

# Caste, Class, and Gender: Social Reflections in the Works of Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan

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### ABSTRACT:

Indian English literature has long functioned as both a mirror to and critique of India's complex socio-cultural fabric. Among its foundational voices, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan offer distinct yet complementary portrayals of Indian society. This paper examines how issues of caste, class, and gender are reflected in their major works. Anand, influenced by Gandhian and Marxist ideologies, adopts a reformist and confrontational tone, foregrounding the struggles of the marginalized in novels such as *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936). His writing directly challenges social hierarchies and exposes systemic injustices related to caste discrimination, economic exploitation, and gender-based oppression. In contrast, Narayan's narrative style is more subtle and introspective. Through works like *The Guide* (1958), *The Painter of Signs* (1976), and *The Financial Expert* (1952), he explores middle-class life in the fictional town of Malgudi, highlighting the nuances of human relationships, social expectations, and personal dilemmas within traditional structures.

By comparing Anand's activist literature with Narayan's humanistic realism, this study demonstrates how both authors contribute to the discourse on social inequality. The paper underscores literature's dual role as a catalyst for reform and as a reflective medium capturing the complexities of everyday life in Indian society.

### KEYWORDS:

Caste, Class, Gender, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan.

**Introduction:**

Literature is often described as a mirror of society. It captures social dynamics, reflects cultural values, and critiques inequalities. In the Indian context, English-language fiction has been particularly instrumental in portraying the complex interplay of caste, class, and gender, which have historically structured Indian society. The works of Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan exemplify two distinct approaches to social representation in Indian English literature.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), often called the “Charles Dickens of India,” dedicated his literary career to exploring social injustice. Influenced by Gandhian ideals and Marxist thought, Anand focused on the marginalized sections of Indian society, particularly Dalits and laborers, depicting their struggles against systemic oppression. His narratives are grounded in social realism, portraying not only individual suffering but also institutionalized exploitation. In novels such as *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), Anand exposes the harsh realities of caste discrimination, economic inequality, and gender subjugation. His characters are often caught in circumstances beyond their control, reflecting a society structured by hierarchical power relations.

R.K. Narayan (1906–2001), on the other hand, is celebrated for his subtle and humanistic portrayal of everyday life. Through the fictional town of Malgudi, Narayan chronicles the aspirations, conflicts, and transformations of the Indian middle class. His approach is often ironic and humorous, revealing societal norms without overt moralizing. Novels such as *The Guide* (1958), *The Painter of Signs* (1976), and *The Financial Expert* (1952) highlight issues of class mobility, gender roles, and social hierarchies, albeit through the lens of personal experience and observation rather than direct activism.

The distinction between Anand and Narayan lies not only in

the choice of themes but also in narrative techniques. Anand employs direct social critique and realism, whereas Narayan uses subtle irony, character-driven storytelling, and narrative humor. Yet, both authors provide invaluable insights into Indian society, particularly concerning caste, class, and gender dynamics. Anand's novels provoke awareness and reform, while Narayan's works reflect the ethical dilemmas, aspirations, and social negotiations of ordinary people.

This paper aims to examine the ways in which caste, class, and gender are represented in the works of Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. It also compares their approaches to reveal how Indian English literature, as a whole, provides a multidimensional understanding of social realities. The analysis will focus on Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, and Narayan's *The Guide*, *The Painter of Signs*, and *The Financial Expert*, exploring how each author engages with the central social themes.

The study contributes to a broader understanding of literature's role as both a social mirror and a tool for reform, highlighting the enduring relevance of these classic works in contemporary discussions about social equity, gender dynamics, and class structures in India.

### **Literature Review:**

Critical studies on Mulk Raj Anand have consistently emphasized his role as a social reformist. Iyengar (1962) identifies Anand's novels as instruments for raising awareness about the plight of marginalized communities. Anand's works reflect his deep concern for social justice, portraying the lives of untouchables, laborers, and women oppressed by both caste and patriarchal norms. Naik (1973) describes Anand's narrative strategy as a combination of realism and social activism, designed to provoke empathy and in-

spire reform. Scholars such as Dodiya (2001) highlight Anand's unique ability to blend literary aesthetics with ethical engagement, making his fiction both politically committed and artistically compelling.

R.K. Narayan's critical reception emphasizes his humanistic approach. Walsh (1982) notes Narayan's skill in capturing the nuances of everyday life, particularly the moral dilemmas and social negotiations of the Indian middle class. While Narayan addresses caste and class indirectly, his novels reveal the subtle ways in which social hierarchies operate in urban and semi-urban India. Mehrotra (1995) highlights Narayan's use of irony and humor as a technique for revealing social norms without direct confrontation, offering readers a reflective and nuanced understanding of Indian society.

Comparative scholarship, though limited, suggests that Anand and Narayan provide complementary perspectives on Indian social reality. Anand's focus on the marginalized contrasts with Narayan's depiction of the middle class, yet both reveal the persistent influence of caste, class, and gender in shaping human experience. The present study aims to synthesize these perspectives, analyzing how each author represents societal inequalities and human resilience.

### **Caste in Anand and Narayan:**

In *Untouchable*, Anand presents a vivid portrayal of Bakha, a sweeper boy, whose life is circumscribed by the rigid hierarchy of the caste system. Bakha's daily experiences—such as being denied access to temples, facing verbal abuse, and living under social stigma—illustrate the deeply entrenched social ostracization of untouchables. Anand uses Bakha's consciousness and inner reflections to evoke empathy and highlight systemic injustice. The novel critiques the moral and social hypocrisy of a society that marginalizes human beings based on birth.

In *Coolie*, Anand expands his critique to include economic and social exploitation. Munoo, a young boy from a rural village, is employed as a laborer in industrial and urban settings. Here, caste intersects with class: Munoo's low social status and lack of economic resources render him vulnerable to exploitation. Anand portrays his suffering with unflinching realism, emphasizing the interconnectedness of caste, poverty, and labor exploitation.

R.K. Narayan's approach to caste is subtler. In *The Guide*, caste is not the primary focus, but it informs the social dynamics between characters. Rosie's and Raju's interactions, as well as the portrayal of villagers and traders, reveal implicit caste distinctions. In *Malgudi*, caste boundaries are observed in everyday transactions, rituals, and interpersonal relationships. Narayan does not confront the system aggressively; instead, he uses irony to highlight social absurdities.

Anand and Narayan's treatment of caste reflects their differing literary agendas. Anand's novels are explicitly reformist, depicting caste oppression as a moral and social crisis. Narayan's fiction presents caste as a subtle, normalized aspect of daily life, revealing its influence on behavior, relationships, and social mobility. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive picture of caste in Indian society—from systemic brutality to subtle social stratification.

### **Class in Anand and Narayan:**

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* and other works address class exploitation alongside caste oppression. Munoo's journey from rural poverty to urban labor exposes the harsh realities of industrial capitalism in colonial India. Anand illustrates how class intersects with caste to compound oppression, as Munoo faces discrimination not only from employers but also from a society structured around hi-

erarchical social norms. The novel highlights the vulnerability of the working class, emphasizing both economic exploitation and social marginalization.

R.K.Narayan's novels, such as *The Financial Expert* and *Malgudi Days*, focus on middle-class aspirations, failures, and ethical dilemmas. The depiction of class is personal and everyday-oriented, rather than structural. Characters navigate social hierarchies through ambition, entrepreneurship, and interpersonal relationships. Humor and irony reveal the contradictions inherent in middle-class life, such as the tension between aspiration and morality, or tradition and modernity.

Anand addresses class as a structural and systemic phenomenon, whereas Narayan explores class through the lens of individual experience and social mobility. Anand's novels provoke awareness of social injustice, while Narayan's works reflect on the ethics, dilemmas, and resilience of the middle class. Together, they provide complementary perspectives on class in Indian society.

### **Gender in Anand and Narayan:**

Women in Mulk Raj Anand's fiction are often depicted as doubly oppressed—by patriarchy and social hierarchy. In *Coolie* and *Untouchable*, female characters face gendered vulnerabilities, reflecting both societal expectations and systemic exploitation. Anand's portrayal of women underscores the intersectionality of oppression, highlighting how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape human suffering.

R.K. Narayan presents a more nuanced exploration of gender. In *The Painter of Signs*, Daisy embodies the modern Indian woman negotiating career, autonomy, and societal expectations. In *The Guide*, Rosie challenges patriarchal authority through her pursuit of dance, asserting independence from her husband and social con-

straints. Narayan emphasizes individual agency within societal norms, highlighting the evolving role of women in urban and semi-urban India.

Anand portrays women primarily as victims of social systems, while Narayan explores their negotiation of identity, autonomy, and tradition. Anand's focus is structural and political; Narayan's is psychological and social. Combined, their works offer insight into both the challenges faced by women and their agency within Indian society.

### **Conclusion:**

Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, despite their divergent literary approaches, provide enduring insights into the social structure of India. Anand's fiction serves as a call to social consciousness, exposing oppression, inequality, and injustice. Narayan's works offer humanistic reflections, emphasizing the subtleties of middle-class life and the interplay of tradition and modernity.

Their exploration of caste, class, and gender demonstrates literature's ability to both educate and inspire, offering a rich tapestry of social observation, critique, and ethical reflection. Anand's novels remain relevant for discussions on social reform, while Narayan's continue to illuminate the nuances of everyday experience. Together, they exemplify the power of Indian English literature to mirror society, challenge conventions, and provoke thought.

In contemporary India, where issues of caste, class, and gender persist, their works continue to offer valuable lessons about equity, resilience, and the human condition. Understanding their contributions is essential not only for literary scholarship but also for broader social awareness and reform.

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