

## **A Brief Thematic Study of the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy**

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**Abstract.** Dalits have been the extremely backward and deprived sections of the Indian society suppressed since a long time only on account of their lowly birth. They have been exploited socially, physically, economically, mentally, and above all, emotionally by the upper-caste people. They have been forced to lead an alienated life of utter neglect and humiliation. Even when they are talented, hard-working, punctual, dutiful and able in all respects they are earmarked as 'untouchables', 'down-castes', 'outcastes', 'paravan' or 'harijans', and seen by all with contempt and hatred. It is an irony of civilization that these 'working class' people who always work hard are looked down upon and treated shabbily by the powerful. Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy both have delineated the pathetic lots of these downtrodden and oppressed sections of Indian society in their novels and in this respect both can be entitled as true champions of the cause of the poor and the exploited. Their writings are suffused with a note of protest and resentment against the exploiting societal set-up of India. Both have led crusades against these dehumanising and barbaric distinctions. Their characters, both the exploited and the exploiters, are drawn from men and women they saw around. The glaring disparities between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, powerful and powerless, compelled both to think about the amelioration of the downtrodden. The present paper purports to present a brief thematic study of the novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy. Both the novelists have portrayed the agony of those people who have encountered lifelong oppression, subjugation, insults, inequality, discriminations and brutality in their own country.

**Keywords:** Paravan; humanism; fascism; feudalism; imperialism; fanaticism; communalism.

Dalit literature forms an inseparable and distinct part of Indian Literature. The term 'Dalits' as a whole refers to oppressed Indian castes whose sufferings are not just the sufferings of an individual but universal, that keeps them trampling down and disfiguring their identity as human beings. It is an irony of civilization that the 'working class' people who always work hard are looked down upon and treated shabbily by the powerful. Dalits have been the extremely backward and deprived sections of the Indian society suppressed since a long time only on account of their lowly birth. They have been exploited socially, physically, economically, mentally, and above all, emotionally by the upper-caste people. They have been kept away from their basic rights and are forced to lead an alienated life of utter neglect and humiliation. Even when they are talented, hard-working, punctual, dutiful and able in all respects they are earmarked as 'untouchables', 'down-castes', 'outcastes',

‘paravan’ or ‘harijans’, and seen by all with contempt and hatred. Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy both have delineated the pathetic lots of such downtrodden and oppressed sections of caste-ridden Indian society in their novels and in this respect both can be entitled as true champions of the cause of the poor and the exploited. Their writings are suffused with a note of protest and resentment against the exploiting societal set-up of India. Both have led crusades against these dehumanising and barbaric distinctions. Their characters, both the exploited and the exploiters, are drawn from men and women they saw around. The glaring disparities between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots compelled both to think about the amelioration of the downtrodden. If sweepers like *Bakha*, cobblers like *Chhote*, barbers like Ram Charan, coolies like Munoo, labourers like Gangu, his wife Sajini and daughter Leila, road workers like Bhikhu, farmers like Nihal Singh and Sukhua, soldiers like Lalu, coppersmiths like Ananta, patriots like Maqbool, unemployed educated youths like Nur and machine-workers like Ralia whose destiny is to suffer, appear in Anand’s novels; Roy too, has chosen *Velutha* as her most powerful character whose sufferings represent sufferings of the multitudinous mass of the insulted and injured, the depressed and the divested. *Velutha* is the epitome of all the silent sufferings experienced everywhere through centuries by the underdogs of Indian society. When one goes through the novels of Anand and Roy one finds a great thematic similarity and realistic portrayal of the societal problems.

Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel *Untouchable* (1935) gives an account of single day event in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper-boy of eighteen who lived in a dark, dingy one-roomed mud cottage in the outcaste colony with his father Lakha, brother Rakha and sister Sohini. This colony was situated in an extremely uncongenial place to live in where the inhabitants were mostly poor who lived in misery and in dirty unhygienic conditions. He feels segregated and alone, by the alien chants of the temple, the alien gods, and alien people who shun and berate him and loathe his touch. There are moments of disjuncture and separateness when Hindu shopkeepers carefully avoiding his touch receive his payment for cigarettes:

The shopkeeper pointed to a spot on the board near him. Bakha put his anna there. The betel-leaf-leaf seller dashed some water over it from the jug with which he sprinkled the leaves now and again. Having thus purified it he picked up the nickel piece and threw it into the counter. Then he flung a packet of ‘Red-Lamp’ cigarettes at Bakha, as a Butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop. (*Untouchable* 33-34)

Bakha is unjustly abused, slapped, beaten, and humiliated and the sweets in his hands are thrown down, merely because he has accidentally touched a Hindu in his ecstasy. He has to go through the market crying, "Posh, Posh" so that the accident may not happen again. Bakha has a number of other dramatic experiences. An upper caste Hindu housewife curses Bakha for having polluted her doorsteps by sleeping near them, and throws a piece of bread at him as if he were a dog. When out of sympathy Bakha takes an injured little boy to his home the mother of that boy instead of thanking him, abuses him for defiling her child and home. Bakha turns back insulted and crestfallen like a kicked dog.

Similarly, there are three characters in Arundhati Roy's magnum opus *The God of Small Things* (1997), Vellya Paapen and his two sons, Kuttapen and Velutha who belong to the category of the downtrodden. They belong to an untouchable caste called "Paravan". *Vellya Paapen*, *Kuttapen* and *Velutha* constitute the trio which depicts the three types of the dalits in Indian society, namely, the docile conformist, the discontented paralytic and the rebel who moves for equality and stakes his life. The novel mentions only the names of three untouchable castes, namely, Paravans, Palayas and Pulayas. They were not allowed to enter into the house of upper caste. They did not receive the Mantra from a Brahmin or other recognised Hindu guru and are not served by good Brahmins as family priests :

Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time. In her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprints. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (Roy 73-74)

Arundhati Roy's presentation of the dalits has provoked a lot of controversy. She is often accused of drawing a gloomy picture of the dalits which is related to their past rather than present in Kerala. It is also said that she has underplayed the role of the Communists for the upliftment of the dalits in Kerala.

So far as themes dealt with by Anand are concerned the major themes of his novels are the caste system, the economic exploitation by the 'Banya' community,

the conflict between tradition and modernity, the position of women in Hindu society and their pathetic attempt to retain their gone glory. Anand does not write about the glories of past or the spiritual heritage of India. His themes are mainly concerned with the socio-economic problems of contemporary India. The subjects he chooses for his novels are untouchability, exploitation, poverty and wretchedness, labour problem, hunger, religious and narrow fanaticism, condition of women, economic insecurity. His novels broke new ground and represented a departure from the tradition of previous Indian fiction. He made the common people of lower class his heroes and began to write about them. Commenting on early influences on his characterisation, Anand himself observes :

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 real people. I had known during my childhood and youth.  
(Preface, *Two Leaves and a Bud* 2)

Anand's *Coolie* deals with the problem of textile mills. *The Village* discusses the problem of object poverty and indebtedness. *The Big Heart* is concerned with the problem of introduction of machines and consequent unemployment. Anand's humanism and sympathy for the poor, needy and the exploited gives a socialistic as well Gandhian touch to his philosophy. According to him, the conquest of pain should be the supreme goal of all individuals and all nations. His philosophy involves opposition of fascism, feudalism, imperialism, and all other similar tendencies which come in the way of man's efforts to achieve freedom. That is why he opposes caste, creed, untouchability and communalism. He believes in democracy and socialism, and the peaceful co-existence of all nations and people. He exposes social hypocrisy and taboos, class exploitation and class struggle, social and economic injustice and the inhuman atrocities in his novels. He learnt of the technique of realistic portrayal from eminent masters of Indian fiction like Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Premchand, and Sharat Chand Chattopadhyaya and European novelists like Chekhov, Flaubert and Tolstoy. He is a minute observer of life, society, and human character and does not leave even the ugliest and most unpalatable situations aside. Everything—latrines, dirt, squalor, beggars, poverty, disease and prostitution—is beautifully described in his works. He sees both the seamy and ugly sides of life minutely and portrays them realistically.

Like Anand, Roy has also introduced plethora of problems prevalent in patriarchal Indian society even after independence. The novel focuses on several things. It highlights the rigid caste-system and its evil impact on men and women both. Even the conversion to Christianity could not liberate the individuals from the inhuman and unjust casteist mentality. The novel depicts the corrupt politicians

who, though, boast of being true Marxists, yet, are cruel manipulators and oppressors of marginalised in reality. The novel relates a heart-touching and tear-provoking love-story of a hapless divorcee upper caste lady Ammu and a paravan Velutha. Ammu, mother of Estha and Rahel, after being betrayed by her husband Baba divorces him. When she returns to her parent's home with her twins she is humiliated and tortured to death. Her being a divorcee daughter and loving an undercaste couldn't be digested by her family members, and two innocent lives – Ammu and Velutha are sacrificed at the altar of hollow familial and societal prestige. Roy's feminine anger at well-oiled exploitative machinery finds sufficient outlet in this novel. The police is also stripped bare of all its dignity of uniform and badges and is portrayed leaving no chance in cowing down a helpless woman and poor paravan. The novel is a unique blend of suspenseful and tragic mystery, love story, and an exposition of all the paradoxes and evils looming over India even after independence. The theme of sexual abuse meted out to innocent Estha at the hand of Orangedrinkman – lemondrinkman is also presented in this novel. How Pappachi maltreats Mammachi, his wife and Ammu, his daughter has also been portrayed realistically. Chacko's flirting with the poor needy workers at Paradise Pickles and Inspector Mathew's lecherous treatment of Ammu has also been pointed out by Roy with feminist purpose.

In the writings of Anand and Roy both there is an autobiographical touch. Their depictions are based on the real life-experiences and thus are sufficient enough to touch the inner cords of readers' hearts. Both are superb in psychological delineations of their characters and apply suitable narrative techniques for the same. Arundhati Roy seems to be a step ahead from Anand in her presentation of the pathetic and deplorable state of the nature and environment also as an eco-conscious novelist. Not only in her novel *The God of Small Things* but in her several articles such as "The End of Imagination", "The Greater Common Good" she shows her worries and cares about the threatened states of Earth's surroundings and atmosphere. She stands dead against India's policies towards nuclear weapons as well as industrialisation and economic growth which she describes as "encrypted with genocidal potential" in *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*. She is an author who believes not simply in preaching from the ivory tower rather she has been a dedicated social activist also. She works tirelessly for several causes, including those of the dalits, the displaced population due to Narmada Dam, victims of religious fundamentalism and environmental pollution. She seems to be eco-conscious in presenting the once beautiful river Meenachal being overused for growing rice to feed increasing human population. The impact of population explosion after so many years had polluted this majestic river. Though it was June and raining,

The river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles under water. Bronze-winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay-footed cautious. (Roy 124)

Now, the river was no more than “a slow sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea.” (124) Estha too found that the river “smelled of shit, and pesticides survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils.” (13) Regarding Roy’s eco-consciousness Amitabh Roy observes:

Eco-conscious as the novelist is, her concern for the environment finds an adequate expression in *The God of Small Things*. (139)

Clearly enough, it can be said in a nutshell that Anand and Roy both purport at arousing sympathy for the exploited and oppressed sections of Indian society and thereby want an ameliorative protest against all sorts of anomalies which are disturbing the peaceful existence of living beings, most particularly, human beings.

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