

Caste and Gender Intersections: A Comparative Analysis of the Selected Works of Mulk Raj Anand and Anita Nair

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Abstract: The concepts of Caste and Gender have given a significant place in Indian society and culture, and their exploration in literature has played an important role in raising awareness and promoting social change. Still, a new perspective is required to visualise the changes since independence through the works written by the older and the newer generations. This research paper delves into the interconnected issues of caste and gender in the works of Mulk Raj Anand and Anita Nair, two prominent Indian writers. By employing a comparative analysis, the paper explores how these authors portray the complex ways in which caste and gender intersect to shape the experiences of their characters. Anand's focus on the plight of the marginalized, particularly the untouchables, will be compared with Nair's exploration of gender roles and expectations within the caste system. The analysis will examine how both authors depict the limitations imposed by caste and gender, but also how their characters resist these structures and strive for agency. Through a close reading of key novels from each author, the paper will highlight the unique challenges faced by characters from different castes and genders. This comparative approach will ultimately shed light on the evolving discourse on caste and gender in modern Indian society.

Keywords: Caste, Gender, power-structure, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Nair.

INTRODUCTION

Caste and gender are two important concepts that have been explored extensively in Indian writings in English. These two concepts have had a significant impact on Indian society and culture, and their exploration in literature has played an important role in raising awareness and promoting social change. The term 'caste' refers to the hierarchical social system that has been prevalent in India for centuries. In this system, individuals are divided into different castes based on their birth, and their social status and opportunities are determined by their caste. Caste discrimination and oppression have been a significant social issue in India, and many Indian writers in English have explored this concept in their works. Gender is another important concept that has been explored in Indian writings in English. Gender discrimination and inequality have been major issues in India, particularly with regards to women's rights and status in society. Many Indian writers in English have explored these issues in their works, and have highlighted the need for gender equality and social change. Mulk Raj Anand, a prominent Indian writer, is known for his works that focus on social issues and the lives of the marginalized communities in India. In his writings, Anand often addresses the themes of caste and gender, highlighting the injustices and inequalities that exist in Indian society. Anand's works are set in a society where caste hierarchy is deeply ingrained and rigidly enforced. He portrays the lives of the Dalits, who are at the bottom of the

caste system, and their struggles against the social and economic oppression they face. Anand's works also address gender issues in Indian society. He portrays the lives of women who face discrimination and oppression due to their gender. Anand also brings out the gender-based discrimination faced by women, as they are denied education and equal job opportunities. Through his portrayal of women characters, Anand portrays the struggles of women who fight against the patriarchal system and strive for their rights. Anand's works also challenge the traditional gender roles assigned to men and women in Indian society. It is apprehensive that "with time, grew a great need of the society for its women to be confronted if they chose an alternative route to live their lives. Along with this is a disdainful and loud avowal of feminism. But there are positive aspects of that." (Madhesiya, 2024)

In the same vein, Anita Nair is also an Indian author whose works often deal with social issues such as caste and gender. Her novels and short stories explore the lives of women and marginalized communities in India, shedding light on the discrimination and inequalities they face. Nair's works often centre on the experiences of women who challenge the patriarchal norms and strive for their rights. Through the stories of women characters, Nair highlights the various forms of oppression that women face, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Her novels

challenge the traditional gender roles assigned to women and celebrate their resilience and strength. Her works challenge the societal norms and stereotypes that limit the potential of individuals. It is required to understand here that “the birth of a female child is seen negatively in many communities in India. That is dangerous to women's very survival. It's shocking all over again that women in the male world are clueless about their own rights. Most don't get to experience childhood at all, and others are even treated like slaves as adults.” (Barua, 2023)

On caste Mulk Raj Anand mentions “Why, why is anyone superior to another? Why are we all sinners?” (Anand, *Untouchable*) It shows the ideology of Mulk Raj Anand that marks a question on the societal view on caste. On the other hand, Anita Nair is far forward in mentioning the menace of the caste system as “Caste is like a stain on the soul. It is a mark of shame that can never be erased.” (Nair, *A Suitable Girl*)

Anand mentions the state of women as “The woman is a victim of the caste system. She is doubly marginalized, both as a woman and as a Dalit.” (Anand, *Coolie*) Nair, on the other hand, writes that the situation of women is changed in India but still it is a question to be resolved always. She states “Women in India are fighting against the odds, against patriarchal structures, against societal norms.” (Nair, *Mistress of Spices*) This Indianisation of English in Anita Nair is coupled with interspersing third person and first-person narratives. It enables her to delve into the psyche of various characters and brings out a broader range of characters particularly women characters. This strategy, with variation and focus peculiar to these writers, reveals the attitudes of different characters about social contexts in which they are located. The socio-cultural context of the narratives - late twentieth century or early twenty first century - provides us an opportunity to view the implied social criticism from the point of view of the young generation characters' responding, reacting and striving to transform the age-old social institutions. Anand mentions that “The caste system is a monstrous thing. It is a disease that has eaten into the very heart of India.” (Anand, *Untouchable*) Nair admits in her works that “The shadow of caste still lingers over India, even in the twenty-first century.” (Nair, *Mistress of Spices*) The standards of giving birth to a girl in Indian society is also uncovered by Anita Nair as she mentions that “The birth of a girl child is seen as a curse in many parts of India. She is considered a

burden, a liability.” (Nair, *A Suitable Girl*) In the same vein, Mulk Raj Anand asks for their freedom by saying that “Women are the property of men. They have no rights, no freedom. They are mere chattels.” (Anand, *Untouchable*)

Mulk Raj Anand's exploration centres on caste, especially the plight of the marginalized untouchables. His works depict caste as a deeply ingrained system that not only restricts social mobility but also strips individuals of dignity and agency. His characters, often drawn from the lowest strata, struggle against the brutal realities of caste oppression, reflecting the social injustices prevalent in pre- and post-independence India. Anand's work serves as a powerful critique of caste hierarchy, offering insight into how caste intersects with gender, particularly in the limited agency granted to women in lower castes. In contrast, Anita Nair's narratives focus on gender, with caste playing a more subtle, yet still significant, role. Her works delve into the internal struggles of women who navigate societal expectations related to both gender and caste. Nair presents the female characters as individuals striving for personal autonomy in a society that imposes rigid gender roles, while also revealing how caste further complicates their journeys. Through Nair's exploration, the intersectionality of caste and gender becomes evident, showing how women's experiences are shaped by multiple layers of social expectation and limitation. Both authors highlight resistance as a key theme, though their depictions differ. Anand's characters often resist through direct confrontation with caste barriers, reflecting a more overt form of defiance. Nair, on the other hand, portrays a quieter, more introspective resistance, where women challenge both gender and caste norms through personal empowerment and subtle acts of defiance. This evolution of resistance from Anand's era to Nair's suggests a shift in how marginalized individuals navigate oppressive systems, pointing to more complex forms of agency in contemporary society. Ultimately, the comparative analysis specifically highlights the continued relevance of caste and gender in Indian society. The transformation occurs not only in the morphology of the social institutions but also, perhaps more importantly, in the contemporary socio-cultural value system. The resolution of the plots in most cases follows the pattern of popular literature, i.e. all the problems of the lead characters and protagonists are solved to their satisfaction.

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