliation is vividly illustrated through these bodily experiences [11].

Anand's humanism has generated both admiration and criticism among scholars. Supporters argue that his commitment to social justice challenged dominant narratives and expanded the scope of Indian English literature [12]. Critics contend that his representations sometimes reflect reformist rather than revolutionary perspectives. From an Ambedkarite standpoint, one might argue that the novel identifies caste oppression without fully embracing the radical political solutions proposed by Ambedkar. Yet this critique should be balanced against the historical context in which Anand was writing. At a time when caste discrimination was often ignored or normalised, *Untouchable* represented a bold intervention that forced readers to confront uncomfortable realities [13].

The continuing relevance of Anand's work becomes evident when considered alongside contemporary debates on caste discrimination. Despite constitutional protections and social reforms, caste-based inequalities persist in education, employment, housing, and public life [14]. Literature remains a powerful medium for exposing these injustices and fostering empathy. Anand's portrayal of Bakha encourages readers to recognise the human consequences of structural inequality rather than reducing caste to a statistical or legal issue.

Reading Anand alongside Ambedkar, Spivak, and Bhabha reveals the richness of interdisciplinary approaches to caste studies. Ambedkar provides a framework for understanding caste as a system of institutionalised inequality requiring radical transformation. Spivak highlights questions of representation, voice, and subaltern agency. Bhabha illuminates the cultural negotiations and hybrid identities produced within colonial and postcolonial contexts. Together, these perspectives deepen our understanding of Anand's literary project and its significance for contemporary scholarship.

Ultimately, *Untouchable* remains a foundational text because it combines literary artistry with ethical urgency. Anand transforms caste from a sociological abstraction into an intimate human experience. Through Bakha's struggles, readers encounter the emotional, psychological, and material dimensions of exclusion. The novel challenges complacency by exposing the everyday violence embedded within social structures. At the same time, it gestures toward possibilities of resistance, dignity, and transformation. When interpreted through the lenses of Ambedkar, Spivak, and Bhabha, Anand's work emerges as a complex exploration of oppression, representation, and identity. Its enduring significance lies not only in its historical importance but also in its continued capacity to provoke critical reflection on caste, power, and social justice in contemporary society.

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