



SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS: A COMPARATIVE CRITIQUE OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE AND COOLIE

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Cite This Article: T. Martin Jayasri & K. Ravichandran, "Subaltern Consciousness: A Comparative Critique of Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and Coolie", International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

and Modern Education, Volume 12, Issue 2, July - December, Page 15-17, 2026.

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Type of Review: Peer Reviewed as per [C|O|P|E] Guidance.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21545998>

Abstract:

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) remain pioneering works in Indian English literature for their powerful representation of marginalized communities under the intersecting structures of caste, class, and colonialism. This article examines the emergence of subaltern consciousness and the mechanisms of social exclusion in these two novels through the theoretical perspectives of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial criticism. While *Untouchable* portrays the everyday humiliation, ritual pollution, and systemic ostracization experienced by Bakha, an untouchable sweeper, *Coolie* traces the relentless exploitation of Munoo, whose life is shaped by poverty, labour, and economic inequality. Although the protagonists belong to different social locations, both novels reveal how institutional structures deny dignity, agency, and equal opportunities to those positioned at the margins of society. The article argues that Anand's realist narrative exposes social exclusion not merely as an individual experience but as a deeply embedded socio-political process sustained by caste hierarchy, economic exploitation, and colonial power.

Key Words: Subaltern Consciousness, Social Exclusion, Colonialism, Inequality, Humiliation

Introduction:

Indian English literature consistently serves as a powerful medium for exposing the socio-political realities of marginalized communities, particularly during the colonial period. Among the pioneers of social realism, Mulk Raj Anand occupies a significant position for his empathetic portrayal of the lives of the oppressed and the underprivileged. His novels challenge entrenched systems of caste discrimination, economic exploitation, and colonial domination by foregrounding the experiences of those excluded from mainstream society. *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) are landmark novels that examine the structural inequalities shaping the lives of marginalized individuals. Through the protagonists Bakha and Munoo, Anand presents compelling narratives that illuminate the intersection of caste, class, labour, and colonial power in pre-independence India.

The concept of the subaltern, popularized by the Subaltern Studies collective and later theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to social groups that remain excluded from dominant structures of political, economic, and cultural power. Anand's fiction predates the formal articulation of Subaltern Studies but anticipates many of its concerns by centering the voices and lived experiences of those historically denied representation. Bakha, an untouchable sweeper, endures the dehumanizing effects of caste-based exclusion. His social position is forcefully expressed through the humiliation; "keep to the side, you low-caste vermin!" (89), while Munoo, an orphaned labourer, experiences relentless exploitation as he moves through various forms of employment. Although their circumstances differ, both protagonists are subjected to systemic oppression that denies them dignity, agency, and social mobility.

This article examines the representation of subaltern consciousness and social exclusion in *Untouchable* and *Coolie* through the lens of Subaltern Studies. It argues that Anand portrays marginalization as a multidimensional phenomenon sustained by the intertwined forces of caste hierarchy, class inequality, and colonial governance. The study further explores how the protagonists gradually develop an awareness of their social condition, revealing forms of subaltern consciousness that emerge through lived experience rather than organized political resistance. Anand's realistic narrative style humanizes the oppressed and exposes the structural mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion, inviting readers to question the moral legitimacy of hierarchical social systems.

Subaltern Consciousness in Untouchable:

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* presents one of the earliest and most compelling literary representations of caste-based marginalization in Indian English fiction. Through the experiences of Bakha, a young sweeper boy, Anand exposes the everyday realities of untouchability and the systematic denial of human dignity. The novel demonstrates that caste oppression extends beyond economic deprivation; it permeates every aspect of social life, regulating physical movement, social interaction, labour, and identity "he was a sweeper's son and could never be a babu" (9). Bakha's experiences reveal the workings of a deeply hierarchical society in which an untouchable is denied equality not because of individual actions but because of birth. Read through the lens of Subaltern Studies, *Untouchable* illustrates how caste functions as a mechanism of social exclusion while simultaneously shaping the consciousness of the marginalized subject.

Bakha's daily routine reflects the structural violence embedded in the caste system. As a sweeper, he performs the work considered ritually impure, and his occupation determines his social identity. His obligation to announce his presence while

walking through the streets so that members of the upper castes may avoid physical contact symbolizes the institutionalized nature of untouchability. As Mulk Raj Anand Writes: "He has to announce his approach by shouting, 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming!'" (9) This compulsory announcement demonstrates how caste hierarchy regulates even the physical movement of the marginalized subject. The humiliating incident in which Bakha is publicly abused after accidentally touching an upper-caste man demonstrates how caste hierarchy is enforced through fear, ritual purity, and public humiliation. The accusation of "pollution" transforms an ordinary encounter into an act of social violence, emphasizing that untouchability operates as a system of exclusion rather than a matter of personal prejudice.

Bakha's encounters with different ideological responses to untouchability further contribute to his evolving consciousness. The Christian missionary's promise of religious conversion, Mahatma Gandhi's speech advocating the abolition of untouchability open up the inner conscience of Bakha. Gandhi's appeal: "Untouchability is a crime against God and humanity" (139) challenges the religious and social justification of caste exclusion. The discussion of the flush toilet as a technological solution presents another possibility for social transformation. His response to the possibilities of social change reflects the emergence of a new awareness: "He felt a sudden hope" (139). Anand does not endorse any single solution uncritically; instead, he exposes the complexity of caste oppression and suggests that meaningful change requires structural transformation rather than symbolic reform alone. These encounters encourage Bakha to reflect upon his own existence and the possibility of a life free from humiliation.

From a Subaltern Studies perspective, Bakha exemplifies a subject whose voice has long been excluded from dominant social and historical narratives. Although he lacks the political power to challenge the caste system directly, his thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences constitute an important form of subaltern consciousness. Although he lacks the political power to challenge the caste system directly, his thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences constitute an important form of subaltern consciousness. His internal response to repeated humiliation reveals the psychological effects of caste oppression: "Why was he treated so badly?" (89). This questioning marks an important moment of consciousness, as personal suffering begins to develop into an awareness of structural injustice. Anand's realist narrative restores visibility to those historically silenced by caste hierarchy and reveals that the struggle for dignity begins with an awareness of injustice. By centering Bakha's perspective, *Untouchable* transforms the experiences of an untouchable sweeper into a profound critique of caste oppression and social exclusion, affirming the humanity of those whom society seeks to dehumanize.

Social Exclusion and Labour Exploitation in *Coolie*:

While *Untouchable* foregrounds caste-based discrimination, Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* broadens the discourse on marginalization by examining the exploitation of labour within the socio-economic structures of colonial India. Through the life of Munoo, an orphaned adolescent who moves from one place of employment to another, Anand exposes the harsh realities of poverty, class inequality, and capitalist exploitation. Munoo's journey from a domestic servant to a factory worker and finally a rickshaw puller illustrates how labouring bodies are commodified and discarded in a society governed by economic inequality and colonial interests. Read through the lens of Subaltern Studies, *Coolie* demonstrates that social exclusion is not limited to caste but is also reinforced by class, labour relations, and colonial capitalism.

Munoo's vulnerability begins with his social position as an orphan without family, property, or education. His early condition is marked by poverty and social insecurity, as he is described as an "ominous orphan" (3). This label reflects how Munoo's orphanhood becomes a source of social vulnerability and contributes to his entry into exploitative labour. Deprived of economic security, he is forced into exploitative labour at an early age. Throughout the novel, every employer views him as a source of cheap labour rather than as an individual deserving dignity and compassion. Whether serving in the household of Babu Nathoo Ram, working in the pickle factory at Daulatpur, labouring in the cotton mill at Bombay, or pulling a rickshaw in Simla, Munoo encounters different forms of exploitation that reflect the unequal distribution of wealth and power. His labour sustains the comfort and prosperity of others while leaving him physically exhausted, emotionally isolated, and economically powerless.

Anand portrays labour as a mechanism through which social exclusion is institutionalized. Industrial workplaces are characterized by long working hours, unsafe conditions, low wages, and the absence of legal protection. The cotton mill episodes particularly reveal the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism, where workers are treated as replaceable components of the production process. Munoo's psychological response to the factory environment reveals its alienating effect: "He felt alone and isolated. He felt he would go mad with the din" (185). The factory thus becomes a space where industrial labour produces not only physical exhaustion but also psychological alienation.

Despite his suffering, Munoo exhibits an evolving awareness of the inequalities surrounding him. He gradually recognizes the stark contrast between the privileged classes and the labouring poor, observing how wealth determines social status, opportunity, and respect. Although he lacks the education and political consciousness necessary to organize resistance, his repeated encounters with injustice expose the structural nature of exploitation. His consciousness emerges not through ideological instruction but through lived experience. His growing despair reveals the psychological consequences of repeated exploitation: "My death would rid the world of an unlucky person" (189). This moment demonstrates how structural oppression is internalized by the subaltern subject, causing social suffering to appear as personal failure.

From the perspective of Subaltern Studies, Munoo represents the silenced labouring classes whose experiences remain absent from dominant historical narratives. Anand restores visibility to this marginalized figure by depicting his aspirations, emotions, and struggles with empathy and realism. Anand restores visibility to this marginalized figure by depicting his aspirations, emotions, and struggles with empathy and realism. Munoo's experience of isolation is evident in the statement, "He felt alone and isolated" (185). This emotional isolation reflects the broader social exclusion experienced by the subaltern labourer. Unlike conventional narratives that celebrate colonial modernity and industrial progress, *Coolie* reveals the inequalities concealed beneath economic development. The novel demonstrates that social exclusion operates through interconnected systems of class, labour, and colonial power, producing conditions in which the poor remain trapped in cycles of exploitation and deprivation. By centering Munoo's life, Anand critiques colonial capitalism and indigenous social hierarchies, affirming the humanity of the labouring poor and exposing the structural forces that perpetuate their marginalization.

Comparative Analysis: Caste, Class, and Colonialism:

A comparative reading of *Untouchable* and *Coolie* reveals Mulk Raj Anand's comprehensive critique of the interrelated structures of caste, class, and colonialism that shaped the lives of marginalized communities in pre-independence India. Although the novels focus on different protagonists and forms of oppression, they converge in their portrayal of systemic exclusion that deprives individuals of dignity, agency, and equal opportunities. Bakha and Munoo occupy distinct social locations, yet both embody the subaltern subject whose existence is defined by forces beyond personal control.

In *Untouchable*, caste functions as the primary instrument of social exclusion. Bakha's identity as an untouchable sweeper predetermines his occupation, social status, and interactions with others. His experiences of humiliation arise from the rigid caste hierarchy that institutionalizes notions of purity and pollution. The accusation "You touched me!" (79) demonstrates how an ordinary physical encounter is transformed into a violation of caste boundaries. Anand thereby exposes the irrational yet socially powerful logic of untouchability. Social exclusion in the novel is therefore rooted in hereditary discrimination, where birth alone determines one's place within society. In contrast, *Coolie* foregrounds class inequality and labour exploitation. Munoo is not subjected to untouchability in the same ritualistic sense as Bakha, but his poverty, orphanhood, and lack of education render him vulnerable to continuous exploitation. His identity is shaped by economic deprivation rather than caste alone, demonstrating how class functions as another mechanism of subalternization.

Despite these differences, Anand illustrates that caste and class are not mutually exclusive but deeply interconnected within the colonial social order. Colonialism intensifies existing inequalities by sustaining economic systems that depend upon cheap labour while leaving traditional social hierarchies largely intact. Colonialism intensifies existing inequalities by sustaining economic systems that depend upon cheap labour. The exploitative conditions of labour are reflected in Anand's description of the workers as "broken, dispirited, docile and reticent" (219). The description demonstrates how economic exploitation produces both physical exhaustion and psychological submission.

Whether through Bakha's degrading occupation or Munoo's exploitative labour, the colonial state benefits from the continued marginalization of the poor without fundamentally challenging indigenous structures of discrimination, Anand thus exposes colonial modernity as a contradictory project that promises progress while perpetuating social and economic injustice.

The protagonists also differ in their responses to oppression, yet both exhibit an emerging subaltern consciousness. Bakha reflects critically on the irrationality of caste discrimination and seeks dignity through education, technological advancement, and social reform. His interest in the flush toilet represents the possibility that technological change might transform the social conditions of sanitation labour. The discussion of the flush system suggests that "the flush system would make the scavenger's work unnecessary" (27), thereby connecting technological progress with the possibility of liberation from hereditary occupation. Munoo, on the other hand, acquires an awareness of inequality through repeated experiences of labour exploitation and displacement. Although neither protagonist possesses the political power to overthrow the systems that oppress them, their consciousness challenges the inevitability of marginalization and affirms their humanity.

By juxtaposing caste oppression in *Untouchable* with class exploitation in *Coolie*, Anand demonstrates that social exclusion is multidimensional and sustained by overlapping systems of power. Bakha's experience of caste humiliation is expressed through the accusation "You touched me!" (79), while Munoo's industrial experience is marked by alienation and despair: "He felt alone and isolated" (185). Together, these experiences demonstrate how different structures of power produce similar conditions of marginalization. Through Bakha and Munoo, Anand transforms individual suffering into a broader critique of social injustice, making both novels enduring contributions to the discourse on subalternity, human rights, and social equality.

Conclusion:

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie* remain significant contributions to Indian English literature for their incisive portrayal of marginalized lives under the intersecting forces of caste, class, and colonialism. Through the experiences of Bakha and Munoo, Anand exposes the structural inequalities that deny dignity, equality, and social mobility to those positioned at the margins of society. While *Untouchable* foregrounds the dehumanizing effects of caste-based exclusion, *Coolie* highlights the relentless exploitation of labour and economic deprivation, demonstrating that oppression operates through multiple and interconnected systems of power. Viewed through the lens of Subaltern Studies, both novels foreground the voices and lived experiences of individuals who have historically remained excluded from dominant historical and literary narratives. Anand's social realism not only documents their suffering but also reveals the gradual emergence of subaltern consciousness as the protagonists recognize the injustice of the social structures that confine them. Although Bakha and Munoo are unable to mount organized resistance, their aspirations for dignity, equality, and humane treatment challenge the legitimacy of oppressive institutions and expose the moral contradictions of colonial society. The comparative analysis of the two novels demonstrates that caste discrimination and class exploitation are inseparable dimensions of social exclusion in colonial India. Anand's critique extends beyond individual experiences to expose the broader institutional mechanisms that sustain inequality and marginalization. His fiction continues to resonate in contemporary debates on social justice, human rights, and inclusive development, reminding readers that the struggle against discrimination requires both structural reform and ethical transformation. Consequently, *Untouchable* and *Coolie* endure as powerful literary testimonies that recover subaltern voices and reaffirm the universal values of dignity, equality, and human compassion.

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