Colonialism, Class, and Caste in Mulk Raj Anand's Early Novels: Reconsidering the Tripartite Nexus of Subaltern Oppression

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Abstract— **This article examines the relationship among colonial authority, economic exploitation, and caste-based social hierarchy in four early novels by Mulk Raj Anand: Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), Two Leaves and a Bud (1937), and The Village (1939). Rather than treating these works as separate studies of caste, poverty, plantation labor, or rural oppression, it reads them comparatively to ask how different systems of power shape the lives and bodies of marginalized characters. It argues that Anand's fiction represents exploitation as a connected but uneven process: colonial institutions help structure the conditions of labor; economic insecurity narrows the choices available to workers and peasants; and caste and inherited status influence whose suffering is normalized or ignored. Close attention is paid to narrative scale, movement through space, bodily vulnerability, and the contrast between human dignity and social classification. The article also places Anand's fiction in dialogue with scholarship on subaltern representation and contemporary research on labor conditions in global supply chains. These comparisons are treated as analytical parallels, not as claims that colonial plantation labor and present-day employment are identical. The article's contribution lies in bringing the four novels into one comparative framework while retaining the historical and social differences among their characters and settings.**

Index Terms— **Caste, Colonialism, Class, Indian English Fiction, Labor, Mulk Raj Anand Social Realism, Subaltern Studies; Postcolonial Criticism**

I. INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand's early fiction asks readers to look closely at people whom dominant social systems treat as insignificant. His protagonists are not distant symbols of poverty; they are individuals whose ordinary needs—to eat, work, move freely, protect family members, and be recognised as human are repeatedly obstructed by institutions and social attitudes. In Untouchable, the young sweeper Bakha experiences caste discrimination through the routines of a single day. Coolie follows Munoo through a series of workplaces and social environments in which poverty makes him vulnerable to exploitation. Two Leaves and a Bud turns to plantation labour in Assam, while The Village traces the pressures that shape rural life and the choices available to a young peasant.

These novels are often approached through distinct critical emphases: caste and ritual exclusion in Untouchable, class and migration in Coolie, colonial plantation relations in Two Leaves and a Bud, and rural inequality in The Village. Such approaches remain valuable, but a comparative reading can show how the problems represented in these novels overlap without becoming identical. A person may be impoverished without experiencing the same caste stigma as Bakha; a plantation worker's vulnerability is not simply the same as that of a landless peasant; and colonial authority does not operate in exactly the same way in a village, a town, a mill, and an estate. The point is not to collapse these differences, but to examine how they interact.

This article uses the phrase "tripartite nexus" to describe three connected dimensions of domination: colonial power, economic exploitation, and caste or inherited social hierarchy. The phrase is an interpretive framework developed for this comparison, not a claim that Anand himself named the relationship in these terms. The central argument is that Anand's novels represent oppression as cumulative. Political authority shapes the conditions in which labor is

recruited and controlled; economic insecurity restricts the ability to refuse exploitation; and caste or inherited status influences how individuals are treated, where they may belong, and whose pain is taken seriously.

The article proceeds through a focused review of criticism, a clarification of the conceptual framework, and close readings of the four novels. It then considers a limited comparison between Anand's fictional worlds and contemporary labor conditions. Since the novels exist in multiple editions, page-specific references to primary texts must be added against the exact editions used before journal submission. This version avoids unverified direct quotations and concentrates on plot, narrative structure, and interpretation.

II. SCHOLARSHIP AND THE RESEARCH GAP

Critical writing on Anand has long emphasised his social realism, humanism, and concern for people pushed to the margins of Indian society. Studies of Untouchable and Coolie have explored caste prejudice, poverty, child labor, and the pressures of colonial modernity. K. D. Verma's discussion of the two novels draws attention to the different social constraints shaping Bakha and Munoo. Their hardships cannot simply be equated: Bakha's experience is structured by the stigma attached to untouchability, whereas Munoo's movement through different forms of employment foregrounds the vulnerability of a poor worker. This distinction matters because class analysis should not erase caste-specific violence. (Verma 32–46; Shankar 332–41).

Sonali Perera places Coolie within the broader context of colonial labor, international trade, and socialist fiction. Her account challenges readings that treat the novel only as a national allegory, showing how the movement of a child worker can be read in relation to wider economic forces. Jill Didur's study of Two Leaves and a Bud extends plantation criticism beyond a simple opposition between British rulers and Indian workers. Her analysis connects the plantation to racialization, environment, and the organization of life around extraction. S. Shankar's work on Untouchable stresses the importance of reading caste in relation to colonial modernity, nationalism, and anti-caste thought rather than treating the novel as a self-contained social document. (Perera).

These studies provide a foundation, but they also indicate why comparison must be precise. It would be inaccurate to claim that Anand's novels have been ignored as separate texts; each has received critical attention. The more defensible gap is narrower: the four novels can be brought into a single comparative reading that tracks how political authority, economic dependency, and inherited social hierarchy interact across different narrative settings. This article does not claim to be the first study of exploitation in Anand. Its contribution is a structured comparison of the mechanisms and limits of domination across these four works. (Didur 340–60; Perera; Shankar 332–41; Verma 32–46).

The framework also requires awareness of representation. Anand's commitment to the oppressed does not make his fiction a transparent record of subaltern experience. Postcolonial and subaltern criticism asks who narrates suffering, whose language is heard, and how marginalized characters are made legible to readers. A balanced reading recognizes the political force of Anand's sympathy while considering the limits of representing people whose experiences are shaped by structures larger than any one character.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE TRIPARTITE NEXUS

The first dimension is colonial power. In these novels, colonialism is not only a matter of British characters or formal government. It also appears through institutions, legal arrangements, economic priorities, and social assumptions that organise everyday life. Colonial authority is direct in the plantation setting of Two Leaves and a Bud and more diffuse in the rural and urban environments through which Anand's characters move.

The second dimension is economic exploitation. Labor becomes exploitable when the need to survive leaves little meaningful freedom to refuse poor conditions. Debt, insecure employment, low wages, dependence on employers, and limited access to alternative work reduce the possibility of choice. A Marxist perspective directs attention away from individual cruelty alone and toward the arrangements through which labor is controlled and value is extracted. Yet the novels also show that economic class cannot explain every form of humiliation.

The third dimension is caste and inherited social hierarchy. In Untouchable, caste is not merely an additional disadvantage that can be removed by improved wages. It governs social contact, public space, occupation, and the interpretation of the body. In other novels, class position and local hierarchies shape characters' options differently. Caste and class may reinforce one another, but they are not interchangeable; nor does every character experience the same combination of forces.

The framework asks three questions of each novel: who has the authority to organize or discipline the protagonist's life; what material arrangements make the protagonist dependent; and what social classifications make the resulting treatment appear acceptable or inevitable? The answers differ across the novels. The framework is comparative rather than formulaic.

IV. THE PLANTATION AND THE ORGANIZATION OF LABOUR IN TWO LEAVES AND A BUD

Two Leaves and a Bud provides the clearest setting in which colonial authority and labor extraction converge. Gangu's movement from his familiar rural world into plantation employment makes recruitment itself part of the novel's social critique. The plantation is not presented as a neutral workplace where a worker freely exchanges labor for wages. Distance from home, limited understanding of employment terms, and dependence on the estate make refusal and departure difficult.

The plantation's spatial organization matters. The estate separates workers from social and legal resources that might help them challenge their treatment. European managerial space and workers' living quarters are not simply different locations; they express a hierarchy of whose comfort and safety count. The estate's power is visible in everyday routines, control of movement, and the unequal distribution of protection. Exploitation is sustained not by wages alone but by dependency, isolation, and coercion. (Didur 340–60).

Anand's treatment of Gangu's family prevents the labor question from being reduced to economics. The vulnerability of women and children exposes how workplace authority can extend into family life. The violence involving Reggie Hunt and Gangu's daughter, followed by Gangu's death and Hunt's acquittal, brings the novel's critique of racial power into the legal sphere. The episode suggests that law may formally exist while failing to offer equal protection to those whose lives are treated as less valuable. This should not be simplified into a claim that every colonial court functioned identically; the novel dramatizes a particular structure of unequal credibility and power. (Didur 340–60).

The plantation environment also deserves attention. Disease, exhaustion, and workers' accommodation make the human body a measure of the estate's priorities. The harvest and managerial comfort take precedence over the welfare of laborers. Jill Didur's analysis is useful because it encourages readers to consider the plantation not only as a labor regime but also as an organized environment in which human life is subordinated to production. (Didur 340–60).

The novel should not be treated as a complete historical record of every tea plantation in Assam. It is fiction shaped by narrative choices and political purpose. Its value here lies in how it represents the plantation as a space where recruitment, racial hierarchy, economic dependency, and restricted mobility reinforce one another.

V. CASTE, SPACE, AND THE BODY IN UNTOUCHABLE

Untouchable presents a different structure of exclusion. Its compressed time frame the events of a single day allows Anand to show how caste operates through repeated ordinary encounters. Bakha's work as a sweeper is socially necessary, yet the person who performs it is treated as polluting. Society depends on the labor of the person it excludes, then uses the stigma attached to that labor to justify exclusion.

Space is one of the novel's important narrative devices. The location of the outcaste settlement, Bakha's movement through public places, and other people's reactions make social hierarchy visible in the arrangement of the town. His body is read before his intentions can be understood. A physical encounter can become a public offence because caste turns proximity into a question of status and ritual contamination. Anand's attention to humiliation in everyday life shows that oppression is reproduced through gestures, habits, and assumptions as well as through formal institutions.

Bakha's experience complicates a purely economic account of labor. Better wages or a different employer would not, by themselves, dissolve the social meaning attached to his occupation and caste location. The novel's closing discussion of possible solutions religious reform, Gandhian intervention, and technological change does not provide an uncomplicated resolution. Instead, the alternatives reveal how difficult it is to imagine change when suffering has material, social, and ideological causes.

Reading Untouchable alongside Two Leaves and a Bud makes comparison possible without making the characters equivalent. Gangu's vulnerability is intensified by plantation control and radicalized colonial power; Bakha's daily humiliation is organized through caste and the social meanings attached to sanitation work. Both novels expose a society that relies on marginalized labor while denying full recognition to the people who perform it. Their mechanisms, however, are historically and socially distinct.

VI. MOBILITY, WORK, AND DISPOSABLE LABOR IN COOLIE

Coolie expands the field of analysis by following Munoo through a succession of households, workplaces, and cities. The episodic structure is significant: rather than giving him a stable occupation or secure social position, the novel repeatedly relocates him. Each move seems to offer a possibility of survival, yet the conditions of work expose him to another form of dependency. Mobility does not necessarily produce freedom when the person who moves has little bargaining power and few resources to fall back on.

Munoo's changing workplaces allow Anand to compare domestic service, small-scale employment, industrial labor, and street work. The settings differ, but the recurring pattern is the imbalance between employer control and the worker's need for income. Exhaustion and illness are not merely private misfortunes; they reveal the consequences of work organized around productivity without adequate concern for the worker's life. The novel's tragic ending gives this pattern a bodily conclusion: the capacity to labor is consumed while the arrangements that produced vulnerability remain largely intact.

Sonali Perera's reading of Coolie within colonial labor history and international economic relations encourages a reading beyond a narrow national frame. It asks how the circulation of labour and commodities shapes the novel's world. At the same time, Munoo's story remains particular. His age, social position, and successive experiences of employment matter; he should not be reduced to a generic symbol of the proletariat. (Perera).

Compared with Bakha, Munoo moves across more social spaces, but movement does not guarantee escape from exploitation. Caste-based exclusion can fix a person within a stigmatized occupational and social position, while poverty can push a worker from one insecure setting to another. Both limit agency, but they do so through different mechanisms.

VII. RURAL INEQUALITY AND THE LIMITS OF CHOICE IN THE VILLAGE

The Village returns the analysis to rural Punjab and the pressures that shape Lalu's life. Land, debt, local authority, and expectations about social conduct influence the choices available to him. Here exploitation does not depend on the same degree of physical confinement found on the plantation. It works through economic dependency, social discipline, and unequal power within village life.

The novel shows how the loss or insecurity of land can turn migration or military service into a constrained option rather than a freely chosen path. Local power relations do not exist outside the colonial order, but neither can they be explained as simple extensions of British authority. Colonial institutions and revenue arrangements shape the larger conditions of rural life, while landlords, moneylenders, and community authorities exercise influence through their own relationships and interests.

Lalu's conflicts with established expectations reveal that resistance can carry a material cost. Social disapproval may threaten access to livelihood and community support, narrowing the practical space for dissent. The Village therefore adds a dimension to the framework: the nexus does not always appear as a single institution exercising total control. It can be experienced as a series of pressures that gradually reduce a person's room for manoeuvre.

Read together, The Village and Two Leaves and a Bud suggest a possible connection between rural distress

and the recruitment of vulnerable workers. This should remain a question for historical investigation, not a universal claim that all plantation workers followed the same route from landlessness to contract labor. The novels offer distinct narrative histories, and their differences are part of the argument.

VIII. NARRATIVE FORM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF SUFFERING

Anand's critique depends on more than the subjects he chooses. Narrative structure, setting, and the presentation of bodily experience shape how readers understand oppression. Untouchable's concentration on a single day makes repeated humiliations accumulate; Coolie's episodic movement exposes the instability of insecure labor; Two Leaves and a Bud uses the enclosure of the estate to dramatize the relationship between labor and authority; and The Village locates conflict within a rural network of land, custom, and local power.

These formal differences matter because the novels do not simply list social problems. They show how a character's options narrow across time and space. The body becomes a record of social relations: Bakha's body is marked by caste, Munoo's is worn down by work and illness, and Gangu's family becomes vulnerable to authority exercised within the plantation. Such representations are powerful, but a character's suffering should not be treated as direct evidence for every historical claim about the community represented.

Narrative voice is equally important. Anand's sympathetic attention challenges the indifference of dominant groups, yet representing marginalized lives raises questions about mediation. Subaltern criticism asks not only whether the oppressed are visible, but how their speech, desires, and resistance are framed. A balanced reading recognizes Anand's intervention without assuming that literary representation fully resolves the problem of speaking for others.

IX. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Marxist criticism helps explain the role of labor, debt, and economic dependency across Anand's fiction. It draws attention to the arrangements that make some people dependent on others and to the way labor can be valued chiefly for its productive use. Yet a class-based account alone cannot explain the specific ritual and social force of untouchability. Ambedkarite thought is essential for understanding caste as a system of graded inequality that shapes social status and access to dignity, not merely as a cultural expression of economic class.

Postcolonial criticism brings colonial power and racialization into the analysis, while Subaltern Studies encourages attention to experiences and forms of resistance that dominant political narratives may marginalize. These approaches overlap, but they are not interchangeable. Said's account of Orientalism addresses the production of knowledge and images of the Other; Spivak's question about subaltern representation concerns the conditions under which marginalized subjects can be heard within dominant systems of knowledge and power. Neither concept should be used as a general synonym for oppression.

The tripartite nexus is best understood as a reading strategy that brings these approaches into conversation without pretending to resolve their theoretical differences. In Two Leaves and a Bud, radicalized colonial authority and labor control are especially prominent. In Untouchable, caste and the social regulation of space are central. In Coolie, repeated movement between workplaces highlights economic insecurity, while The Village draws attention to land, local power, and constrained choice. The relative weight of the three dimensions changes from novel to novel.

X. CONTEMPORARY RESONANCES: COMPARISON WITHOUT FALSE EQUIVALENCE

Anand's fiction can be placed in dialogue with present-day labor research, but the comparison must be carefully framed. The International Labor Organization's research on global supply chains documents how fragmented production and complex purchasing arrangements can create governance gaps and contribute to deficits in working conditions and labor rights. Its work also stresses that supply chains are diverse: they can create employment and economic opportunities, while poor compliance and weak enforcement can leave workers exposed to harm. This evidence supports a focused comparison with Anand's concern about the distance between those who benefit from production and those who bear its costs.

(International Labor Organization, Decent Work; International Labor Organization, World Employment).

The parallel is strongest at the level of mechanism: recruitment through intermediaries, dependence on employers, unequal bargaining power, and gaps between formal protections and workers lived experience. It would be misleading, however, to equate contemporary supply-chain employment with colonial plantation labor. Present-day legal frameworks, technologies, labor movements, and forms of worker agency differ, and contemporary workplaces vary widely. The novels provide a critical lens for asking questions about responsibility and dignity; they do not substitute for empirical research into current labor conditions.

The same caution applies to informal employment and migrant labor. The ILO's World Employment and Social Outlook reports persistent challenges around job quality, working poverty, and unequal access to decent work. Such findings give contemporary relevance to Anand's concern with insecure livelihoods, but they do not prove direct historical continuity between Munoo and every modern gig worker or migrant. The comparison should remain interpretive: both contexts invite questions about how insecurity limits workers' choices, but their specific causes and institutions require separate analysis. (International Labor Organization, World Employment). Contemporary research on caste and labour-market discrimination in India also cautions against treating economic inequality as caste-neutral (Jodhka; Thorat and Newman).

In India, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020, provides a current statutory point of reference for workplace safety and conditions of employment. Legal protections and their implementation are not the same thing. An article making claims about present-day labor must distinguish legislation, enforcement, reported violations, and lived experience. This paper therefore uses contemporary research to establish relevance rather than to claim that Anand predicted particular modern employment systems. (India, Occupational Safety).

XI. CONCLUSION

Reading Untouchable, Coolie, Two Leaves and a Bud, and The Village together reveals a sustained concern with the conditions that prevent marginalized people from exercising meaningful control over their lives. The novels differ in setting, narrative form, and the social position of their protagonists. Their comparative value lies not in making those experiences identical, but in showing how political authority, material dependency, and inherited hierarchy can reinforce one another in different ways.

The idea of a tripartite nexus offers a way to describe these connections. Colonial power shapes the institutions and environments in which people live and work; economic exploitation restricts their ability to refuse harmful conditions; and caste or local social hierarchy influences how their labor and suffering are valued. Anand's fiction makes these relationships visible through character, setting, movement, and bodily vulnerability. Its political force rests in refusing to treat poverty or humiliation as the natural fate of particular people.

The contemporary relevance of these novels should be understood as a critical invitation rather than a claim of direct equivalence. Current research on supply chains, informal work, and workplace protections raises related questions about responsibility, bargaining power, and the dignity of labor. Anand's fiction remains useful because it asks readers to look beyond individual misfortune and examine the social arrangements that make exploitation possible. A fuller account of those arrangements must also attend to the distinct histories of caste, class, race, and colonial rule.

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