



Relevance of Women in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract: This paper examines the centrality and representational complexity of women in the major novels of Mulk Raj Anand particularly Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), and Two Leaves and a Bud (1937), with glances at later works. It argues that Anand's fictional women are not peripheral ornaments to male-centered plots rather, they are catalysts who expose the intersecting structures of caste, class, and colonial power, and they anchor the author's humanist ethics. While Anand often writes through male focalizers, women repeatedly function as the text's moral barometers, sites of social injury, and vehicles of social critique. The paper also notes limits in Anand's vision moments of paternalism and exoticization while situating his portrayals within 1930s realist aesthetics and reformist discourse.

Key words: focalizers, moral barometers, social injury, paternalism, aesthetics, discourse.

Introduction: Mulk Raj Anand's early fiction is widely read as foundational to Indian English social realism. His protagonists Bakha in Untouchable, Munoo in Coolie, and Gangu in Two Leaves and a Bud are male, but the moral weather of these novels often turns on what happens to the women around them. Anand's attention to everyday humiliation, bodily vulnerability, and the politics of labour renders women doubly or triply burdened: by caste patriarchy, class exploitation, and colonial domination. In this sense, women in Anand are not merely "relevant" they are indispensable to how the novels produce feeling, diagnosis, and critique.

Two framing claims guide this study:

Women carry the novels' ethical charge, converting social fact into felt experience. Anand's humanism, though occasionally paternalistic, attempts to recover women's agency often quiet, practical, and relational inside oppressive structures.

Method and Critical Context:

The analysis adopts close reading of scenes across Anand's early trilogy, placing them in conversation with scholarship on Indian English realism, Dalit studies, and gender. The method tracks: (a) how women are seen focalization and point of view (b) what social functions they perform within plot and milieu and (c) which forms of agency are attributed to them. Rather than quantify "strong" or "weak" characters, the essay evaluates the narrative work female figures do: whom they move, what they reveal, and how they bear the novel's ethical argument.

Sohini and the Exposure of Caste-Sexual Violence:

If Bakha's day long itinerary anatomizes untouchability, the novel's most searing moment arrives when his sister is molested by a upper caste priest. This scene performs two functions. First, it sutures caste oppression to sexual domination: the "polluted" body of the Dalit girl becomes a screen for upper-caste impunity and desire. Second, it reveals how the apparatus of purity can invert guilt. Sohini's violation is quickly displaced by accusations against her. Through this reversal, Anand stages how gender amplifies caste vulnerability.

Women as Moral Barometers and Healers:

Women in Untouchable also furnish spaces of care domestic labour, water-carrying, sibling solidarity without which Bakha's movement would be unliveable. Anand renders these routines with documentary detail, making visible the ordinary labour that sustains life at the margins. While overt political speech in the novel is dominated by men (colonial officials, reformers, Gandhi), the felt cost of untouchability is most legible on women's bodies. The ethical centre of gravity thus passes through Sohini's experience.

Coolie (1936): Femininity, Labour, and Colonial Desire

The Household, the Factory, the Street

Munoo's migrations from hill town to domestic service, factory shopfloor, and urban underworld bring him into contact with a range of women whose lives index structures of work and desire. Domestic mistresses, shop-floor girls, and urban performers occupy different rungs of the colonial economy, but each is constrained by gendered expectation and male control. Anand is attentive to how femininity is commodified: as decorum in the home, as docility in the factory, as spectacle in the city.

The "Memsahib" and the Fetish of the Colonial Gaze

Anand's portrayal of English and Anglo-Indian women participates in, and critiques, the erotic's of empire. The memsahib's fascination with youthful native male bodies both parodies and exposes the asymmetry of colonial power: she can desire across racial lines without forfeiting class privilege, while Indian working-class women cannot refuse laboring femininity without punishment. The figure thus functions as a prism through which Anand examines race, gender, and class entanglements.

Invisible Care, Unequal Risk:

Even where women remain offstage, their care work structures the plot. Munoo's survival repeatedly depends on cooking, cleaning, nursing, and informal economies organized by women. Yet when crisis strikes illness, unemployment, police action women are often the first dispensable labour. Anand uses these rhythms to argue that colonial capitalism depends upon the extraction of feminized, frequently unpaid work.

Two Leaves and a Bud (1937): Plantation Patriarchy

Family, Wage, and the Plantation Regime:

Set on a tea estate in Assam, the novel re-centres the family as a unit of labour discipline. Women and girls are recruited alongside men; pregnancy, menstruation, and childcare become matters of managerial calculation. By showing how wages are tied to family subsistence, Anand demonstrates that the plantation's profitability rests on the regulation of female bodies both as workers and as bearers of future labourers.

Sexual Coercion as Governance:

One of the novel's pivotal crises involves predation upon a poor labourer's daughter by those protected by

colonial authority. Anand does not isolate this as a private moral failing; rather, he presents sexual coercion as a technique of rule intimidation “favour,” and impunity that keep workers compliant. The father’s attempt to protest is met not with justice but with violence, underlining how vulnerability to assault is structurally produced and gendered.

Individual Empowerment:

Anand is not content to render women solely as victims. Plantation women share food, warn each other of overseers, form whisper networks, and mobilize around safety. These are not heroic set-pieces but durable, everyday tactics what might be called micro-agencies that the narrative treats with respect. Through them, Anand maps a repertoire of survival that is social rather than individual.

Narrative Technique and the Gendered Gaze Focalization and Witnessing:

Anand often writes from a close third-person aligned with male protagonists, but he punctuates this with moments in which women become the scene’s centre of consciousness particularly when injury or care is at stake. These shifts interrupt the normal flow of male perception and force readers to witness women’s experience directly. The technique is crucial to the novels’ ethical project- it transforms women from background figures into agents of narrative attention.

The Body as Archive

Bodies carry social memory in Anand: scar, fatigue, hunger, menstruation, lactation, sexual violation. When the state or the factory produces silence, the body becomes an archive the novel can read. This is especially true for women, whose material routines and exposures are minutely rendered. Anand’s realism thus contests abstraction by anchoring politics in corporeal life.

Limits and Tensions in Anand’s Humanism

Anand’s sympathy can shade into paternalism. Working class and Dalit women sometimes appear primarily as vessels for male protagonists’ moral awakening. Moreover, representations of Anglo-Indian and English women risk exoticizing desire, even as the text critiques the colonial gaze. Finally, reformist rhetoric in the novels occasionally resolves complex gendered harm into moral appeals to male conscience or to technological modernity (e.g. sanitation), rather than to women’s collective power.

Yet these tensions coexist with genuine attempts to register women’s speech, labour, and practical intelligence. The result is a body of work that while historically located remains strikingly contemporary in its intersectional analytics.

Comparative Glances Beyond the Trilogy:

Later works extend these concerns. Royal courts and nationalist spaces generate new gendered scripts: queens, courtesans, and political wives navigate honour economies and public-reformist visibility. Even where women’s names are not foregrounded, their constraints and choices continue to direct the novels’ ethical energies. The continuity suggests that for Anand, the question of justice is inseparable from the condition of women.

Conclusion:

Why Women Matter in Anand and Why That Matters Now Across Anand’s fiction, women concentrate the novels’ critique of caste, class, and empire they disclose how macro- structures precipitate intimate injury; and they model solidarities that make endurance possible. Their “relevance” is thus structural and ethical. Reading Anand through his women does not merely add a gendered footnote to social realism it recovers the very engine of his moral imagination.

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