

**PREDICAMENT OF PROTAGONISTS IN MULKRAJ ANAND'S  
NOVELS**

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**Abstract:**

Mulkraj Anand with his amazing aesthetic brilliance has carved a niche for himself in the global literary arena. He delves deep into the confined world of the oppressed and analyses their exploitation with microscopic details. Closely intertwined with the themes of caste discrimination, inequity and intolerance, are the pictures of the colonized as speechless and lifeless and those of the colonizers as victorious and ubiquitous. A social commentator and critic, Anand acquaints us with the gross injustice and heartless suppression endured by the downtrodden. Through his art, he questions the plight of oppressed, who are deliberately deprived of human dignity. Like many of his generations the independence movement had a defining impact on him and throughout his life this influence was reflected in his work. The present paper is an attempt to fathom the depth of the agony and affliction of Anand's protagonists, who symbolize some aspects of our cultural heritage which have written shame on our brow; Our discussion will be confined to the 'Untouchable' (1935), the 'Coolie' (1936) and 'Two Leaves and a Bud' (1937) the three major novels in Mulkraj Anand's canon.

**Keywords:** exploitation, colonized, gross injustice, downtrodden, affliction, colonizers.

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Predicament is “a difficult or an unpleasant situation where it is difficult to know what to do” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary). It is “An unpleasant situation which is difficult to get out of” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary). Mulkraj Anand in his novels, depicted a solitary figure against a background of social melancholy, unravelling the mysteries and miseries of the effete. The wide gulf that exists between the rulers and the ruled, the high and the low, the exploiters and the exploited is portrayed meticulously, unveiling the harsh realities of the Indian society. These novels are set in the early twentieth century background, when India was gradually recapturing its lost freedom, trying to snap every shackle and every bond that made its dream of ‘Independent India’ a far sighted goal. The untouchable ‘Bakha’, the coolie ‘Munoo’ and the enslaved laborer ‘Gangu’ are moulded and fashioned by the personal experiences of the author.

All these heroes as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me, because they were the reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth. And I was only repaying the debt of gratitude I owed them for much of the inspiration they had given me to mature into manhood, when I began to interpret their lives in my writing. Anand portrays them as the victims of institutional cruelty and infringement leading to their inevitable and often dismal doom. An analysis of these protagonists reveals their grim acceptance of disgrace and despair with great resignation. (qtd. in Iyengar 334).

The novel 'Untouchable' is an onslaught on the viciousness of the Hindu caste system and its consequences on the lowest of the low class 'Achuta' the untouchables. According to traditional Hindu 'Varna System' a person is born into one of the four castes – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas or Sudras – based on karma and purity. Untouchables are literally outcastes not being directly figured in any of the traditional 'Varna System' of Hindus. The protagonist Bakha, eighteen year old boy who belongs to 'Bhangi Samaj' inherits his profession as a sweeper from his forefathers. The inheritance comes to him with all the disgust, depression, slavery, poverty, humiliation and marginalization associated with it. Anand brings out the issue of untouchability that was rampant in the 1930s, with no strict laws to check it or any constitutional provisions to defend the outcastes. This novel (of Anand) seems to underscore the thoughts of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, "The outcaste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcaste as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system."

The 'Untouchable' pictures the events of a single day in Bakha's life, the whole gamut of emotions he goes through, the unrestrained humiliation inflicted on him, his ceaseless struggle to get out of where he belongs to. The realistic description of Bakha's locality, with all the squalor, decay, and filth brings out the abhorrent and detestable living conditions of the untouchables. It is a place with "no drains, no light, no water; of the marshland where people live among the latrines of the townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere"(Anand 15). Bakha desires to be like "Sahibs superior people" (Anand 03) as he knew, for those people subject to the crippling effect of inequality, education is touted as the panacea and this awareness instills in him the urge to learn of which he is deprived, as "there was no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low caste man's son" (Anand 30-31). It seems as if he were born to endure the trauma of being an untouchable.

The hypocrisy of the caste system is revealed when the priest of the temple Pandit Kalinath, the so called 'torch-bearer of the traditions' tries to molest Sohini, Bakha's sister. Humanity seems to be ashamed when Bakha is blatantly rebuked for polluting a high caste

man by his touch. Tradition compels the untouchables to herald their arrival by a clarion call “Posh keep away, posh sweeper coming posh, posh, .....”(Anand 42) The stab of insult, while collecting the bits of bread, hurled at him remains excruciatingly painful in Bakha’s heart. But the disgust is quelled when expressed in front of his father, Lakha, in whom the age-old beliefs of social hierarchy have been deeply ingrained. Lakha says, “They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us.”(Anand 109)

Being singled in the scorching heat of age old social grouping, he finds consolation in Christianity – caste free religion – introduced to him by Colonel Hutchinson, the chief of a Christian missionary. But the antiquated and complacent Lakha, quite happy as ‘Achut’ discards the idea of conversion, saying “that the religion which was good for his forefathers was good enough to him.”(Anand 114)

‘Coolie’ is a convincing and credible chronicle of an orphan, Munoo – frail, feeble figure – set against a world of exploiters. Mulkraj Anand presents a portrait of the macabre childhood afflicted by the exploitations of all sorts – capitalistic, social, industrial, colonial, communal, and sexual – ultimately leading to his death. It is story of Munoo’s migration from the native village to the town, from the town to the city and ultimately to the highlands. Munoo has been the victim of exploitation since early age “He had heard of how the landlord had seized his father’s five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when the rains had been scanty and harvests bad.”(Anand 02-03) Munoo is uprooted from his native village and employed as a boy servant at Babu Nathuram’s house. The lady of the house spares no efforts to make Munoo’s life a hell. His experience is horrible and harrowing forcing him to run away in hope of a better destiny. At this tender age he realizes the reality, “There must be only two kinds of people in the world, the rich and the poor.”(Anand 56) As a coolie, Munoo is reduced to the level of a beast, competing with other coolies to earn a meagre wage. A vivid description of their suffering and suppression provokes anger and indignation at the entire humanity. “The bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered garbs. Some were curled up in knots, others lay face downwards on folded arms, and others were flat on their chests.....”(Anand 162). Munoo’s stay in Bombay reveals to him the exploitation of poor in a capitalistic set up.

It brings home to him how rural people who moved from villages to industrial cities seeking better wages, if not better life, were turned victims of exploitation. M.K. Naik observes: "The factory is a huge octopus with its numerous tentacles clutching the labourer in its deadly grasp, slowly paralyzing and poisoning him."(41)

Communalism is also hinted at in the novel which is rumoured in order to weaken the poor labourer's strike. In the ensuing riots, Munoo loses his job. The last phase of his life is set in Shimla where he is employed as a rickshaw puller of Mrs. Mainwaring and dies of tuberculosis. Munoo's sad and sordid tale is a powerful, harrowing depiction of exploitation and the crushed curiosities of a teenager. In his depiction of Munoo's life, Mulkraj Anand shows an uncertain grasp of psychological essentials.

The third novel 'Two Leaves and a Bud' embraces a wide variety of themes – strains between the 'whites' and the 'Brown's, rift between the rich and the poor, the clashes between the 'employer' and the 'employee'. The novel explores the trepidation and tribulations of tea plantation workers, the evil of laissez faire capitalism, and the tyranny of, man over man. The central character 'Gangu', a poor Punjabi peasant is lured into an Assam Tea Estate by the coolie agent, Sardar Buta Singh. Gangu's hopes and aspirations to earn money and get back his lost ancestral property is soon ruined after his encounter with the harsh realities of the plantation. The half-starved workers, no better than slaves, live in utter poverty, humiliation and despair with unhygienic huts, improper water supply and are prone to the spread of epidemics. The deft presentation of the plight of these destitute stuns the readers.

When Gangu's wife, Sajani dies of malaria, he begs his Indian manager, Shashi Bhushan to arrange him a loan, so that he can carry out the funeral rites. He says, "Babuji, I promise to give you some of the money which the Sahib may give me if you talk to him in 'angrezi' and get me the loan I want .....my wife died last night."(Anand 111-112) This implies that these obsequious sycophant had a lion's share in the turbulence and tempest of these bottom underdogs. Dr. De la Harve is the only angel in this horror story of Gangu. He yearns for benevolence of the poor labourers realizing the repercussions of their living conditions.

Reggie Hunt, the haughty plantation master is a lecherous man, who unabashedly cast his lustful eyes on the coolie women and holds them in his vicious grip. He enjoys a free license to all acts of inhumanity and lust. “Slim young body defined by the narrow girth of her skirt and the fine stretch of her bodice, her whole demeanors like a bird that would flutter in the hands of the shikari”. (Anand 121) Gangu is shot dead by Reggie, when the former comes to save his daughter Leila from the cruel clutches of Hunt. The disparities in the society are intricately intertwined as the moon and the tide, the mountain and the valley. An important element that invites attention is the marginalized section excluded from the basic human rights. ‘Gangu’ faces the complexities and conflicting experiences of life. The injustice, the violence and the brutality is inflicted on him not only by the British but also by his own countrymen. Anand questions and probes the identity problems of the depressed.

**Conclusion:**

The problem that Mulkraj Anand raises in these novels is not how to ‘succeed’ in life but how to ‘survive’ in this world. What are the dreams, aspirations and yearnings of these protagonists? They desire not for the ‘luxuries’ but the ‘necessities’ of life. What stimulate our sympathies are the ‘two disparate worlds. These two worlds represent ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’. The vicissitudes and sufferings of Bakha, Munoo and Gangu are the same, for them getting to eat is the first of many worries. They are victims rather than rebels, yielding to the bare realities of life. The graphic description of their miseries has a common underlying fact that neither they nor their fate is responsible for their exploitation. They find themselves in a world in which they are from the first moments and at every moment in extreme danger. It’s not an exaggeration to discern that evils such as untouchability, class discrimination, poverty still reign supreme in our society. There is little doubt that many of these evils designed to deprive the depressed of their rights are still vehemently practised. One wonders why such a long continuance of these secondary status when everything in this ‘googled’ world has changed. A closer scrutiny of the predicament of these protagonists and some introspection -

proper, precise and free from any prejudice - are sine quibus non to wipe out this evil of untouchability even from our psychic-geography.

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