

Forbidden Bonds, Universal Lessons: A Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* in the Context of Love as a Bonding Power

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Introduction

Indian literature has long functioned as a powerful conduit for expressing the complexities of human relationships, particularly those that blossom or struggle within rigid societal frameworks. Deeply intertwined with the cultural, historical, and spiritual fabric of the nation, these narratives often reflect not only personal conflicts but also collective social realities. Among the most compelling themes that recur across Indian literary works are love, unity, and the confrontation of social injustices—particularly those stemming from the deeply entrenched caste system. These stories do more than depict personal struggles; they serve as broader commentaries on the socio-political structures that define and often limit human experience. By engaging with issues such as caste-based marginalization, taboo relationships, and the longing for equality, Indian literature transcends its geographical and cultural origins. It offers readers around the world a glimpse into the universal struggles for acceptance, dignity, and connection. The emotional truths at the heart of these stories—truths about love's capacity to challenge power, the resilience of the human spirit, and the yearning for justice—resonate far beyond national boundaries.

The two exemplary works that embody these themes with remarkable intensity are Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935). Both novels, though distinct in time period, narrative style, and character focus, illuminate how love—

whether romantic or rooted in the basic human desire for respect—can act as a force of resistance against oppressive societal norms. Roy’s portrayal of a forbidden inter-caste relationship and Anand’s depiction of a Dalit boy’s quest for dignity offer deeply human stories that confront systemic injustice with empathy and insight.

The present research paper closely examines how these two literary masterpieces transcend their specific Indian contexts to address broader human concerns. Through the lens of Roy and Anand’s characters, we explore how literature can serve as a bridge between disparate cultures, nurturing global understanding and emotional solidarity. By unpacking the layers of caste, love, rebellion, and social critique in these works, we uncover essential lessons about the enduring values of compassion, equality, and shared humanity that remain relevant across time and place. To fully appreciate the thematic richness of these two texts *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, one must understand the socio-political frameworks within which these narratives unfold. Both novels are deeply entrenched in the complex realities of Indian society, where social hierarchies, particularly the caste system, continue to influence interpersonal relationships, institutional structures, and cultural norms.

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is set in post-independence Kerala, a region known for its relatively progressive stance on education and reform. Yet, beneath the veneer of modernization and constitutional guarantees of equality, caste-based discrimination continues to shape daily life. Despite the legal abolition of untouchability enshrined in the Indian Constitution, Roy reveals how deep-seated social prejudices linger, subtly and overtly dictating the behaviour of individuals and communities. The novel’s portrayal of inter-caste love, familial fragmentation, and societal policing reflects a society still grappling with its colonial past and deeply entrenched social codes. A particularly striking aspect of Roy’s critique lies in her concept of the “Love Laws”—unwritten societal rules that regulate who is allowed to love whom, and to what extent. These “laws” serve not only as narrative anchors but as incisive metaphors for the social taboos surrounding caste, class, and gender as

Roy writes, "The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (33). This haunting line encapsulates the moral boundaries that society imposes on human emotion, reducing love to a social transaction monitored by tradition and power.

In the contrast, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is set in colonial India, a time when the caste system was even more rigid and institutionalized. The novel presents a single day in the life of Bakha, a young Dalit boy, whose existence as a manual scavenger symbolizes the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy. His encounters with society—marked by verbal abuse, physical assault, and systemic exclusion—offer a vivid account of how caste violence is normalized within everyday life. Anand's commitment to social realism allows readers to witness the harsh indignities suffered by Dalits, who are systematically denied basic human rights. One of the most powerful observations in the novel is the portrayal of Bakha's constant internalization of inferiority, "He lived in a world of perpetual degradation, constantly reminded of his place in the social order." This line underscores the psychological toll that caste oppression exacts on individuals, reducing them to mere instruments of labor, devoid of personal agency or social mobility.

Both the authors, through their distinct narrative strategies and historical lenses, challenge the legitimacy of social systems that sustain inequality. Roy critiques the hypocrisy of modern Indian society that upholds democratic ideals while remaining deeply conservative in matters of caste and love. Anand, writing in a colonial context, exposes the violence and inhumanity embedded in ancient social structures, while also gesturing toward reform through figures like Gandhi. Together, *The God of Small Things* and *Untouchable* provide a comprehensive picture of how caste-based oppression operates across time periods, social classes, and individual experiences. Their works stand as powerful testimonies to the ongoing struggle for social justice in India, urging readers to reflect on the deep-rooted nature of discrimination and the need for genuine transformation.

Exploring Forbidden Love in *The God of Small Things*

At the emotional core of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* lies a profoundly moving and socially subversive love story between Ammu and Velutha. This relationship, condemned by societal norms and cultural expectations, serves as a powerful indictment of the caste-based and patriarchal constraints that govern personal lives in Indian society. Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman burdened by the stigma of divorce, and Velutha, a Dalit carpenter employed by her family, represent individuals who are marginalized not because of their actions or character, but because of their caste and gender identities. Their love transcends these societal limitations, becoming an act of rebellion against a system that seeks to control affection, intimacy, and human connection.

Roy poignantly captures this transgression in her lyrical and emotionally charged prose. One of the most memorable lines—“They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They held each other as though their lives depended on it.”—beautifully encapsulates the fragility, desperation, and defiance that define their relationship. In presenting their bond as both intensely personal and inherently political, Roy urges readers to confront the brutal consequences of caste orthodoxy and gender inequality. Velutha's role in the novel extends beyond that of a romantic figure. He becomes a symbol of silent resistance, representing the dignity and humanity of those whom society chooses to devalue. Fully aware of the risks involved, Velutha does not retreat from the relationship. His decision to love Ammu, despite the dire repercussions, affirms his autonomy and challenges the social order that demands his invisibility and submission.

Roy's portrayal of their doomed relationship does more than elicit sympathy—it demands outrage. Through Ammu and Velutha, Roy exposes the dehumanizing effects of the caste system and illustrates how love, when it violates societal boundaries, is punished rather than celebrated. Their story becomes a vehicle for critiquing oppressive institutions and illuminating the cost of defiance in a deeply hierarchical culture.

The Quest for Dignity in *Untouchable*

In contrast to Roy's exploration of romantic love, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* centers around the broader, but equally powerful, human desire for dignity and social recognition. The novel follows a single day in the life of Bakha, a young Dalit boy whose existence is defined by the daily indignities of his occupation as a manual scavenger. Through Bakha's eyes, Anand exposes the rigid caste stratification that reduces human beings to mere functions, denying them individuality, respect, and basic human rights. From the opening scenes, the novel immerses the reader in Bakha's reality—a world where every interaction reminds him of his social status, "Outcaste, Untouchable, he was reminded of his status in every act, every interaction." This line captures the relentless nature of caste-based marginalization and its psychological impact. Bakha's daily encounters with abuse, exclusion, and humiliation are not isolated incidents but manifestations of a deeply embedded social order designed to perpetuate inequality.

A transformative moment in the novel occurs when Bakha hears Mahatma Gandhi speak against untouchability. Gandhi's words, "Untouchability is a blot on humanity." If we do not eradicate it, we fail as a society, and introduce a new possibility—a vision of a society that might recognize the inherent worth of every individual. This moment plants a seed of hope in Bakha's consciousness. It marks the beginning of his moral awakening, suggesting that systemic change, while difficult, is possible through collective action, empathy, and reimagined social values.

Anand's decision to end the novel on an ambivalent note—where Bakha contemplates the future but remains uncertain—reflects the complexity of social reform. Change is neither immediate nor guaranteed, but awareness is the first step toward transformation. Through Bakha, Anand gives voice to the voiceless and invites readers to recognize the humanity of those oppressed by social convention. By highlighting the emotional and spiritual dimensions of Bakha's journey, *Untouchable* moves beyond social critique and becomes a plea for human empathy.

The novel's enduring relevance lies in its portrayal of caste not merely as a social structure but as a moral failing that demands urgent redress.

Textual Analysis

Although both Arundhati Roy and Mulk Raj Anand explore the concept of love from different vantage points—one romantic and transgressive, the other rooted in human dignity and social justice—both authors converge on the idea that love has the transformative potential to transcend entrenched social boundaries. In *The God of Small Things*, the forbidden relationship between Ammu and Velutha represents a direct challenge to caste and gender-based hierarchies. Their union, though brief and ultimately tragic, symbolizes a courageous assertion of emotional freedom in the face of societal rigidity.

In contrast, *Untouchable* does not revolve around romantic love but centers instead on Bakha's unyielding desire to be treated as a human being. His yearning for self-respect and equal treatment serves as a form of love—for oneself and for the collective dignity of the marginalized. Anand uses Bakha's internal struggle to highlight the psychological violence inflicted by caste discrimination and the enduring human need to be seen and valued.

What unites both novels is their portrayal of the resilience of the human spirit. Whether through an intimate relationship or a plea for dignity, both Velutha and Bakha embody the universal pursuit of identity, acceptance, and connection. Their struggles transcend the confines of Indian society, offering global readers insight into broader human rights issues. It is this emotional and thematic universality that has enabled *The God of Small Things* and *Untouchable* to reach audiences across linguistic and cultural borders. Their continued presence in academic syllabi and literary discussions around the world affirms their ability to resonate beyond their immediate cultural contexts.

Indian literature, as illustrated by Roy and Anand's works, does more than document local histories or cultural specificities—it speaks to the global human condition. These novels function as cultural bridges,

fostering empathy among readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of Indian caste or social structures. In a time when the world remains divided by class, race, religion, and ethnicity, literature like *The God of Small Things* and *Untouchable* offers a shared emotional vocabulary through which these divisions can be examined and understood.

The issues depicted in these texts are not confined to the Indian subcontinent. Discrimination—whether on the basis of caste, race, or ethnicity—continues to affect millions globally. Roy's and Anand's narratives highlight the systemic mechanisms that enable social exclusion and provoke readers to confront the structures of power within their own societies. As such, the novels remain deeply relevant in contemporary discourses surrounding social justice, equity, and civil rights. They inspire not only empathy but also a vision of a world where love, understanding, and solidarity transcend social and cultural boundaries.

Both Roy and Anand masterfully use symbolism and imagery to deepen the emotional and philosophical resonance of their narratives. In *The God of Small Things*, recurring symbols such as the river and the moth carry layered meanings. The river, a site of both serenity and tragedy, mirrors the forbidden nature of Ammu and Velutha's relationship—it is a place of union, secrecy, and ultimately, loss. The moth, fragile and fleeting, reflects the vulnerability of their love and the inevitability of its destruction under societal pressure.

In *Untouchable*, Anand utilizes more grounded, realist symbolism to underscore the weight of caste oppression. One of the most potent images is Bakha's broom, which symbolizes the literal and metaphorical burden he carries as a sweeper. The broom is not just a tool of labor but a constant reminder of the societal position assigned to him. Through such imagery, Anand invites readers to visualize the psychological and physical costs of caste-based labor.

These symbols are not mere embellishments but serve as narrative instruments that evoke empathy and bring abstract injustices into tangible focus.

Both novels also function as critical examinations of India's postcolonial and traditional societal structures. Roy's *The God of Small Things* exposes the lingering effects of colonial-era thinking that continue to shape contemporary Indian society. Though the British have departed, their legacy lives on in the caste rigidity, class consciousness, and social conservatism that persist. Roy critiques how colonial ideologies, once imposed, have been internalized and perpetuated by Indian elites and institutions.

Similarly, Anand's *Untouchable* not only challenges the caste system's brutality but also interrogates the contradictions of Western influence. The colonial presence introduces notions of equality and modernity, yet these ideals rarely benefit the lowest strata of society. While some colonial figures express sympathy or admiration for Bakha, they remain largely complicit in maintaining the structures that oppress him. Thus, Anand presents a nuanced view of colonialism—not wholly destructive or redemptive but entangled in ambivalence and selective moral concern.

Roy and Anand employ distinct narrative approaches that enhance the impact of their stories. Roy's style is lyrical, fragmented, and nonlinear. The narrative moves fluidly between time periods, memories, and perspectives, mimicking the emotional and psychological disarray experienced by her characters. This fragmented structure emphasizes how trauma disrupts chronological order and how the past continuously intrudes upon the present. Her poetic language often blurs the line between prose and verse, amplifying the emotional depth of the narrative.

Conversely, Anand's narrative in *Untouchable* is linear and rooted in realism. The novel's structure follows the events of a single day, focusing intensively on Bakha's inner and outer worlds. Anand adopts a straightforward, journalistic tone that aligns with his social reformist agenda. This simplicity does not dilute the novel's power but makes it more accessible and immediate, allowing readers to absorb the harsh truths without narrative distractions. Both techniques are effective in their respective contexts—Roy's complexity reflects the multi-layered nature of identity and emotion, while Anand's clarity serves to unmask the raw realities of systemic oppression.

Religion and Mythology: Tools of Inclusion or Exclusion?

Religion, a powerful force in Indian society, is portrayed in both novels as a double-edged sword. In *The God of Small Things*, religious customs and beliefs reinforce caste divisions and moral restrictions. The intersection of religion with class and gender often leads to exclusion rather than inclusion, as seen in the social condemnation of Ammu and Velutha's relationship. Roy's narrative questions the use of religion as a means to regulate behaviour and justify inequality.

Anand, too, illustrates how religious ideology can be weaponized to legitimize social discrimination. Bakha's ostracization is not just a social act but one deeply sanctified by Hindu doctrines that equate purity with caste. Rituals of pollution and purity govern his life, depriving him of dignity and autonomy. Religion, in this context, becomes a mechanism of control rather than a source of solace. Both authors critique the ways in which religious and cultural beliefs, rather than serving as moral compasses, are often manipulated to uphold oppressive traditions.

A Global Perspective: Literary Parallels and Comparative Themes

The themes explored in *The God of Small Things* and *Untouchable* find resonance in global literature that grapples with social exclusion, forbidden love, and systemic injustice. Roy's portrayal of love constrained by social codes which parallels Toni Morrison's *Beloved* which addresses the devastating effects of slavery and the reclamation of agency through love. In both novels, love becomes a means of resistance against dehumanizing forces.

Anand's depiction of caste oppression bears similarity to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where rigid traditional structures and colonial pressures impact individual freedom and cultural continuity. Both authors explore how cultural systems, when unyielding, contribute to personal and societal breakdown. Such comparisons highlight the universality of

these themes, demonstrating that while the settings may vary, the struggles for dignity, justice, and love are deeply human and widely shared.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* are more than literary masterpieces; they are calls to action. Through their poignant depictions of love and resilience, these novels challenge societal norms, foster cross-cultural empathy, and inspire readers to advocate for a more just and equitable world. The enduring power of these stories lies in their ability to connect individuals across divides, reminding us of the universal values that bind humanity together. As Roy eloquently states, "A story ends, but its echoes remain. It haunts us, reminding us of who we are and who we could become." Through these narratives, Indian literature continues to illuminate the path toward a more compassionate and interconnected future.

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