

Social Inequality and Human Dignity in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

In this article, we will explore the themes of social inequality and human dignity using examples from the literary works of two authors (Mulk Raj Anand and Amitav Ghosh). In particular, we will look at examples from Anand's (*Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves & Bud*, *The Big Heart*, *The Old Woman and the Cow*), as well as Ghosh's (*The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, *Flood of Fire*) novels. The discussion will draw upon the primary source material previously mentioned, as well as upon critical sources proposed in the context of this study (i.e. New Humanism, Caste Realism, Labor Exploitation, Patriarchal Ideology, Dalit Resistance in Anand's Work along with recent scholarship from theorizing Diaspora, Ideology, Ethics of Representation, Ecological Thought, Precarity, and Postcolonial Identities concerning the writings of Amitav Ghosh). The difference between these two authors' styles of writing is substantial. The distinction between the writers is what will lead to reading them together. Anand's novels get closer to the wounded body of the sweeper, coolie, peasant, artisan, and oppressed female; Ghosh's work deals with issues of memory, migration, empire, ecology, and the historical afterlife. While there are similarities in the writing of both authors, both present systems of inequality that constrict individuals to either caste, class, race, gender, their mode of labouring, their place within the ecology, or their purpose within an empire. Therefore, the paper contends that the works of both writers constitute an ongoing analysis of how marginalized peoples' rights to dignity are denied and how their dignity continues to appear in literature.

Keywords: *Mulk Raj Anand, Amitav Ghosh, social inequality, human dignity, caste, class, postcolonialism, ecology, subaltern, Indian English literature*

1. Introduction

Background on Indian English literature as a site of social critique

The Indian English literary tradition has almost never existed as a neutral literary tradition. From its early modern creation, it has been forced to articulate itself in a language

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created through colonialism and to speak about a society organized according to caste, class, gender, religion, poverty, and the power of empire. Consequently, the Indian English novel has been more than just a medium for the expression of private feelings or domestic events. It has also been a means by which to publicly examine the ways that social structures are arranged. Mulk Raj Anand is often cited as the socially conscious beginning of this literary tradition. He provided a fictional voice to sweepers, coolies, peasants, artisans, plantation workers, and women who lived outside of the privileged environment of the elite's narrative. Naik (1982) has positioned Anand within the development of the Indian English social novel. The current research utilised here portrays Anand's works as a consistent form of protest against the cruelty of caste, the discontentment of poverty, and the exploitation of the working class (Rai, 2026; Sharma & Parag, 2025; Taş, 2023).

Amitav Ghosh writes at a completely different time: postcolonial, transnational, global in scope. Regardless of this, Ghosh's fiction also goes back to groups of people who have been excluded from official history. He doesn't typically define inequality as a single visible social problem, but instead examines the longer structures of inequality: Empire, migration, indentured labor, ecological vulnerability, communal violence, the maritime trade, and memories of borders etc. Naha (2023), De (2016), Huttunen (2011); Yogita (2025); Kapur and Roy (2025) illustrate, in their own ways, that Ghosh's imaginary world can't be restricted to just one nation or community. Ghosh's imaginary world consists of a multitude of locations including Bengal, Burma, the Indian Ocean, the Sundarbans, Canton, Mauritius and the memory and violence surrounding partition. Questions concerning Ghosh's conception of the world are not limited solely to the question of who suffers but also include the more important question regarding the way in which history manages to scatter a person and yet maintain their dignity.

The authors of this piece propose that social inequality and human dignity are explored in their works - Mulk Raj Anand being a colonial realist and Amitav Ghosh being a post-colonial writer examining the history of the diaspora, and the impact of the ecocycle and the empire. Although the authors represent two distinctly different time periods and areas to write from, there are distinct parallels that exist in their literature. Mulk Raj Anand's depiction of the oppression of people through caste and labour can be examined through the actual images he portrays through his use of concentrated realism; whereas, Amitav Ghosh's exploration of the effects of the violence resulting from the empire, capitalism, migration, and ecological destruction can be seen through the use of scattered realism. Together, the works of these authors indicate that social inequality is not limited to just economics; but rather, it is also expressed in the physical body, time, space, culture and ecology, and through the effects of history.

Brief introduction to both authors and their literary significance

Mulk Raj Anand is viewed as being one of the first prominent writers of Indian English fiction to write primarily about the poor and oppressed. His novel *Untouchable* (1935) describes an entire day in the life of Bakha, a low caste, untouchable sweeper boy who suffers continual insults to his humanity from the values and beliefs of the caste system that governs society. In *Coolie* (1936), the protagonist, Munoo, experiences many types of labor

and deprivation, and his journey illustrates the devastating effects that poverty and exploitation of the industrial poor have on all workers. The story *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) brings us to the tea plantations of India and demonstrates the violence of the colonial capitalist system. Unlike his prior works, *The Big Heart* (1945) shifts the focus to the artisans, workers, and changes changing methods of technology (e.g., mechanization) on the lives of these individuals. Anand's last novel published during his lifetime, *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), examines the suffering and eventual assertion of self by a woman living under the oppression of patriarchy (Anand, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1945, 1960). The body of scholarship pertaining to Anand's work utilized in preparing this paper consists of contributions that analyze Anand's writing from multiple perspectives - humanism, criticism of the caste system, social reform, hunger and poverty, gender oppression, and rebellion (Chand, 2025; Meena, 2024; Nirala & Kumar, 2025; Shokeen, 2023; Suja et al., 2024).

By merging the fields of history, anthropology, fiction, memory, ecology, and migration, Amitav Ghosh is a key figure. His novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), deals with borders, violence between communities, memories of family members, and weaknesses of national identity. *The Glass Palace* (2000) traces the histories of Burma, India and Malaysia through colonialism, migration, exile and war. *The Hungry Tide* (2005) focuses on the Sundarbans, where ecological and human uncertainties occur together. (The Ibis Trilogy includes) *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015); all of which are linked to global opium production, indentured labor, crossing oceans and the role of imperial powers in international commerce (Ghosh, 1988, 2000, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2015). Additionally, there are a number of critiques that focus on Ghosh's engagement with diaspora, memory, culture, ecological crisis, ethical representation, precariousness, hybridity and post-colonial identity (Gurulatha & Padmashini, 2025; Huttunen, 2011; Karmakar & Chetty, 2024; Naha, 2023; Xalxo & Piyushbala, 2025).

Statement of the review's purpose and scope

The review aims to establish a shared thematic discussion regarding social inequality and human dignity between Anand and Ghosh. While the authors employ different techniques in their writing, both writers pose similar questions regarding morality. Anand's novels lend themselves to serve as urgent statements regarding the social injustices inflicted upon the oppressed. On the other hand, Ghosh's writings reflect the layering of history through multiple narrators and archiving through experience, memory and biological change. Both writers challenge society to examine how systemic powers, such as empire, capitalism, caste and state, dehumanize individuals within their class structures. In examining Anand and Ghosh's writings this review will encompass all of the following topics: caste and untouchability; labour exploitation; colonial and post-colonial landlessness; migration; environmental inequalities; gender inequalities; narrative form and style; critical response; and the ongoing relevance of both authors.

This review is based on the information provided during this chat (the primary texts), the research that was uploaded and the studies included in the outline. Anand's discussion is based largely upon studies, articles, and books on *Untouchable* . . . etc. (these sources are all included above with publication date of the diary reference accompanying them). Ghosh's

discussion is centered on the study of diaspora(s), representation and ethics of representation, anthropology, cultural memory, Ibis Trilogy(s), eco-consciousness, decolonial and postcolonial precarity (De, 2016; Goswami, 2026; Huttunen, 2011; Kapur & Roy, 2025; Yogita, 2025).

Present research paper presented here is that both Mulk Raj Anand and Amitav Ghosh, representing different periods in Indian English literature, have used fiction as a means of exposing systemic inequality that exists throughout time and reasserting the essential dignity of those who have been marginalized. Anand accomplishes this by employing the straightforwardness of social realism to emphasize the injury to the bodies of Bakha, the starving and overworked Munoo, the exploited worker on the plantation, the woman in danger, and the craftsman faced with the impending impact of modern industrialization. These characters reveal that society has lost its moral center. Ghosh uses both historical and geographical contexts to address issues of marginalization. The exiled king, the migrant worker, the indentured servant, the refugee, the fisherman, the displaced woman, and the ecological subaltern become part of a larger history of empire, capitalism, and environmental degradation. Anand shows the immediate injury. Ghosh traces the historical systems that produce continued instances of injury. However, both authors ultimately affirm that dignity survives, despite ongoing attempts at denial by those with authority.

2. Literature Review

Foundational studies on Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand is regarded as one of the trailblazers of Indian English literature, whose works made the novel an effective tool for social change. Anand has been called a novelist by early critics like Naik (1982) who have attributed the novelist to the fact that he was concerned with the lives of the marginalised groups rather than the privileged classes, thus enriching the moral and social dimensions of Indian English fiction. In his novels he has depicted the lives of the untouchable, the labourer, the peasants, the wage earners, women and other socially downtrodden classes with great realism and compassion. Anand does not just tell stories, he reveals caste discrimination, poverty, exploitation of labour, colonial oppression and economic inequality through literature. Similarly, Cowasjee (1977) acknowledges Anand's efforts to represent the tribulations of oppressed communities and more recent scholars like Rai (2026), Nirala and Kumar (2025), and Meena (2024) view his fiction to be an important blend of literary excellence, historical records, and social awareness. Taken together, these studies provide an idea of Anand as one of the first novelists in India to use fiction both consistently and effectively for the cause of social justice and human dignity.

Anand's literary philosophy is also rooted in Western realism and Indian social ideas, according to scholars. There are clues to Charles Dickens's and Maxim Gorky's influence in his works, which have been sympathetic to the working class and the poor. Anand merges these realist traditions with the Gandhian ethics, the Marxist notions of labour and class, and the ideals of the Progressive Writers' Movement to create a synthesis of the traditions and

ideas of realism and a uniquely Indian society. This means that his novels portray the social inequality as a result of fundamental institutional structures, rather than as single occurrences. Human dignity, equality, and compassion establish the moral underpinning for his fiction and literature is an ethical realism rather than just a social criticism.

There is a substantial amount of literature dedicated to *Untouchable*, which tells the story of one day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper, who lives under the caste system. As per the critics like Taş (2023), Rai (2026), Sinha (2025), and Sharma and Parag (2025) the novel is one of the best literary depictions of the caste oppression in colonial India. Bakha's humiliation highlights the issues of individual dignity lost due to the condition of untouchability, and underlying structural violence in Indian society. Studies of *Untouchable* have also made the connection to the later novels of Anand, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, in which he moves the critique from caste discrimination to labour exploitation, and colonial capitalism. These novels collectively reveal the attitude of Anand towards the realistic narration of the various aspects of social injustice.

Foundational studies on Amitav Ghosh

The works of Amitav Ghosh have always been at the forefront of Indian English literature, where his work examines themes of history, colonialism, migration, identity, memory, ecology, and globalization and consistently placed him among the top Indian English novelists of the day. Critics like Khair, Mondal, Gaurav Desai, Supriya Nair and Elleke Boehmer consider Ghosh to be one of the most significant postcolonial writers who explore the legacy of empire in its ongoing effects across boundaries of nations and histories. As Ghosh's novels "show how historical processes, political power, economic systems, and colonial structures influence individual lives", De (2016) suggests that they cannot be detached from the bigger socio-political context. Rather than isolating individual narratives, Ghosh sees his characters within a wide historical framework of trade, migration, displacement, war, environmental transformation and cultural memory. The general historical context in which he is writing sets his work apart from the earlier realist traditions, and yet, he is still concerned with marginalized communities.

One of the other core themes in scholarship is Ghosh's handling of the themes of migration and identity. For Naha (2023), Ghosh portrays displacement as a central component of modern life in which people feel alienated, nostalgic, rootless, and constantly searching for a place to belong. In his novels like *The Circle of Reason*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Shadow Lines*, *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide*, he illustrates the displacement of communities through the political, economic and cultural processes of colonialism, war, globalization and economic exploitation. Gurulatha and Padmashini (2025) also note that Ghosh's cultural traditions, historical memory, and local customs play a role in maintaining marginalized histories that have been neglected by the official history. So memory is not just a forgetting but a process of constructing identity and collective memory, and of surviving the historical erasure.

Gaps identified in existing literature

Ghosh's fiction has also been the subject of much scholarly interest in the ethical aspects.

Huttunen (2011) states that Ghosh does not write history singularly, using multiple voices, disjointed storytelling, and silence and multiple perspectives. His novelist works give literary voice to marginalised sections of society such as migrants, indigenous communities, lascars, plantation labourers, displaced villagers and forgotten historical actors, who have no place in the official historical narratives. Recent ecocritical scholarship has extended this perspective to focus on how colonial capitalism causes environmental degradation, ecological injustice, displacement and destruction of indigenous knowledge systems. As opposed to Anand's direct social realism, Ghosh often depicts violence in the form of environmental crisis or the disappearance of landscape, conservation policies and climate change, extending the notion of social inequality beyond the traditional political and economic paradigms.

Comparative and thematic scholarship

Comparative scholarship clearly shows that both Anand and Ghosh are truly dedicated to the principles of social justice and human dignity, albeit in different historical contexts and with different literary approaches. The novels written by Anand, mostly in the 1930s and 1940s, address caste discrimination, colonial exploitation, labour exploitation and rural poverty head on. His realist novels reveal naked instances of injustice to the colonized people. Ghosh's fiction, on the other hand, is about the postcolonial world, the "remnants of empire" that are perpetuated by migration, transnationalism, globalization, ecological degradation and historical memory. While both stories are quite different, both authors explore the lives of those who are left out of the main political and historical narrative.

The literature review reveals that there are some key research gaps that warrant a comprehensive comparative study of Anand and Ghosh. First, most studies have focused on the two authors in isolation. Anand has been generally read as a realist, socialist, Marxist, Gandhian and/or a Progressive writer, while Ghosh is read primarily in postcolonial, diasporic, ecological or historical terms. There are only a few studies that explore the continuity of social justice, human dignity and marginalization in both the colonial and postcolonial literary traditions. A comparative approach can thus help to close this big gap in scholarship.

3. Theoretical Framework

Key concepts

The concept of social inequality, human dignity and the concept of marginalisation are all interconnected and gives a conceptual framework to this study, which focuses the works of Mulk Raj Anand and Amitav Ghosh. Social inequality is defined as a condition that is created through structures that may be either denying or limiting access to opportunities, rights, resources, and respect for individuals and communities. It transcends economics, it's about caste discrimination, class exploitation, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, ecological vulnerability, and the marginalisation of workers, migrants, refugees and indigenous people. Both Anand and Ghosh portray these inequalities as not separate incidents but as a consequence of systems of institutions that continue to exclude and to cause injustice.

The principle of human dignity is the central ethical principle for this study. Unlike dignity as an abstract philosophical concept, both authors give dignity as lived experiences. Dignity is demonstrated when one works respectfully, moves freely, and has social relationships, can attend religious and cultural activities, maintain identity and live without humiliation or discrimination. Denial of dignity can be seen when people are made to think of themselves in terms of their caste, occupation, gender, race or economic status. Untouchability, labour exploitation and colonial oppression in Anand's fiction are agents of denial of dignity, whereas Ghosh shows how migration, displacement, environmental injustice, and historical erasure are other means of undermining human worth.

Relevant theoretical lenses

Multiple theoretical perspectives are used in the comparative analysis because the problem of inequality in the novels chosen cannot be explained with just one analysis. Labour exploitation, poverty and economic inequalities can be explained by Marxist theory. In Anand's *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* workers are turned into tools of economic production, whose labor serves the interests of the capitalist and colonial system, removing them from their dignity and security. Likewise, Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* shows how colonial trade, indentured labour, the opium economy, and global capitalism made human beings into commodities in the colonial trade circuits. Marxist criticism thus uncovers the fact that poverty and exploitation is not an individual fault, but is a structural fact of unequal economic systems. The study also takes into consideration Dalit and Caste Studies to understand Anand's depiction of the oppression of the caste system, especially in *Untouchable*. But Bakha's pain is not just about lack of money; it is also because of the idea of purity and pollution that he is denied equality and humanity.

The focus of Dalit scholarship is on the everyday humiliation, social exclusion, and denial of dignity of caste discrimination. In tandem, these studies prompt other questions about literary representation: can sympathy for Dalit suffering be considered as genuine Dalit self-representation? The debate over this critical area is still a key factor in analysing the success and failure of Anand. The postcolonial theory enhances this analysis by introducing an understanding of the cultural, psychological, and political effects of colonialism. The concepts of Frantz Fanon shed light on the impact of colonialism on both physical and psychological identity, while those of Gayatri Spivak on the subaltern question and what is represented and what is silenced in dominant stories, and those of Homi Bhabha on hybridity, mimicry and liminality on the complex identity that is formed under colonial rule. These are especially important theories for Ghosh's work, specifically *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies*, and other novels in which migration, cultural hybridity, language, and identity are constantly transformed by imperial power.

Justification of the framework

The theoretical lenses used in both Anand's and Ghosh's text allow us to look at inequality through multiple lenses rather than one lens. Anand's fiction encourages the idea of examining caste, class, gender, labour, and colonialism as interconnected, while Ghosh's fiction encourages us to examine Empire, migration, ecology, memory, history, identity as

interconnected. Marxist theory provides us with an understanding of extraction; caste studies provides us with an understanding of ritualised violence against outcastes; postcolonial theory looks at Empire and representation; subaltern studies examines the lack of voice and agency; together these theoretical lenses assist in crossing over, between colonial and postcolonial divides, and in understanding the issue of dignity as it moves from Bakha's body to the Ibis ship, from the outcaste colony to the Sundarbans, through plantation labour and imperial trade, and through direct insult and historical erasure.

4. Mulk Raj Anand: Voice of the Dispossessed

Historical and ideological context

Mulk Raj Anand's writing reflects his involvement in the fight against colonial rule, as well as the possibility for social reform and literature as a means of bringing about that change. The Progressive Writers' Movement, of which Anand was a part, promoted literature that dealt with issues of poverty, equality, imperialism and oppression. The novels Anand published in the 1930s, including *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, are perfect examples of literature that addresses these issues by providing a voice to those who are considered unwanted or unnecessary by society. According to Sharma and Parag (2025), Anand's fiction is best described as socio-cultural realism because it not only provides a record of social injustice but also provides an ethical field of consciousness in which oppressed individuals are located and possible reform exists for them.

The works of scholars have consistently illustrated the influence of Gandhi and Marx on Anand's worldview. Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaign provided the moral framework for *Untouchable*, particularly the reformist ending of the novel. The concern with labour and class, central to Marxist philosophy, is evident in *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*. Roy (2025) contends that Anand's humanism was formed by the ethics of Gandhi, Marxist realism, and the Progressive Writers' Movement. Meena (2024) claims that Anand's humanism transcends caste, class, and religion through compassion and the idea of universal brotherhood. Nevertheless, Anand does not regard his humane approach as simply a soft or sentimental response; rather, it evokes anger toward societies that treat people as worthless.

Caste and untouchability

Anand's most concentrated examination of caste oppression comes in the form of his novel *Untouchable*. The one-day structure of the narrative is a critical element in demonstrating that caste humiliation isn't just an isolated incident but the regular rhythm of daily living. Bakha experiences humiliation in the street, is rendered dependent on the well, is denied access to sacred space and is repeatedly made aware that his body is considered polluting by society. Taş (2023) examines the novel as an examination of how untouchability and social inequality affect the marginalization and degrade the dignity of individuals. Rai (2026) also believes that Bakha's narrative serves as a social reform.

The body is a physical representation of humiliation and caste discrimination in the novel **Untouchable**. Although Bakha's labour is necessary for society, he does not enjoy touch, respect, or dignity as a labourer. Sinha (2025) argues that Anand provides a realist

texture to the lived experience of untouchability as a social illness as opposed to an abstract problem. The colony, market, temple, and well restrict Bakha's movements and the way in which he expresses himself. His desire for cleanliness, clothes, education and to be recognised in his demands for humanity. According to Sharma and Parag (2025), Bakha's awakening as a member of a lower social class is an act of challenging the caste hierarchy and Bakha's first question of being inferior will lead him to dignity.

Class exploitation and labour

Anand's Coolie extends his social vision beyond caste and includes class issues. While Munoo is not the same character as Bakha, their lives were similarly shaped by systems which provided no dignity. Munoo will be followed throughout the novel, highlighting the following three areas of work: domestic service, factory work, and rickshaw pulling. Uddin and Saikia (2025) go on to define Coolie as a work that represents many aspects of poverty and suffering, including; the poor, hungry, malnourished, child labourers, class struggles, and exploitation. The continual movement of Munoo among different places results in more exposure to different faces of economic vulnerability rather than the production of his freedom. Every time he moves to another place in search of a means to survive, he finds yet another form of subjugation.

The pain that Munoo goes through demonstrates that class exploitation cannot only be seen as economic, but rather a physical experience as well, kind of more than just numbers. The presence of hunger fatigue, sickness and neglect defines Munoo's life, and it feels, constantly, like there is no pause. By portraying the body of the working child, Anand criticizes the society that calls itself civilized while actually using children and poverty as a cheap labor force. According to Meena (2024) the fiction of Anand highlights this idea that Anand's work does not fail to stress the respect and dignity of labor and workers. Still, as Coolie demonstrates, dignity is not always built in, not every time, not even if the work is labor.

Colonial oppression and the peasantry

The novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* shows colonial capitalism as a big element in Anand's fiction, and honestly it sorts of shadows everything. The tea estate becomes a spot of coercion, of claimed racial superiority, of economic dependency, and even a looming threat to the lives of women. Gangu ends up at the tea plantation because of poverty, and because he has this urge to survive, but for him the plantation is not really "work" in the simple sense. It becomes a kind of enclosure where he stays locked in the space between the British masters and the local brokers. As Uddin and Saikia (2025) put it, the novel exposes how poverty works on the ground along with hunger, disease, low wages, weak sanitary conditions, and sexual exploitation targeted at women in the Assam tea estates. And according to Meena (2024), Gangu is basically an embodiment of labor that has been stripped of humanity by a system fueled by greed and power.

The plantation is also kind of bound up with social inequality, via geography, you know. The worker gets moved away from land that feels familiar, and then is put in some carefully regulated space where their movement, pay, health, and even dignity get managed by the

colonial masters. In that sense the plantation isn't only a spot for work it becomes an entire social system, more or less. And yes, the brutality on the plantation is racial and economic too, but it also runs on gender, especially through the sexual abuse of the female plantation worker. Suja et al. (2024) say that in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, the way gender and class combine to subordinate the female plantation worker, is made visible.

Anand's narrative strategy

Anand's way of building narrative is pretty realist and also kind of emotionally unadorned. His realism calls for natural detail... like dirt roads, colonies that are full of people, the din from factories, starvation on plantations, weariness, degraded language and all that. And it matters, because as Nirala and Kumar (2025) say, *Untouchable* works like classic social realism, since it treats suffering as a social construct made by humans, not something divinely ordained. So yeah, that's an important consideration. Anand, also doesn't romanticize suffering like it is noble in itself. Instead, suffering is used to expose the society that manufactures it

The empathetic third-person voice lets readers get into the oppressed person's shoes. The narrator often slips into the feelings of Bakha's shame, Munoo's fear, and Gangu's despair. This becomes a strong narrative tool because it supports emotional identification but then... there is a risk, like paternalism. The oppressed character ends up being presented through the author's own voice. So future worries about authenticity, and the outside gaze, are relevant here. Anand's strength is that he brings the lived experience of oppression into Indian English fiction. Yet the weakness is that he does it a bit too much from the outside, like he stays slightly over there, watching rather than truly inhabiting.

5. Amitav Ghosh: Inequality Across History and Geography

Historical and ideological context

Amitav Ghosh's novels and stories reflect postcolonial and postmodern perspectives, though they are not completely divorced from local realities. De (2016) holds that Ghosh's work contains ideological explorations of history, politics, science, culture, and economics; additionally, both fiction and non-fiction represent an active engagement with contemporary issues. According to Huttunen (2011), Ghosh's work demands ethical response due to narrative themes that focus on language, expression, violence, and representation. Ghosh has an extensive historical basis for this but does not dwell solely on the past; rather he explores how history is present in our daily experiences.

Ghosh's relationship to history is different than Anand's realism. Anand looks at social scenes, developing moral immediacy through detail. Ghosh examines systems of connection (i.e., trade routes, ocean passages, military imperialism, archival memory, familial memory, ecological environments, diaspora) as a way to illuminate the complexity of human experience. Tiwari (2014) suggests that Ghosh is an innovative author interested in colonisation, history, politics, folklore, immigration, and narrative devices/structure. Gurulatha and Padmashini (2025) call him a writer who creates geo-cultural maps using the cultural objects, historical sites, and memory present in the world through storytelling.

Colonial structures and their legacy

The Glass Palace is a study of colonial displacement and inherited precarity in the work of author Ghosh. The beginning of these novel chronicles the British conquest of Burma and the expulsion of the royal family, but the deeper concern of this work revolves around how colonial modernity dismantles existing social systems, and creates new systems of vulnerability for individuals. According to Kapur and Roy (2025), this text critiques precarity, hybridity, and resistance, through a look at how colonialism displaces persons, destroys local systems, and creates existential uncertainty for their subjects—Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John, Dinu, and Alison—who live as consequences of histories they did not fully choose.

The novel **Sea of Poppies** introduces the body of the laborer into the context of empire. Xalxo and Piyushbala (2025) examine this text through lenses such as identity conflict, hybridity, language as power, and subaltern narratives. Deeti's life illustrates how caste, widowhood, patriarchy, and debt operate, while Neel's decline illustrates how colonial law breaks the security of elites. Kalua's body, too, is an object of stigma and experiences a shift in identity aboard the ship where older social hierarchies lose their rigidity. Yogita (2025) observes that Ibis brings together a wide variety of individuals into an opium-centered migrant community. Throughout the trilogy, opium reorganizes agriculture, law, trade, warfare, and destiny, reducing individuals to units of labor, while at the same time providing a basis for fragile forms of solidarity at sea amongst individuals of different castes and cultures within the empire's power structure.

Migration, displacement, and marginalization

Ghosh's work consistently features migration as a theme (Naha, 2023). Naha considers him a diasporic writer who experienced pain, alienation, rootlessness, nostalgia, and identity, which he expresses through characters who are forced to leave their native lands. Migrating is caused by many reasons including empire building; trade; war; partition; demand for labour; environmental changes; or personal crises. Migration often leads to the establishment of new opportunities and options; however, there are also feelings of isolation or distrust as well as divided or fractured communities associated with migrating.

While Ghosh uses *The Shadow Lines* to treat border issues and conceptions of belonging, he also argues that the way we think about nations and their boundaries is influenced both by emotion and by history. The family, the nation, and the shared memories of violence suffered as a result of Partition all shape our conception of a nation as a map that is 'clean' geographically. Naha (2023) highlights the influence of history on diasporic literature in Ghosh's diasporic novels; he points out how strong the relationship is between colonial India and Partition. It is important to note that while it might be possible to use a border to protect oneself from violence, it is also possible that the border was made possible by violence since nations create their own self-identity through their histories. In addition to being denied dignity through poverty, one might also have their dignity denied through communal hatred or through a nation telling its own story.

Ecology, indigeneity, and the subaltern

Ghosh's chief novel for literary analysis of ecological inequity is *The Hungry Tide*. The Sundarbans, the novel's main setting, consists of more than simply a natural landscape; it is a contested site of interaction between various groups (fishing communities, scientific researchers, environmental advocates, asylum seekers, animals, tide currents, cyclones, mythological beings and institutions of government). In a wider framework of understanding ecological consciousness, Goswami (2026) identifies *The Hungry Tide* as part of a larger tradition and asserts that modern literature can influence and inform the development of ecological ethics and notions of environmental sustainability. Additionally, Masroor et al. (2024) engage *The Hungry Tide* in a discussion of both environmental justice and the concept of slow violence in relation to the effects that climate changes have on all aspects of human life, including their memories and livelihoods.

The core concept of the book, "*The Hungry Tide*", is what adds up to be considered dignity when the lines between both human and non-human can no longer be separated. Piya has an interest in the dolphin's existence from an empirical standpoint, but the way in which Fokir has a substantial level of experience and knowledge on how to exist along the tides is equally important; Kanai's perception of the way in which the river is conceptualized from an educated city perspective is usually underestimated when compared to the way men and women who have worked on the river, have lived in constant danger, or inherited it, view the river through their collective experience. As De (2016) suggests, after Fokir dies, Piya starts to view herself with a more global humanistic viewpoint; the lines of class, caste, race, gender, and ethnicity become blurred in a way that creates a connection to humanity as the larger human family. Therefore, the central theme of the novel is not simply about opposing science and local knowledge, it asks how dignity is preserved when differing knowledge systems interact within an inequitable environment.

Ghosh's narrative strategy

So, the narrative technique employed by Ghosh is polyphonic and multiperspectival, though he rarely lets just one voice decide what the narrative should mean. In "*The Shadow Lines*" there is a kind of movement, between memory and narrative, not straight, more like it slips back and forth. "*The Glass Palace*" traverses through many generations and it almost feels as if time is being rerouted rather than simply followed. In "*The Hungry Tide*", he mixes scientific observation, local mythology, archival memory and a transformation of self. In the Ibis trilogy, he fuses languages, registers, historical perspectives, and social positions, so the story doesn't stay in one register for long. In this case, Huttunen (2011) becomes relevant because the ethics of representation in Ghosh's works is tied to language and silence, and that link matters.

Transnational framing by Ghosh creates new ways to understand an inequitable world. In *Anand*, we see inequity on the level of a town, the level of a family, the level of a factory, the level of a village, or the level of a plantation. Inequity is represented with Ghosh as travelling across large distances and long lengths of time in multiple forms, e.g. the Ibis as both the prison and the new world social structure; the *Glass Palace* representing lives that

are scattered amongst Burma, India, and Malaya; and the Hungry Tide connecting the local ecological environment with the global community through ecological theories. Ghosh, therefore, uses this transnational frame in order to demonstrate that dignity is impacted by systems that transcend the boundaries of nations, including - imperial forces, trade relations, migration patterns, global capital, ecological changes, and historical memory.

6. Comparative Analysis

Shared concerns across both authors

The key common theme, kind of, is the subaltern body as a place of tussle between power and resistance, you know. The subaltern body of Anand's Bakha is seen as defiling, because his caste identity. Meanwhile Ghosh's Deeti is governed by the tangled interplay of caste, patriarchy, and the colonial economy. Then there is Anand's Munoo, whose subaltern body gets pushed into exploitation as labor. In Ghosh, the subaltern body of the girmitiyas gets displaced, because it is yoked to indentured labour. Anand's Gangu, again, is exploited inside plantation labour. And the subaltern bodies of Ghosh's laborers and migrants, they move across oceans, because the imperial economy needs it.

Both authors also handle resistance, but it comes through in uneven, different ways. In Anand's storytelling, resistance can show up as many things, like anger then sudden moral understanding, refusal, strike, and even social reform. What matters in Chand's (2025) reading of "Barber's Trade Union" is that Chandu is not only stuck as a victim of caste exploitation. He also manages to locate resistance through solidarity and labor organizing, somehow. In Ghosh, resistance appears elsewhere: it is quieter, less visible, and more indirect in how it works. Think Dolly's stories, Dinu's photographs, Piya's shifted relationship to Lucibari, Deeti's journey, a re-found community of Ibis, and the recovery of a silenced history.

In both books, dignity is sort of a political claim and also this universal thing, like, a basic characteristic of human beings. In Anand the people in story kinda need dignity in its most literal shape, so they can be recognized as human, to eat, to work, to move around, and to live without being humiliated, well. In Ghosh they need dignity in its historical sense, meaning to belong, to keep remembering, to hold on to their identity, to survive despite displacement, and to have their knowledge and stories treated as something that counts, not just dismissed. The sympathetic narrator in Anand then leans on moral nearness, which amplifies these quiet voices that otherwise stay silent. Meanwhile in Ghosh, the polyphonic narrator uses a bundle of different channels for memory, the archives, and voice itself.

Points of divergence

Parameter	Mulk Raj Anand	Amitav Ghosh
Era	Colonial / pre-Independence	Postcolonial / contemporary
Primary lens	Caste and class	History, empire, migration, and ecology

Narrative mode	Social realism	Postmodern and historiographic narration
Geographic scope	Largely India-centric, with colonial plantation settings	Transnational: India, Burma, Sundarbans, Indian Ocean, China, Mauritius
Tone	Protest, pathos, and reformist urgency	Complexity, ambiguity, historical layering
View of dignity	Immediate, bodily, and visceral	Historical, structural, ecological, and relational

The whole difference in approach isn't really, not necessarily an inferiority of one versus the other. There was an urgency to realism that Anand needed, like it was a necessity in itself, because his themes the untouchability, the hunger, the plantation work, and the violence of poverty, meant he basically had to show it in a harsh way. Meanwhile, historical and narrative complexity was a necessity for Ghosh. His themes the empire, the movement of people, the environmental crises, the opium, and the trans-national identities were the kind of material that simply couldn't be captured inside one single social scene, no matter how hard someone tries. So the contrast should be kind of level, free from any hierarchy, and not turned into some ranking. And yes, it may look easier to call Anand's approach simple, and Ghosh's complex, but you also have to keep in mind the same necessity, the one that pushes them toward their respective ways.

Evolution of the theme

The shift from Anand to Ghosh, is like moving away from social protest towards something more complex and kinder of layered in historical commentary. With Anand, the novel reads more like a deliberate act of protest against clear-cut social wrongs. The downtrodden figures in his novels sit right inside the oppression fashioned by caste society, labor exploitation, colonial plantations, and even patriarchal households. What looks like the opium trade in *The Ibis Trilogy*, the British takeover of Burma in *The Glass Palace*, the communal riots in *The Shadow Lines*, and the ecological strains in *The Hungry Tide*, in Ghosh, are not simply "happenings" they're history, really.

Anand emphasises the transition from individual suffering to collective and systemic inequality. He often uses one individual as a representation of a certain group: Bakha, Munoo, Gangu, Gauri. Ghosh, on the other hand, works with several figures as components of a web of interconnections. In *The Glass Palace*, we see examples of the effects of empire through the lives of many characters. In the *Ibis Trilogy*, we witness the coming together of the collective history of caste, class, race, law, commerce and migration aboard the ship. In *The Hungry Tide*, both human and non-human experiences are intertwined with ecological uncertainty. Thus, the shift we observe between Anand and Ghosh is not from social consciousness to aesthetic sophistication. Rather, it moves from one historical perspective of

social consciousness to an alternative one.

Treatment of gender and intersectionality

Gender deepens the study of inequality in both authors. In *Untouchable*, Anand elaborates on Sohini's vulnerability to underscore the intersection of caste and gender. She is not just low-caste but also a young girl vulnerable at nearly every turn to upper-caste male power. It's in his view that Anand's fiction explores women's identities under patriarchy, wherein Sohini and the female tea workers embody the saddle of gender oppression within caste and class hierarchies. *The Old Woman and the Cow*, through Gauri, makes this concern more pronounced. Through Gauri's journey from submission towards self-assertion, Anand shows sympathy to women caught in the throes of arranged marriages, male domination, abuse, and social expectation.

Women in Ghosh's fiction often have a stronger sense of narrative agency than the male characters but have just as many limits. For example, in *SEA OF POPPIES*, Deeti resists the social norms dictated by her gender and caste; Paulette breaks through the limitations put on her by colonialism and shows her true personality; Dolly in *THE GLASS PALACE* is a victim of being forced out of her homeland but is still able to use her stories to keep alive the memory of her home; and Piya in *THE HUNGRY TIDE* has a great deal of independence, education, and scientific knowledge but must rely on Fokir and the tidal country to become who she truly is. Finally, Moyna's story demonstrates how different factors-gender, poverty, education, and local ecology-all work together to create a person's driving forces and desire for success. While these women all represent some form of empowerment through the different ways they navigate their own power within their respective locations, they do not all reflect the same type of empowered women.

7. Critical Reception and Scholarly Debates

Reception of Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand, considered the pioneer of social realism in Indian English literature, has had this view supported through various works, including those by Rai (2026), Nirala and Kumar (2025), Meena (2024) and Sharma & Parag (2025). All of these studies emphasize Anand's creative contribution to making the oppressed the focus of Indian English literature in a new manner.

These studies also stand in opposition to one another concerning Anand's use of sympathetic instead of humbly detached (or neutral) writing toward the Dalit experience via their autonomous humanity within his *Untouchable* (1935). While many evaluators agree that Anand does write from a place of sympathy towards the Dalit, there is tension created between his advocacy for the Dalit and Anand's author's authority as others may consider that his advocacy had some bearing/impact/limitation upon the very oppression he attempted to expose through virtue of Anand's class/caste/writing status. Therefore, exactly how/if Anand's use of sympathy through writing can be perceived as equivalent to how Dalits represent their own lives/experience will merit much further analysis of this piece in order for future readers to garner understanding and context of the content within the work as it

remains a relevant component for international literary discourse through issues like Dalit identity.

Art is often debated as propaganda. Anand's books are ciphers for social change; some critics see this as a weakness because of how it could become overly educational or moralistic. Still, scholars have demonstrated that Anand's directness was necessary historically. Rai (2026) claims that literature acts as an agent of change in *Untouchable*, and Roy (2025) interprets Anand's art activism as ethical realism rather than defectiveness. Anand believes there is no distinction between literature's aesthetic value and the user experience with respect to human suffering. Rather than being evaluated based only on formal elegance, Anand's novels should be evaluated based on their moral courage.

Reception of Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh has been recognized for the depth of his writing, the sophistication of his narrative techniques, and the ethical scope of his work. Huttunen (2011) identifies his writing as an area of scholarship that engages with issues of ethics, language, silence, and representation. De (2016) highlights the interplay between the ideologies presented in Ghosh's novels, as well as the relationship between fiction and history and between fiction and politics. Yogita (2025) has illustrated Ghosh's anthropological representations of cultural relations and identities in the *Ibis Trilogy*. Gurulatha and Padmashini (2025) have focused on Ghosh's exploration of cultural values, memory, and identity. All of these critiques suggest that Ghosh has established a strong critical reputation by transforming history into a dynamic, human, and multi-narrative form.

The reception of Ghosh ecologically has become an increasingly important area of study. Goswami (2026) considers literature as a way to instil ecological consciousness and promote sustainability. Masroor et al. (2024) link *The Hungry Tide* to the issues of environmental justice and slow violence. Karmakar and Chetty (2024) extend Ghosh's ecological concerns into the decolonization of indigenous knowledge and epistemic responsibility. These investigations indicate that the dignity discourse in Ghosh's works is not just a matter of human rights in the narrow sense, but also relates to the dignity of communities whose knowledge of land, tides, mountains, forests, and species have been disregarded by colonial and capitalist systems.

Common scholarly tensions

Commonly identified as being a source of tension, the author as a social activist and the author as a literary artist can often have difficulty coexisting with each other; Anand's approach is much closer to openly exhibiting activism compared to Ghosh's, who approaches the same end from the perspective of much more complexly and historically reconstructing his subject matter. Nevertheless, both authors demonstrate that fiction can successfully combine both an artistic seriousness and a commitment to social issues. The simplicity of Anand's writing may appear to some as a lack of intelligence; however, it is actually a deliberate choice to create moral immediacy in his writing. On the other hand, Ghosh's more complex writing style does not mean he is avoiding the subject, rather he uses that complexity to reflect the entangled nature of history.

The second source of tension is the possibility of suffering and poverty being aestheticized through literary representation; as such, the author must avoid this risk whenever they create representations of the marginalized members of society. Anand's strategy for avoiding this risk is to utilize direct protest, pathos, and the moral exposure of his subjects. Conversely, Ghosh's particular strategy for avoiding this risk involves polyphony, archival recovery, and attention to silence in his writing. Even though neither author's respective strategy is perfect for achieving their desired outcome, both authors provide ways for the reader to take responsibility. The suffering person represented in the fiction of both authors exists to evoke more than just pity; rather, their existence as suffering people should prompt the reader to rethink the social construct that resulted in the creation of their suffering.

8. Conclusion

Synthesis of key findings

Mulk Raj Anand and Amitav Ghosh may seem to inhabit different parts of the Indian English fiction landscape. Anand is the author writing about something immediate: social injustice in the forms of issues such as untouchability, hunger, labor, exploitation on plantations whose owners were British, or people in oppressive relationships, especially women. On the other hand, Ghosh is a historical novelist who writes about themes such as history, memory, migration, ecology, and transnationalism. However, if one considers both writers from the perspectives of social inequality and human dignity, one can see the connection between them in their roles as conscience keepers for both Indian and colonial societies across time. Additionally, both authors emphasize that people who are located at the margins of society are not marginal in literature but rather central to any honest representation of social life.

Anand's contribution to literature consists of the moral impact of his work in making visible the experience of being harmed via the human body. In his novels (Bakha, Munoo, Gangu, and Gauri) Anand used the experiences of men and women who have been humiliated, hungry, subjected to plantation conditions, and betrayed by the patriarchal system in the everyday world in which they live, as a reflection of the lack of dignity of society as depicted by these characters' experiences. On the other hand, Ghosh's contribution is providing a historical understanding of how inequality travels. For example, societies constructed by/empires like those of some empires, trade, nationalism, conservationism, and memory were shaped geographically and temporally by people forced into exile/migrants/indentured labor/refugees/fiskers and people most impacted by long-term environmental degradation. Anand asks us to examine the wound; Ghosh urges us to follow the wound back through time.

Broader significance

The greater meaning of this comparison shows that fiction written in Indian English can be a way of conveying human rights discourse and consciousness while being more than just political pamphlets. Literature can document what has been omitted from official histories or public morality; to this end, Anand's use of realism captures the hidden cruelty that exists in everyday social customs, while Ghosh's use of historical imagination uncovers the violence

that is found in maps, archives, ships and other forms of commerce, as well as through ecological policy. Both writers demonstrate that dignity does not come from power and is an inherent characteristic of humans, yet dignity must be protected from structures that are in opposition to it.

The on-going relevance of Anand and Ghosh is evidenced by contemporary discussions surrounding caste discrimination, labour exploitation, migration, displacement, ecological injustice and gender-based violence, among other issues. Anand continues to be relevant due to the persistence of caste and poverty; Ghosh remains relevant because migration, environmental vulnerability, memories of colonisation and global capitalism continue to influence people's lives. Together they illustrate how social inequality is not one problem but rather a structure endowed with multiple forms. Human dignity will be the most ethical measure of such structures.

Suggestions for further research

Future research possibilities for both authors can be approached from many angles. For example, a gender-specific and Dalit feminist analysis of both authors is warranted. There is a need to conduct a cross-comparative study among women such as Sohini, Gauri, Deeti, Dolly, Paulette, Piya, Moyna, etc. in determining how their experiences as women in a patriarchal society shape them and provide them with bodily vulnerability, agency, voice, and self-making. In addition, eco-critical analysis can connect Ghosh's attention on environmental justice with Anand's focus on caste, labour, and plantation life as a spatial relationship. Methods from digital humanities may be used to study the reception of Anand and Ghosh through a review of the materials that populate the syllabi, reviews, translations, and readerships where their works appear. Other writers from South Asia should also be considered for this research including Premchand, Bhabanai Bhattacharya, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and other Dalit writers who have written about inequality and dignity. This type of research would allow for the situating of Anand and Ghosh within the larger South Asian literary history of justice.

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