

# Contemporary Social Picture: A Study of the Novels of Anand and Mohanty



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## Abstract

The very objective of this article is to reveal the social picture as mirrored in the writings of Mulk Raj Anand and Gopinath Mohanty. This article will also show how the contemporary society has influenced the very psyche of these two writers. In other words, society was instrumental in producing the writers of this stature. Both of them have been very objective, down-to-earth and true to their portrayal of the follies and frailties of the society. They were completely troubled and upset over the torture, humiliation and harassment meted out to the marginals of the society. Both the writers were concerned for the misfortunes that the Dalit people underwent throughout their lives. Though they belong to different state of the country, their society was more or less the same. The people were inhumanly treated, reduced to brutes and here are the writers who come forward as messiah for those unfortunate untouchables.

**Keywords:** Society, Dalit, Untouchability, Domination, Colonial, Discrimination.

## Introduction

Every writer has the right to be judged by what he attempts to do and can do, rather than by what he can not. The creative artist is a realist who allows his vision to be shaped by the time, the place and the circumstance of the period to which he belongs. Anand is a creative artist. All that he saw, read and experienced in his own country, combined to instill in him a belief that human beings are worthy of something better, that poverty, hunger and servitude militate against the development of consciousness and humanness. Anand is opposed to the formalists or aesthetes who hold that art, though influenced by life, is essentially governed by its own inner logic and not by outside forces. The theme which Anand chooses is reflected in the lives of human beings. Anand's speciality lies in making ordinary things extraordinary. For Anand, literature should be an interpretation of the truths of people's lives. It should be written from felt experiences and not books.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of this article is to show how the two contemporary writers belonging to two neighbouring states of India have reflected their concerns over the social evils of their time. The Dalits were treated as untouchables. The high class people harassed and tortured these people in different ways. Mulk Raj Anand and Gopinath Mohanty, the non-Dalits, wrote for the cause of these unfortunate people. Through their writings they raised their voice of protest against this ill treatment. The objective is to make the people aware of the fact that the Dalits are the human beings and they have the right to live with dignity and decency.

Anand is a novelist of thirties when the Gandhian struggle for freedom was at its height. As a lover of mankind, he was influenced by Gandhi's love and sympathy for the untouchables, the subaltern and the marginalized section of society. Born into a family of metal worker and with an army background in Peshwar, he witnessed the bloody reality of colonial rule with the Jalianwala Bagh Massacre at Amritsar in 1919. As a young man, Anand had suffered at the hands of the police during that Massacre. He was given seven stripes of the cane for breaking the curfew, and was imprisoned for a day during the civil disobedience campaign of 1921. Anand had vehemently criticized British Imperialism. He was also disgusted with the cruelty and hypocrisy of Indian feudal life, with its castes, creeds, dead habits and customs, and its restrictive religious rites and practices.

Anand is fired with a missionary zeal which makes him one of the finest expositors and propagandists. His objective is commensurate with

his ideological predilections and the social values he tries to uphold. He believes in the dictum that the novelist must go beyond the surface and touch the root reality, the boredom and ugliness, which punctuates the lives of the inarticulate Indian masses. Anand has written in his *Apology for Heroism*: "Any writer, who said that he was not interested in *la condition humaine*, is either posing or yielding to a fanatical love of isolation – a perverse and clever defense of the adolescent desire to be different" (9). He feels that "a writer must go straight to the heart of the problem of our time, the problem of human sensibility in present complex world, the tragedy of moral man" (78). He neither shies away from his ideological commitments nor does he feel ashamed of using fiction for all his propagandistic purposes. So committed is he to his creed that Anand endeavours to apotheosize man and tries to bring amelioration to the millions of hapless Indian masses subjected to the worst forms of social indignity, apathy, boredom and ugliness. He endeavours to restore to the India's 'lost generation' of untouchables, of coolies, and of indentured labourers.

He was aware of the suffering of great many people who were exploited. The memory of their suffering began to obsess him and paved the way for his writings. This experience of his life has come up in many of his writings. At an impressionable age he has become aware of the religious hypocrisy and bigotry in Indian society and of its injustice thriving on anachronistic practices. Such practices include untouchability, on feudalism and economic exploitation of the have-nots by the haves. Furthermore, during his stay in England he had also read the letters of Karl Marx and had been considerably influenced by his human concerns and values. Various experiences of his life have made him a militant critic of the baser elements in the Indian tradition. Anand belonged to a period which was infused with the cruelty of the affluent. As a champion of the underdogs, he throws light on the psychology of both the exploited and the exploiters. He raised his voice against untouchability, cruel masters over innocent workers and fallacies which were prevalent during his time through his writings. His fictions represent the form of contemporary society vividly. The social set up of his period particularly before pre independence looms large in his fictions. Anand is one of the few writers who lived, and lived intensely through all the phases of colonial experience, and who continually rendered it into a range of exploratory discourses. His pronouncements on literature and fictional writing that appeared in a number of articles constitute a theory of literature that is invaluable in the context of the emergence of post-colonial theory. Anand establishes cross-cultural links among all post-colonial writers and views them as fellow travellers in their common pursuit of the emancipation of man.

Growing up under the colonial society and writing as a colonial and post-colonial, Anand stays close to the multifarious manifestations of this historical encounter. The colonial experience is a live experience to him, and his writing is therefore linked to this theme directly. Spending his childhood in the

cantonment of Mian Mir and Nowshera, Anand was constantly conscious of the presence of the alien masters. He stood in awe of them, feared their power and resented their domination. C.vijayasree observes: "Growing up in the colonial society full of contradictions, conflicts and incongruities has had a vital impact on the moulding of his personality" (4).

Anand was only eight when he witnessed the cruelty of a British Brigade taking three hundred innocent lives of Pathans in the Nowshera cantonment. He saw the corpses piled up in the graveyard and this left a lasting and terrifying impression of the British on his innocent mind. He saw the World War I when he was nine years old. As a fourteen-year-old boy, Anand was a victim of General Dyer's flogging order in 1919. In 1919, when a curfew was declared in Amritsar, Anand went out to see that curfew. But then he was arrested, flogged and detained in the police station overnight. In the same year, he witnessed another tragedy wherein nearly three hundred women were shot dead by the British regiment as a punishment for their disobedience. All these incidents of colonial violence left such an indelible impression on Anand's psyche. Thus a crusader against imperial oppression was born in him. Colonial authority was not the only structure of hierarchy that Anand noticed. By the time he was nine, he knew that there were superiors and inferiors all around him. The caste structure that discriminated a large section of people as untouchables and privileged certain castes over the others; the class system in which the rich controlled the poor; the regimentation within the cantonment where the native officers behaved exactly like their White bosses, and the patriarchal hierarchy in which all decisions were taken by the male- all these came to be so deeply inscribed in his psyche that his creative work confronts these issues. Anand, in his fictional writings, stages a three-fold protest against the political domination of colonialism, the economic exploitation of feudalism and capitalism, and the religious bigotry of Hinduism. Anand's emergence as a protest writer is thus the natural outcome of his exposure to man's inhumanity to men which reached its apogee during the colonial era.

It is evident from biographies of Mulk Raj Anand that he had drunk deep the cup of sorrow and suffering which filled his whole life with a remarkable bitterness. As a result, all through his novels, he champions the cause of the 'have-nots' and expresses the sordidness and pains of life, which attempts at awakening the conscience of the readers. Mulk Raj Anand was upset by the social status of common man. Conflict between rural and urban life drew his serious attention. He empathized with the poor people for their never ending poverty, their ceaseless hard labor, and their hearts full of sacrifice in such harsh social conditions. The tyrannies of landlords and moneylenders did not escape his attention. Anand focuses his attention on the human predicament, and locates the cause of man's problems in man himself, in his selfishness, and his incapacity for tenderness, which should be natural to mankind. Suffering, of course, is integral to growth

and life as what Saros Cowasjee depicts in *So Many Freedoms*: "Pain-pleasure or pleasure-pain The barbarism and cruelty with which men made millions of wars and the hatred through which people extract pain from each other" (7).

Anand presents social and economic problems of his time. The miseries of children, pitiable conditions of prisoners, slavery, delay in the administration of justice, the gap between the 'haves and have-nots' and the evils of dowry, maladjustment in marriage, helplessness of widows, prostitution, untouchability, bribery, money lending, corrupt police force, impact of western education and materialism, breaking up of joint family system. His works expose the complex and variegated web of Indian life at various levels – at the level of the peasant whose incessant, backbreaking labour does not provide him even the means of bare subsistence, as well as at the level of the opulent capitalists and rajas, and struggling middle class people. The portrayal of these different sections displays both realism and socialism. The novelist expresses his deep sympathy with the poor, the oppressed, and the exploited that include not only peasants and child labourers, but also poorly paid teachers, writers, journalists etc. However, the women are the worst sufferers as the victims of a vicious social system as well as of the base appetites of wicked men. Thus, Anand presents a panorama of the life of the poorest in the colonial India at a time when the British rule was showing some of its wickedest features.

Mulk Raj Anand is a social reformer. One of the outstanding features about his career as creative writer is his humanism combined with realism. He belongs to an era when poverty was in its extreme form. He deals with various themes as he found in contemporary Indian life. His fictions reflect the poverty in rural India and social evils prevalent in the early decades of the twentieth century. Anand's fiction typically presents the complexity of the warring elements in contemporary society. The conflict in all his novels is not a clash between the equals; it takes the form of exploitation of a less fortunate and less privileged group by a more powerful and privileged set of individuals. Anand exposes the colonial conflict prevalent during his time. The two groups involved, therefore, turns into victims and victimizers, and the writer's sympathy for the former becomes obvious. In this connection C. Vijayasree observes: "While presenting and elaborating the theme of conflict in the different facets of human experience, Anand never loses an opportunity to portray the conflict basic to his contemporary society – the colonial conflict" (18). The relation between the White master and the native, the predilections and prejudices that colour this relationship and the ultimate dehumanization such a relationship results in—all these issues figure prominently in Anand's fictional work. It is not mere political freedom that man has lost in the empire but psychological freedom to think independently. Anand offers a careful evaluation of the social laws and values that perpetuate a colonial mentality, and underscores the urgency for making a new social order. Colonial experience thus informs and shapes

the contours of fictional troupes in Anand's work. In his work, the conflicts are not resolved decisively, but the possibility of a solution in future is hinted at. Any conflict involves two groups or institutions. So also in Anand's novels two polarities are introduced and all the characters fall into either of the groups. In *Untouchable* the conflict is between the caste Hindus and the untouchables; *Coolie* presents a class struggle between the haves and the have-nots. *Two Leaves and a Bud* deals with the confrontation between British plantation owners and the Indian labourers; *Lalu Singh Trilogy* portrays different stages in the Indian struggle for freedom; *The Big Heart* fictionalizes the conflict between capitalists and industrial labourers; *Gauri* elaborates female protest against male domination; and so on.

A down-to-earth fiction writer, Anand's experience is deeply rooted in the social conditions of his time. Indian society and its decadent aspects are his prime concerns. Though the Indian constitution has abandoned the practice of untouchability, but the heinous practice of discrimination is still prevalent in India. Discrimination is seen on the basis of caste and class particularly. And this gives Mulk Raj Anand his contemporaneity and makes his fiction extremely relevant today, as the reflection of caste system largely constitutes his realism from which emanates his protest, commitment and ideology. His characters with all their authenticity represent the most fundamental pattern of Indian society. In his article Dr. Arbind Panjiara rightly said: "He presents a society charged with the evils of untouchability, communal disharmony, caste compartmentalizations, and appalling economic differences" (128).

Like Mulk Raj Anand, Mohanty is much interested in the problem of social change. His novels explore the realities of life. His sensitive understanding of the problems of contemporary Orissan society is an outcome of his minute observation of the life of common men. A careful observation of the life of the people is necessary for writing social novels. Unless a writer develops a keen observation and an eye for details of the lifestyle and general behaviour of ordinary people, he or she cannot write a social novel. A writer should develop the habit of observing and should not miss a single opportunity of observing incidents and happenings. All art should convey truth; truth in terms of reality of life. And the role of a creative writer is to render a faithful picture of various aspects of life. Gopinath Mohanty himself was a man of minute observation of the life and behaviour of the masses of the common people. His novels are the photographic records of social, political and economic life of the common people.

In the field of literature, particularly in the genre of novel, Gopinath Mohanty plays a very vital role. Literature is the reflection of life in all its varied forms and shapes. It mirrors life and society. From time to time writers have been exploring the various dimension of the relationship between man and society. Gopinath Mohanty also tried his hand in mirroring his contemporary society which was filled with the forces of capitalism, feudalism, casteism, commercialism and industrialism. If we explore his

novels, we can find those forces always operate in the lives of the marginalised making their conditions very pathetic. His novels betray the ossified ugly rules of the society.

Mohanty's novels are packed with incidents which are common in those days. With the rapid growth of Industrialisation in the age of science, significant changes took place in the society, particularly in the life style of people. The society was controlled by the elite class of people. Similarly, a new merchant class had all the power to subjugate the poorer section of society. Not only that, the contemporary society of Mohanty was infected with caste-conflict; a conflict which constitutes the core of Hindu religion and procures an obstacle in the path of peace and prosperity. Social inequality is a keynote of the caste system. The superiority of one caste over the other does not necessarily mean domination of one caste over the other. It is more accurate to think of the caste system as constituting a multiplicity of hierarchies determined by custom within various geographical areas of organisation. The relationship of one caste to another is not similar to that which exists between master and slave. The inferior-superior relationship of a caste may be stated in terms of its purity. Caste system generates the feeling of 'superiority' or 'inferiority' in the minds of caste-based society. Mohanty, a man of rare combination of humanist vision and exquisite workmanship had hammered hard on these heinous practices of caste-conflict and class-consciousness. His preoccupation with caste or class system and poverty is unmistakable. His heart suffered for those million of untouchable or the socially isolated people who form the most vital part of a nation. He could not tolerate to see them leading a deplorable and miserable life beyond description. Thus, the main concern of his life was the urgent need for meting out justice to the underprivileged and downtrodden, especially in the rural and tribal areas. It would not be an exaggeration to say that hardly any writer or scholar in India has surpassed him in his profound understanding of the life of the tribals, their deprivations, their sufferings, their innate greatness and their potential. In this connection, Brahmananda Singh observes:

With the scientific developments there culminate many conflicts and tensions in human being's mind. All these find a place in Mohanty's novels. With an attempt to uplift the degraded status of the downtrodden, Mohanty involves himself in their culture, tradition and festivals. While doing so, he completely lost and identifies himself with these less-privileged groups and roams in the lap of nature (9).

Mohanty had lived an eventful life with people belonging to rural and urban and tribals in particular. He experienced events both happy and unhappy throughout his life. In fact, these experiences of his life merged into the crucible of his creative self and reflected in many of his writings. Mohanty's instinct was to go to the basics that prompted him to explore the unexplored life and life style of the major

tribes in Odisha. It grew into a passion with him and persuaded him to sing about the unsung miseries and glories of the people marginalised and oppressed by the rules drawn up by the urban upper class. This love for the marginalised section impelled him to take to creative writing- creative in true sense of the word, i.e. using the powers of the imagination to ameliorate the sufferings and to bring about spiritual regeneration. Mayadhar Mansingh observes:

Gopinath Mohanty is in every way a path-breaker. Caring little for the problems of publication and sale, he has written enormous novels, and with even less concern for their popularity, he has taken as his subjects, not the popular romantic or the socio-political topics of the educated middle class, but the fate and traditions of the primitive aborigines in the distant jungle district of Koraput. Of the thousands of employees of the State Government of Orissa, he alone seems to have completely identified himself with the people, and has been able to see rich human values which have failed to interest hundreds of other officers (255).

Literature is an echo or reflection of the society and that is why authors like Mulk Raj Anand and Gopinath Mohanty have a direct association with the society and its values. They have always been successful in the vivid portrayal of the colourful society. At the same time they never hesitate to show a dirty and filthy image of their contemporary society realistically. One of the major themes in all genres of literature is social issues or problems. Anand is an objective delineator of Indian social reality and has dealt extensively in his novels with the most vital aspects of Indian life in all its social, political, economic and cultural manifestations. Though his novels are written in English they form an integral part of the significant trend of social realism in the Indian novel. His ideology is imbued with an acute social awareness and a distinctive sense of responsibility towards life. He desires a radical transformation of the Indian society and depicts the multiple tensions existing at various levels as between the feudal orthodoxy and bourgeois progressivism or between capitalist acquisitiveness and socialist collectivism. His novels encompass the wide spectrum of class and caste hierarchies from the highest princes and Brahmins to the lowest coolies and untouchables. Anand's first protagonists are sweepers, coolies, and plantation workers. These characters are a new phenomenon in Indian Literature. Being a minute observer of human situation in the realistic tradition of fiction, Anand exposes social hypocrisy and taboos, class exploitation and class struggle, social and economic injustice, and the atrocities committed on the oppressed dishevelled lot. He depicts human beings who are enmeshed in poverty and injustice, struggling to come out but shackled by the coils of evil. The village-money lenders, priests, tea-planters and caste Hindus treat them as beasts. The novelist

favours the degraded people – the peasant, the sweeper, the city drudge, the sepoy, the labourer – the miserable human beings. Thus, there is no doubt that social realism is the principal layer in the major novels of Mulk Raj Anand as he tried to remove the tears of poor by presenting his passionate echo against existing evils in society through his great novels. Similarly Mohanty shows his concerns for the marginalised section through his fictions. In the novels of Gopinath Mohanty social realism has been kept at the central position. His fictions are the real description of Orissan masses. Mohanty is the true representative of his age and has a definite social purpose in writing his novels. His works reveal that he is not merely great observer but penetrating commentator on life. Mohanty's novels depict social, political and economical problems of his time. His depiction of the practice of untouchability is essentially a matter of pretentious religiosity and exploitation. His novel *Harijana* proves this. In *Harijana*, Mohanty touches the problematic issues of casteism, untouchability and corruption embedded in social institutions. Untouchability makes the socially disadvantaged groups social lepers, economic insecurity degrades them like the cats and dogs of the street. Their self-respect is always at stake. Moreover, the characters like Jema, Puni, Sania face a hostile environment outside. For their stigmatised roles in society, they are always maltreated. Mohanty, we can say is a social realist and humanist. He has deep concerns for the victims and through the work of art, he wants to change the society is his great zeal like what his protagonists have for living life. Mohanty's novels are written for the betterment of society, particularly the downtrodden, suppressed untouchables and all the sufferers at the hand of the social design.

#### **Conclusion**

In summing up we find that these two writers have done their best in reflecting the problems of the contemporary society. By analysing the novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Gopinath Mohanty, we find out the grievous concern of the subalterns who have raised voice against the injustice and exploitation inflicted upon them by the higher class people in the society. The writings of these two writers highlight the

predicament of the protagonists who are alienated from society, their hazardous journey towards the path of life, their struggle for survival etc. Both Anand's and Mohanty's principal actors come from the subaltern classes and groups such as untouchables, coolies, farmers, industrial labourers, working class women, socially disadvantaged etc. Both reveal the horror and miseries of their existence with a strong sense of social commitment. The characters achieving a sense of identity mobilise resistance against caste and class oppression.

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