

Childhood, Education, and the Making of Modern Subjectivity: A Comparative Study of Mulk Raj Anand and Rabindranath Tagore

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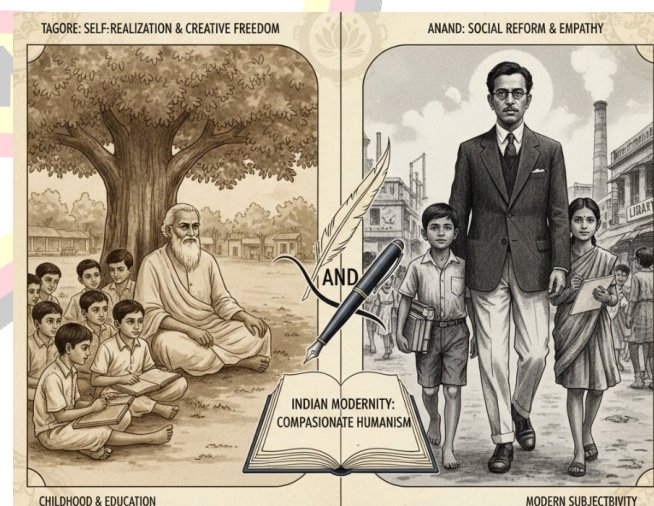
ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a comparative study of Mulk Raj Anand and Rabindranath Tagore, two foundational figures in Indian English Literature, exploring how their writings reconstruct the ideas of childhood, education, and modern subjectivity within the broader framework of colonial and postcolonial India. Both authors, though different in temperament and linguistic sensibility, share a deep concern for human growth, social ethics, and the moral education of individuals. Tagore's works, deeply rooted in the Upanishadic and classical Indian traditions, envision education as a process of self-realization and creative freedom, as reflected in *The Home and the World* and *Gora*. Anand, influenced by humanist realism and Gandhian ethics, reinterprets the concept of education through social reform and empathy, particularly in novels such as *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. By analyzing their fictional worlds, this paper argues that both writers construct a modern Indian subjectivity that balances tradition and progress, spirituality and materialism, individuality and social responsibility. Tagore's idealist pedagogy and Anand's realist vision intersect in their shared quest for a compassionate, egalitarian humanism that defines Indian modernity. The study combines comparative literary analysis, postcolonial theory, and educational philosophy, offering a nuanced

understanding of how these two literary giants reimagine the role of learning and childhood in shaping the moral and intellectual consciousness of modern India.

KEYWORDS

Modern Indian Subjectivity, Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Education, Humanism and Moral Development, Tagore and Anand, Childhood and Social Reform



INTRODUCTION

The concepts of childhood, education, and modern subjectivity occupy a central place in the shaping of India's literary and intellectual modernity. Among the pioneers who

redefined these ideas through their writings, **Rabindranath Tagore** and **Mulk Raj Anand** stand out as two distinct yet convergent voices. Both writers, though separated by linguistic medium and philosophical temperament, engage deeply with questions of human development, ethical consciousness, and the transformative role of education in society. Tagore, inspired by the spiritual and holistic ideals of the Upanishads, envisions education as a journey toward inner freedom, creativity, and harmony between the individual and the universe. In contrast, Anand, guided by humanist realism and Gandhian thought, portrays education as a means of social awakening and moral reconstruction amid the injustices of colonial India.

Through their literary works, both authors critique the oppressive systems—whether colonial, social, or educational—that stifle human potential, while proposing alternative visions rooted in compassion, equality, and intellectual freedom. Their writings not only reinterpret childhood and learning as tools of personal growth but also link them to the making of a modern, ethical subject capable of balancing tradition with progress. This comparative study seeks to explore how Tagore's idealist pedagogy and Anand's realist humanism together articulate a vision of Indian modernity that is both spiritually grounded and socially responsible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly attention to **Rabindranath Tagore's educational thought** emphasizes its humanistic, aesthetic, and natural-centred orientation. Critics and education historians routinely describe Tagore's pedagogy as aiming for *self-realization*, creative freedom, and intimate engagement with nature, art, and community life — principles he institutionalized in Santiniketan and articulated in essays and lectures across his career. Recent reviews highlight Tagore's critique of rote, colonial schooling and his insistence that education cultivate moral imagination and a cosmopolitan sensibility rather than merely transmit facts. This strand of scholarship frames Tagore as both a cultural nationalist and an internationalist,

whose educational experiments sought to reconcile rootedness in Indian spiritual traditions with openness to global cultures.

Research on **Mulk Raj Anand** has concentrated on his commitment to social realism and his sustained engagement with the problems of class, caste, and labour. Literary studies of *Untouchable* and *Coolie* often foreground Anand's portrayal of the formative effects that oppressive social structures have on children and young people, and how informal learning within families and communities competes with (and is undermined by) dominant institutions. Scholars note Anand's insistence that ethical education must be social and material as well as intellectual: reform, empathy, and political awareness are integral to the "education" his novels depict, and these works stage pedagogy as an element of social critique and potential transformation. Recent articles and critical overviews underscore how Anand's humanist realism is allied with Gandhian ideals of moral improvement and social uplift.

Comparative readings of Tagore and Anand, though less numerous than single-author studies, reveal productive contrasts and convergences. Comparative scholars typically argue that Tagore's idealist, spiritually inflected pedagogy and Anand's materialist, reformist vision both contribute to a distinctively Indian modern subjectivity: Tagore emphasizes inner freedom and aesthetic cultivation, while Anand insists on the primacy of socio-economic justice and practical empathy. A handful of recent comparative essays place these two writers in dialogue to show how educational ideas in their fiction negotiate tensions between tradition and modernity, individual autonomy and communal responsibility. These works often draw attention to narrative strategies — characterization, child protagonists, scenes of schooling or apprenticeship — through which both authors dramatize processes of moral formation.

The literature also situates Tagore and Anand within **postcolonial theoretical frameworks** that address subject formation under colonialism. Canonical theorists such as

Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have supplied concepts (hybridity, ambivalence, the subaltern's voice) that scholars use to read how colonial power shapes ideas of the child, the learner, and the modern individual. For instance, Bhabha's attention to ambivalence and in-between spaces helps explain how Tagore's Santiniketan simultaneously resists and borrows from Western educational models; Spivak's work draws attention to who is permitted to speak and be educated within colonial hierarchies — a critical lens particularly useful for readings of Anand's subaltern and working-class characters. Using these frameworks, critics analyze how literary depictions of pedagogy enact or contest colonial subjectivities.

Methodologically, scholars combine close textual analysis of novels, stories, and essays with historical contextualization (colonial education policy, nationalist reform movements) and intellectual history (Tagore's engagement with Upanishadic thought; Anand's writings on Gandhian ethics and Marxist critique). Empirical studies of Tagore's institutions (archival work on Visva-Bharati, contemporary histories of Santiniketan) complement theoretical accounts, while readings of Anand often engage with reception studies and socio-political histories of labour and caste. Recent dissertations and journal articles model interdisciplinary approaches that pair literary exegesis with educational theory and social history, arguing for a multi-layered understanding of "education" in literary texts.

Despite this rich scholarship, several gaps persist. First, comparative work that systematically links Tagore's philosophical pedagogy and Anand's pragmatic social pedagogy to the lived experiences of children (as historical actors) remains limited; more archival and oral-history work could ground literary claims in social practice. Second, while postcolonial theory is widely used, fewer studies explicitly map how pedagogical ideals in these authors' works influenced or were received by contemporary educational reforms or by subsequent generations of Indian educators. Third, intersections of gender, childhood, and pedagogy in both writers' texts warrant deeper exploration: how are girls'

educational trajectories represented differently from boys', and what does that reveal about modern subject formation? Addressing these lacunae would strengthen our grasp of how literary visions of education shaped broader cultural transitions.

In sum, the literature establishes a clear starting point for a comparative analysis: Tagore's and Anand's writings operate on complementary registers — the spiritual/aesthetic and the social/material — yet both invest education and childhood with formative power in the making of modern Indian subjectivity. Building on postcolonial theory and the existing textual scholarship, further comparative work can illuminate how pedagogical imaginaries in fiction helped negotiate the ethical and political challenges of colonial and early postcolonial India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research methodology grounded in the principles of comparative literary analysis, postcolonial theory, and educational philosophy. The aim is to examine how Mulk Raj Anand and Rabindranath Tagore conceptualize childhood, education, and modern subjectivity within their literary and philosophical frameworks, and to explore the intersections between their humanistic visions and the socio-political contexts of colonial and early postcolonial India.

1. Research Design

The research follows a comparative and analytical design. It systematically compares selected works of Tagore—such as *The Home and the World*, *Gora*, and selected essays on education—with Anand's novels like *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *The Village*. The design focuses on thematic parallels and contrasts in their treatment of childhood, moral growth, and education as tools for shaping modern consciousness. The study emphasizes interpretation over quantification, seeking to uncover underlying philosophical and cultural meanings rather than statistical generalizations.

2. Data Collection

The study relies primarily on **secondary and primary textual sources**.

- **Primary data** include the literary works, essays, and letters of Tagore and Anand that reflect their educational and ethical ideas.
- **Secondary data** comprise scholarly articles, critical essays, biographies, and published research from reputed academic journals, which provide historical, theoretical, and contextual insights. Library archives, digital repositories, and peer-reviewed databases were consulted to ensure the reliability and academic authenticity of the materials.

3. Analytical Framework

The analysis integrates three major frameworks:

- **Comparative Literary Analysis:** Used to examine structural, thematic, and stylistic elements in both authors' writings, identifying shared motifs such as moral education, compassion, and the conflict between tradition and modernity.
- **Postcolonial Theory:** Draws on the ideas of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Frantz Fanon to interpret how colonial education shaped identity and subjectivity, and how both authors resisted this through alternative pedagogical ideals.
- **Educational Philosophy:** Applies Tagore's holistic educational vision and Anand's humanist ethics to evaluate their proposed models of learning as instruments of individual and social transformation.

4. Approach and Methods

A **textual and contextual approach** is employed, combining close reading with socio-historical interpretation. The method involves identifying key themes—such as freedom, empathy, social justice, and moral development—and analyzing how

these are articulated through character formation, narrative structure, and philosophical reflection. Tagore's idealist perspective and Anand's realist vision are examined as complementary paradigms of education and modernity.

5. Comparative Dimension

The comparative dimension is central to this research. It highlights not only the philosophical differences between Tagore's spiritual universalism and Anand's pragmatic humanism but also their shared goal of creating a compassionate, egalitarian society. The method of comparison is thematic and conceptual rather than biographical, emphasizing how both writers respond to similar historical and moral challenges through distinct literary modes.

6. Limitations of the Study

While this research draws on extensive textual and theoretical analysis, it does not employ empirical methods such as interviews or field studies. The findings are interpretive and depend on the critical reading of available texts and scholarly discourse. Future studies may extend this work by incorporating reception analysis or exploring pedagogical influences in contemporary Indian education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Reimagining Childhood as Moral and Social Awakening

The analysis reveals that both **Rabindranath Tagore** and **Mulk Raj Anand** reframe childhood not as a passive stage of dependence but as a dynamic period of moral and intellectual formation. In Tagore's fictional and philosophical works, childhood symbolizes **purity, curiosity, and an intuitive connection with nature**, uncorrupted by rigid social hierarchies. His depictions of young minds in *Gora* and *The Home and the World* suggest that the early years are crucial for nurturing compassion and creativity. Education, therefore,

must align with the child's natural rhythm and emotional needs rather than impose mechanical learning.

In contrast, Anand's portrayal of childhood—especially through characters like **Bakha** in *Untouchable* and **Munoo** in *Coolie***—exposes the harsh social realities that deform innocent minds under caste and class oppression. Childhood in Anand's world becomes a **site of resistance and survival**, where learning occurs through experience, struggle, and human empathy rather than formal schooling. The result of this comparison underscores that while Tagore's childhood is idealized and spiritually grounded, Anand's is socially embodied and politically aware—together reflecting two complementary visions of Indian modernity.

2. Education as Liberation and Humanization

The findings indicate that both authors position **education as the central mechanism of liberation**, though their pathways differ. Tagore's educational philosophy promotes **holistic learning** that blends aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical dimensions. He imagines a form of learning that liberates the soul through joy, creativity, and harmony with nature. The Santiniketan model—embodied in both his fiction and essays—rejects colonial rigidity and aims to cultivate **freedom of thought and universal sympathy**.

Anand, conversely, regards education as a **social weapon against injustice**. His characters rarely receive formal education; instead, their moral and emotional learning comes through **suffering, observation, and empathy**. For instance, in *Untouchable*, Bakha's moment of realization after meeting Gandhi symbolizes education not as classroom knowledge but as **moral enlightenment and social awareness**. Thus, while Tagore seeks spiritual awakening through education, Anand aims for socio-political transformation. Both converge on the idea that true education should restore human dignity and agency—values suppressed by colonial and hierarchical systems.

3. Construction of Modern Indian Subjectivity

A major result of this comparative study is the emergence of a **shared vision of modern Indian subjectivity** rooted in ethical humanism. Tagore and Anand both confront the colonial narrative that defined the “modern subject” as Westernized and alienated from indigenous values. Tagore's protagonists strive to reconcile spiritual depth with rational progress, proposing a **synthesis of Eastern introspection and Western rationality**. Anand's characters, meanwhile, reflect the **awakening of social consciousness**, struggling to assert individuality within oppressive structures.

Through different routes, both authors arrive at a vision of the modern Indian subject as **morally autonomous, socially responsible, and emotionally compassionate**. Their writings suggest that modernity in India must be **ethical before it is material**, founded upon empathy and equality rather than imitation of the West. The intersection of their ideas reflects a uniquely Indian response to colonial modernity—one that integrates reform with moral introspection.

4. Tradition, Reform, and the Humanist Ethos

Another key finding is the authors' **balanced negotiation between tradition and reform**. Tagore revitalizes ancient Indian thought, especially the Upanishadic idea of the unity of all existence, and reinterprets it for a modern, plural world. He envisions education as a continuous dialogue between tradition and freedom—a **living tradition** that evolves rather than stagnates.

Anand, however, emphasizes the **urgent need to reform tradition** where it becomes a tool of social exclusion. He uses realism to expose the moral decay within caste hierarchies and colonial exploitation, advocating a more egalitarian and compassionate society. The convergence lies in their **shared humanism**—a belief that progress and tradition must serve human dignity and not suppress it.

5. Convergence of Idealism and Realism

The comparative discussion highlights that Tagore's **idealism** and Anand's **realism** represent two poles of a unified intellectual quest. Tagore's idealism offers the moral and spiritual foundation necessary for personal growth, while Anand's realism grounds this idealism in tangible social reform. Together, they form a **dialectic of vision and action**—the imaginative freedom of Tagore meeting the pragmatic empathy of Anand. This synthesis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding Indian modernity as both inwardly reflective and outwardly transformative.

6. Broader Implications

The broader implication of this analysis is that literature, for both writers, functions as a **pedagogical space**. Through stories, characters, and moral dilemmas, they teach readers to think critically about freedom, justice, and compassion. Their works transcend mere fiction and operate as **moral laboratories**, shaping public consciousness about education, inequality, and ethical citizenship. The results thus reinforce the idea that the making of modern Indian subjectivity is inseparable from literary imagination and humanistic education.

The results affirm that Tagore and Anand, though differing in methods and tone, converge in their aspiration to redefine the Indian self through education and empathy. Their works collectively demonstrate that **modern subjectivity in India is neither wholly Western nor purely traditional**, but a dynamic synthesis that arises from moral growth, cultural dialogue, and social reform. Through their portrayal of children, learners, and thinkers, both authors articulate a humanist vision that remains vital to the ongoing conversation about education, identity, and ethical citizenship in the modern world.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of **Rabindranath Tagore** and **Mulk Raj Anand** reveals how both writers, through distinct yet

converging perspectives, redefine the relationship between **childhood, education, and the making of modern subjectivity** in India. Despite differences in style and ideology—Tagore's spiritual idealism and Anand's social realism—both seek to restore the human essence lost amid colonial domination, social inequality, and mechanized education. Their writings embody a profound faith in the power of learning to liberate individuals, nurture empathy, and reshape society.

Tagore's vision of education, deeply rooted in **Upanishadic philosophy** and his belief in the harmony between nature, creativity, and the human spirit, advocates for a system that cultivates freedom of thought and emotional wholeness. His idea of the child as a spontaneous learner reflects a pedagogy centered on **self-realization and joy in learning**, which challenges the rigid, colonial patterns of education. Anand, conversely, grounds his educational ideal in **social awareness and reform**, portraying learning as an instrument of resistance against caste oppression and economic exploitation. For him, true education emerges through **experience, suffering, and moral awakening**, rather than institutional training.

Together, their approaches articulate a broader humanistic philosophy that envisions education as both a **moral and social enterprise**. Tagore teaches the necessity of inner growth and spiritual balance, while Anand underscores the importance of external reform and ethical action. This synthesis of idealism and realism forms a holistic model of Indian modernity—one that unites **spiritual introspection with social responsibility**, and **individual freedom with collective empathy**.

The study concludes that both writers redefine modern subjectivity not as a mere imitation of Western rationality but as a **distinctly Indian moral consciousness**—rooted in compassion, justice, and cultural harmony. By reimagining childhood and education as transformative forces, Tagore and Anand contribute to a vision of India's modern selfhood that is progressive, inclusive, and deeply humane.

Ultimately, this research underscores that the enduring relevance of their thought lies in its **universal humanism**. In a world still struggling with inequality and alienation, Tagore's and Anand's educational ideals remind us that true progress begins not with technology or wealth, but with the **moral awakening of the individual** and the **cultivation of empathy through learning**. Their works thus remain vital blueprints for rethinking education as the foundation of a more compassionate and equitable society.

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