

Reimagining English Classrooms: Caste, Emotion, and Empathic Learning in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

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ABSTRACT

This article reimagines English classrooms by positioning Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* as a catalyst for empathic, justice-oriented learning. Using the Affective–Aesthetic–Activist (AAA) framework, the study synthesizes affect theory, aesthetic education, and critical pedagogy to show how literary emotion, form, and classroom praxis can move learners from feeling to reflection to ethical action. A qualitative, interpretive design includes close textual analysis of affective nodes (humiliation, shame, compassion) and a simulated teaching module that operationalizes reflective journaling, dialogic circles, and creative reimagination. Findings indicate that Anand's critical realism enables narrative empathy while foregrounding caste as a lived, affective structure; when mediated through AAA-aligned activities, students' emotional responses can be scaffolded into moral reasoning and civic consciousness. Implications include reframing assessment to value emotional literacy alongside analytic skill and establishing facilitative norms that transform discomfort into critical insight. The model is transferable to Indian and international contexts addressing social inequality through literature.

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Introduction

The intersection of literature, emotion, and pedagogy has increasingly been recognized as a transformative site for cultivating empathy and ethical awareness among learners (Keen, 2007, p. 112; Nussbaum, 1997). Within English education, reading is not merely an aesthetic or linguistic exercise but a moral and affective practice that can humanize students and foster social consciousness (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 72–73). This paper situates Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935/2014) as a pedagogical text that enables learners to engage with the affective realities of caste oppression and to cultivate empathic understanding through aesthetic experience and critical reflection. Using an Affective–Aesthetic–Activist Framework, the study explores how English classrooms can become spaces of emotional engagement, social awareness, and transformative learning.

Mainstream English classrooms often prioritize cognitive competence—comprehension, grammar, and textual analysis—over emotional literacy and moral imagination (Boler, 1999; Zembylas,

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2020, p. 24). In contexts such as India, where education intersects with entrenched social hierarchies, this omission reproduces distance between learners and the socio-ethical realities surrounding them (Kumar, 1991, p. 41; Mukherjee, 2016). Anand's *Untouchable*, a foundational text of Indian English literature, provides a compelling opportunity to reimagine English education beyond aesthetic appreciation toward affective and ethical engagement.

Anand's realism allows students to encounter the visceral realities of caste. Early in the novel, the narrator describes the outcaste colony as

a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 1).

Such vivid spatial marginalization not only frames Bakha's life but also provides students with a visual and emotional entry point into systemic exclusion. Bakha's daily existence—his labor, humiliation, and fleeting pride—embodies what Zembylas (2015) calls the “affective economy” of oppression, where emotion itself becomes a mode of subjugation. When Bakha accidentally brushes against a high-caste man, he is berated: “*Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me?*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 38). Reading such moments in class invites reflection not only on social violence but on the emotional structures that sustain it.

Through a modernist realism that combines humanist sympathy with political critique, Anand renders the affective world of the marginalized visible to privileged readers (Limbale, 2004, p. 18). The novel's emotional vocabulary—shame, anger, compassion, longing—functions as a moral discourse on social exclusion (Rege, 2013). As Bakha reels from humiliation, he wonders, “*Why was I so humble? I could have struck him!*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 46). This interior conflict exemplifies what affect theorists describe as the circulation of emotion between body and society (Ahmed, 2004, p. 9). In pedagogical settings, such scenes allow learners to experience emotion as epistemic—something through which they can understand moral worlds rather than simply feel pity.

Literature thus becomes a “moral laboratory” (Hakemulder, 2000, p. 102) where readers rehearse ethical imagination. For instance, Bakha's aspiration toward literacy—“*How nice it must be to be able to read and write! One could read the papers after having been to school*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 35)—mirrors students' own desire for social mobility through education. In analyzing such passages, learners can link emotional resonance with critical reflection, moving from empathy to moral reasoning (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Nussbaum, 1990, p. 53).

Recent work in affect theory challenges the rationalist bias of education by foregrounding emotion as a legitimate mode of knowing (Massumi, 2002, p. 28; Ahmed, 2004, p. 10). Emotions circulate within classrooms, shaping both content and experience (Zembylas, 2015). Pedagogues such as Boler (1999) and Zembylas (2020) advocate “affective pedagogy,” viewing feelings as epistemic forces that deepen critical engagement. When applied to literature instruction, reading becomes an embodied act of empathy—feeling *with* rather than merely *about* characters (Keen, 2024). Anand's realist detail allows readers to inhabit Bakha's sensory world: “*He worked away earnestly, quickly,*

without loss of effort; though his job was dirty, he remained comparatively clean” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 8). The tension between dirt and dignity challenges students to confront how moral purity is socially constructed.

The aesthetic experience of literature, as Dewey (1934) and Greene (1995) argue, unites perception, emotion, and imagination. Anand’s aesthetic of social realism disrupts comfort; it forces readers to confront the ugliness of structural inequality while recognizing the beauty of human dignity and resistance (Beaumont, 2007, p. 67). Consider Bakha’s silent awe as he glimpses the temple from afar:

He sighted the temple, a colossal, huge turreted structure of massive stone... some unknown force... made the place too heavy to breathe in (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 49).

This description blends reverence and exclusion, encapsulating the paradox of sacred spaces denied to the marginalized. Through such imagery, learners encounter what Biesta (2010) calls the “ethical interruption” of art—where aesthetic experience opens moral reflection.

When coupled with activist pedagogy, rooted in Freire’s (1970/2000) and hooks’s (1994) vision of education as liberation, the English classroom becomes a dialogic arena. Students can analyze not only textual form but also positionalities and responsibilities. In *Untouchable*, Bakha’s encounter with reformist discourse exemplifies this transformation. Gandhi’s speech in the novel asserts:

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 144).

Through classroom dialogue, such excerpts can move students beyond emotional reaction toward ethical critique and civic empathy—linking affective engagement to activist awareness (hooks, 2010, p. 93; Giroux, 2020).

In Indian classrooms, English often functions as a marker of privilege and exclusion (Mukherjee, 2016; Nambissan, 2010, p. 121). Integrating a text like *Untouchable* subverts this hierarchy by using English to articulate Dalit experience and resistance. The narrative’s closing vision—“*No god is needed to rescue the Untouchables... simply and solely—the flush system*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 148)—reframes redemption through technological and social reform rather than divine intervention. Such realism invites students to link empathy with practical ethics.

By foregrounding caste and emotion, this study argues for a pedagogy that embraces discomfort as a condition for growth (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p. 115). Through guided reflection, dialogic discussion, and creative engagement, learners can transform affective responses into moral insight and collective understanding. The *Affective–Aesthetic–Activist* Framework thus bridges feeling, art, and action—enabling students to read *Untouchable* not only as a text but as a lived ethical encounter.

Accordingly, this paper aims to:

1. Analyze the affective and aesthetic strategies through which Anand (1935/2014) represents caste oppression;
2. Explore pedagogical practices that translate literary empathy into social awareness; and

3. Propose a theoretical model—the Affective–Aesthetic–Activist Framework—for designing empathic, justice-oriented English classrooms.

By aligning affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi, 2015, p. 42), aesthetic education (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995, p. 28), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 2010), the study envisions a holistic approach that unites feeling, form, and action. This framework reimagines literature teaching as an ethical encounter rather than an interpretive exercise, reaffirming the humanities' crucial role in nurturing democratic sensibilities (Biesta, 2010; Nussbaum, 2010, p. 94).

Review of Literature

The review of literature draws on six interrelated strands that ground this study: (a) empathy and literature, (b) affect theory and emotion in education, (c) critical pedagogy and social justice, (d) Dalit and postcolonial literary discourse, (e) aesthetic education and moral imagination, and (f) empathy development in practice. Collectively, these perspectives provide a theoretical and emotional foundation for understanding how Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* functions as both an affective and activist pedagogical text.

The notion that reading literature cultivates empathy and moral awareness has been repeatedly affirmed across disciplines. Nussbaum (1990, 1997, 2010) positions literature as a form of moral philosophy—an imaginative exercise that enables readers to inhabit multiple perspectives and develop compassion through reflection (p. 83). Keen (2007, 2024) similarly defines literary empathy as a process of “co-creation,” where readers' affective responses interact with narrative form to yield ethical understanding. In Anand's *Untouchable*, the immediacy of emotion becomes central to this process. The opening depiction of Bakha's marginalized world situates empathy as the reader's first pedagogical encounter:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 1).

This stark geography of exclusion invites readers—and by extension, learners—to experience alienation as an emotional reality, not a distant sociological concept. Such aesthetic realism activates what Hakemulder (2000) calls the “moral laboratory” of fiction (p. 104), where ethical imagination is tested through feeling. Kidd and Castano (2013) empirically validated this link, demonstrating that reading literary fiction enhances Theory of Mind and empathic sensitivity. Likewise, Koopman (2015, p. 28) notes that emotional engagement deepens moral reflection, suggesting that literature functions as both an intellectual and affective simulator.

Affect theory extends this conversation by conceptualizing emotion as epistemic rather than peripheral. Ahmed (2004, p. 11) describes emotions as “cultural practices” that circulate between bodies, texts, and collectives, shaping social relations. Massumi (2002, 2015) further interprets affect as the pre-conscious intensity that drives ethical and political change. Within education, such perspectives reposition feeling as central to cognition. Zembylas (2015, p. 73) argues that emotions are the “texture of pedagogical experience,” generating both resistance and transformation. Boler's

(1999) “pedagogy of discomfort” highlights this tension—where feelings of guilt, shame, or fear become catalysts for critical reflection.

Anand’s representation of humiliation in *Untouchable* exemplifies this dynamic vividly. When Bakha accidentally brushes against a caste Hindu, he is assaulted with words that crystallize social disgust:

Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin! ... Do you know you have touched me and defiled me? (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 38).

For learners, such moments dramatize emotion as knowledge—the point where shame and anger become tools for social awareness. As Boler and Zembylas (2003, p. 119) contend, confronting discomfort in classrooms can nurture empathy grounded in accountability rather than sentimentality. In this sense, the text aligns with affective pedagogy by turning emotional unease into ethical inquiry.

The tradition of critical pedagogy, advanced by Freire (1970/2000) and hooks (1994, 2010), frames education as a practice of freedom. Freire emphasizes dialogue as the means through which learners and teachers co-create knowledge, while hooks (2010, p. 95) integrates love, care, and emotional honesty into this process. Their approaches insist that empathy must translate into praxis—feeling as action rather than passive sympathy.

In *Untouchable*, Anand dramatizes this transformation through Bakha’s exposure to reformist ideas. Gandhi’s speech in the novel represents a pedagogical turning point:

I34 regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. If I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them. (Anand, 1935/2014, pp. 144–145).

In classroom discourse, this scene can serve as an example of dialogic awakening—where emotion (Bakha’s reverence and confusion) intersects with political consciousness. Giroux (2020, p. 47) asserts that critical pedagogy must engage affect to humanize social critique; it is this merging of feeling and ethics that transforms understanding into social agency.

Dalit literature emerges as a counter-discourse to dominant upper-caste narratives, reclaiming emotion as political language. Limbale (2004) and Dangle (1992) view Dalit writing as the transformation of pain into collective assertion—a process echoed in Anand’s early humanist fiction. Although *Untouchable* predates the formal Dalit literary movement, it anticipates its ethos by representing caste through empathy rather than pity. Bakha’s internal voice—“*They think we are dirt because we clean their dirt*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 2)—encapsulates the affective consciousness that later Dalit writers theorize as “embodied protest” (Rege, 2013, p. 121).

Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* (1936/2014, p. 53) provides philosophical grounding to this sentiment, exposing caste as an emotional as well as structural system of dehumanization. Postcolonial theorists such as Spivak (1988, p. 294), Bhabha (1994), and Said (1978) similarly interrogate voice and representation, urging educators to ask who can speak within the literary canon. Spivak’s notion of the “subaltern” directly resonates with Bakha’s silenced subjectivity—

his inability to articulate injustice even as he feels it viscerally. As Anand writes, “*Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed*” (1935/2014, p. 39). For English education, this is not merely literature but an entry point into the politics of voice, silence, and empathy.

Aesthetic education connects the emotional and ethical capacities of art to transformative learning. Dewey (1934, p. 59) describes art as “experience”—a fusion of perception, imagination, and emotion that provokes reflection. Greene (1995, p. 38) adds that aesthetic encounters can awaken moral imagination and social responsibility. Anand’s realism exemplifies this synthesis of art and ethics.

He sighted the temple, a colossal, huge turreted structure of massive stone... some unknown force made the place too heavy to breathe in. (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 49).

This passage blends sensory description with moral contradiction—the grandeur of religion set against Bakha’s exclusion. As Beaumont (2007, p. 66) notes, aesthetic experience in such texts “discomforts the privileged gaze” by exposing the beauty and pain of human struggle. Lukács’s (1964) concept of “critical realism” finds embodiment here: Anand’s art renders oppression emotionally intelligible, turning form into an ethical encounter.

In teaching contexts, such moments foster what Noddings (2013, p. 45) calls “ethical caring”—a recognition of the other’s humanity through emotion. Students not only interpret literary structure but also experience empathy as an aesthetic practice.

Research on empathy in education emphasizes its multidimensional role in shaping ethical learners. Hoffman (2000, p. 72) identifies empathy as the bridge between moral cognition and compassionate action. Rogers (1969) and Noddings (2013) regard it as the foundation of humane pedagogy. Contemporary studies confirm that empathy can be intentionally cultivated through reflective discussion, narrative immersion, and dialogic learning (Decety & Ickes, 2009, p. 95; Bachen et al., 2012).

Anand’s *Untouchable* offers educators a text that operationalizes these theories. The protagonist’s oscillation between humiliation and hope mirrors students’ own affective growth. After hearing Gandhi, Bakha contemplates: “*That machine which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it... I wonder what it is like?*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 155). Here technological reform symbolizes moral imagination—suggesting that empathy must extend into social innovation. For Indian classrooms, this aligns with activist pedagogies promoting justice and inclusion (Sarangapani, 2018, p. 34).

Across these strands, the reviewed literature reveals a convergence between empathy studies, affect theory, and critical pedagogy, yet few works integrate these perspectives in the teaching of Indian English texts addressing caste. While global research validates the relationship between literature and empathy (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 92; Keen, 2007), and educational theorists endorse affective learning (Zembylas, 2020; Boler, 1999), there remains limited attention to how these frameworks localize within the Indian sociocultural matrix. This gap justifies the present study’s *Affective–Aesthetic–Activist Framework*, which unites affect theory, aesthetic education,

and critical pedagogy to reimagine English literature teaching as an empathic, ethical, and socially responsive practice.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in a triadic framework that unites Affective Theory, Aesthetic Education, and Activist Pedagogy to conceptualize empathy-driven English classrooms. Termed the *Affective–Aesthetic–Activist (AAA) Model*, this framework integrates emotion, art, and social transformation as interdependent dimensions of learning. It assumes that the teaching of literature is not merely cognitive or interpretive but also affective, imaginative, and ethical—a process that prepares learners to engage critically and compassionately with the world.

The first pillar, the *affective dimension*, draws on affect theory and emotion studies. Affect theory challenges the Cartesian separation between reason and feeling, insisting that emotion is not antithetical to knowledge but constitutive of it (Ahmed, 2004, p. 9; Massumi, 2002, p. 28). As Ahmed (2004) notes, emotions “stick” to bodies, words, and ideas, circulating through social relations and shaping ethical orientations. Within education, affect becomes the undercurrent that determines how students experience, resist, or internalize knowledge (Zembylas, 2015, p. 74; Zembylas, 2020).

In literature pedagogy, affective engagement enables learners to inhabit the emotional worlds of texts, transforming reading into an embodied act of empathy (Keen, 2007, p. 112). Anand’s *Untouchable* functions precisely in this way—its affective power lies in rendering humiliation, shame, and hope as palpable experiences. When Bakha is publicly insulted — “*Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin! ... Do you know you have touched me and defiled me?*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 38)—the reader encounters the raw intensity of caste as emotion. Such scenes compel learners to confront how injustice is felt, not just known.

The novel’s emotional density also invites introspection. Bakha’s internal conflict— “*Why was I so humble? I could have struck him!*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 46)—illustrates what Ahmed (2004) calls the “circulation of affect,” where social structures inscribe themselves on the body through feeling. Boler’s (1999) *pedagogy of discomfort* links directly to this insight, arguing that moral unease can open reflective spaces for growth. When students discuss such moments, discomfort over caste or privilege is not pedagogical failure but a site of affective transformation.

Moreover, Anand gives emotion moral complexity rather than sentimentality. “*He worked away earnestly, quickly, without loss of effort; though his job was dirty, he remained comparatively clean*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 8). Here, labor and dignity coexist, challenging binary notions of purity and pollution. Within the AAA framework, such affective reading develops self-awareness, ethical sensitivity, and intercultural understanding—core capacities of empathic learning.

The *aesthetic dimension* of the AAA model is rooted in theories of art and education that position imagination at the center of human growth. Dewey (1934, p. 59) conceptualized art as an experiential process uniting perception and emotion into meaning, while Greene (1995, p. 37; 2001) argued that aesthetic experience “releases the imagination,” allowing individuals to perceive

the world as alterable rather than fixed. For Biesta (2010, p. 45), such experience transforms learning from mechanical memorization into reflective creation.

Anand's (1935/2014) *Untouchable* exemplifies this union of art and ethics through its realist aesthetics. The novel opens with a cinematic sweep of the outcaste colony — “a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together ... outside their boundaries and separate from them” (p. 1)—immediately situating readers within a world of sensory exclusion. Later, Bakha's gaze toward the temple captures the tension between beauty and oppression:

He sighted the temple, a colossal, huge turreted structure of massive stone... some unknown force made the place too heavy to breathe in. (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 49)

This aesthetic rendering of sacred architecture juxtaposed with social exclusion exemplifies Lukács's (1964) “critical realism,” in which art exposes contradiction to reveal truth. For students, such description turns abstract injustice into perceivable form—what Nussbaum (1990, p. 94) terms the “moral imagination.”

By emphasizing aesthetic engagement, the AAA model resists both moral didacticism and emotional manipulation. It cultivates *reflective empathy*—a response mediated by aesthetic distance. Greene (1995, p. 41) notes that art's ethical value lies not in prescribing virtue but in awakening perception. In this framework, reading *Untouchable* becomes an imaginative act of recognition that refines moral reasoning while deepening appreciation for literary craft and beauty. The moment when Bakha contemplates literacy— “*How nice it must be to be able to read and write!*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 35)—links artistic aspiration with moral longing, exemplifying how aesthetic desire becomes a route to ethical vision.

The *activist dimension* derives from traditions of critical pedagogy and social-justice education. Freire's (1970/2000, p. 66) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* defines education as *conscientização*—developing critical awareness through dialogue and reflection. bell hooks (1994, p. 13; 2010) expands this by envisioning teaching as an act of love and resistance: “education as the practice of freedom.” Both thinkers emphasize that emotion and ethics must merge in transformative praxis.

In literary instruction, this activist orientation positions texts like *Untouchable* as instruments of social critique. Anand fuses emotional intensity with reformist vision. Gandhi's words near the novel's end articulate empathy as action:

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism.... If I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows and sufferings. (Anand, 1935/2014, pp. 144–145)

Here, feeling evolves into ethical commitment. In classrooms, students can analyze this speech not only for historical significance but as an affective template for civic empathy. Giroux (2020, p. 47) argues that critical pedagogy must humanize politics through feeling—transforming empathy into the capacity for action.

Anand closes the novel with an even more radical gesture of activism. A modernist poet proposes technological reform as salvation: “*Introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone*

having to handle it—the flush system” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 148). The shift from divine redemption to material progress embodies Freire’s notion of praxis—reflection followed by concrete transformation. For learners, this moment signifies that social change requires both compassion and innovation.

In the Indian context, where caste and class inequalities still mark educational spaces (Kumar, 1991; Nambissan, 2010, p. 118), the activist pillar of the AAA model becomes especially urgent. The English classroom can serve, as hooks (1994, p. 36) calls it, a “transgressive space” where marginalized voices are centered and dominant assumptions interrogated. Teaching *Untouchable* in English, the language of privilege, becomes a political act that subverts hierarchy by articulating Dalit experience in the colonizer’s tongue.

Though distinct, the affective, aesthetic, and activist dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Emotion without aesthetic mediation risks sentimentality; aesthetics without activism lapses into formalism; activism without affect degenerates into ideology (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p. 121; Nussbaum, 2010, p. 102). The AAA model therefore conceptualizes *empathy* as the nexus that binds these strands.

Within this triadic interaction, literature pedagogy follows a cyclical rhythm—a movement from feeling, to imagining, to acting. Students first encounter the emotional reality of a text (affective engagement); they then analyze how narrative form constructs that reality (aesthetic reflection); and finally, they connect textual insight to ethical awareness and civic responsibility (activist response). This continuum transforms reading into praxis—linking Dewey’s (1934) experiential learning with Freire’s (1970/2000) philosophy of reflection-in-action.

Anand’s closing image of Bakha pondering modernity encapsulates this cycle: “*That machine which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it... I wonder what it is like?*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 155). The passage fuses emotion (hope), imagination (curiosity), and activism (the dream of social reform). For students, it models how empathic insight can evolve into a vision of justice.

Applying the AAA framework to *Untouchable* allows for a holistic reading that merges emotional literacy with ethical activism. The affective dimension interprets Bakha’s experiences as emotional texts that make caste oppression a *felt* structure. The aesthetic dimension examines how Anand’s realist form mediates empathy through imagery and rhythm. The activist dimension, finally, repositions classroom learning as civic participation, encouraging students to challenge inequality beyond the text.

No god is needed to rescue the Untouchables... simply and solely—the flush system.
(Anand, 1935/2014, p. 148)

This line embodies the AAA ethos: emotion (the yearning for dignity), aesthetics (the clarity of expression), and activism (the demand for material justice) converge into a single pedagogical insight.

By integrating these three perspectives, the framework envisions empathic learning as a transformative educational practice. It reclaims the humanities as spaces for cultivating not only

linguistic and analytical skills but also ethical imagination and social commitment. Teaching *Untouchable* through the Affective–Aesthetic–Activist lens thus transforms the English classroom into an arena of humanization—where feeling becomes understanding, understanding becomes reflection, and reflection leads to action.

Method

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design grounded in the *Affective–Aesthetic–Activist (AAA) Framework* to explore how literature can foster empathy and social awareness in English education. The methodology combines textual analysis of Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935/2014) with pedagogical reflection and classroom-based simulation, integrating literary interpretation and educational praxis. Following affect theory, aesthetic education, and critical pedagogy, the orientation is hermeneutic, participatory, and reflective.

The research follows an interpretivist paradigm that views knowledge as both socially and emotionally constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 57). Within this framework, qualitative inquiry facilitates a deep exploration of the emotional, ethical, and social meanings embedded in literary texts and pedagogical interactions. The selection of *Untouchable* is motivated by its affective and ethical richness—a narrative that dramatizes caste, humiliation, and dignity in ways that evoke both emotional resonance and moral reflection (Anand, 1935/2014; Limbale, 2004, p. 18)

Anand’s realism captures the minute details of suffering:

The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink ... an ‘uncongenial’ place to live in. (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 2)

Such sensory imagery situates oppression in material as well as emotional space, making the novel ideal for exploring empathic pedagogy.

The design consists of two interconnected phases: (a) *Textual–Affective Analysis* — a close reading of *Untouchable* focusing on emotional representation, narrative voice, and aesthetic form; and (b) *Pedagogical Application* — a simulated classroom model using the text to design empathy-based learning aligned with the AAA framework. Together, these phases embody Freire’s (1970/2000, p. 79) notion of *praxis*—the fusion of reflection and action directed toward humanization.

Research Questions

1. How does *Untouchable* construct affective experiences of caste and oppression through its literary form?
2. In what ways can these affective dimensions be harnessed pedagogically to foster empathy and critical consciousness?
3. How does the AAA Framework inform the design of empathic and socially engaged pedagogy?

The primary text is Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935/2014, Penguin Classics edition). Secondary data include theoretical works on affect (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi, 2002, 2015), empathy and literature (Keen, 2007; Nussbaum, 1997), aesthetic pedagogy (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994). Dalit literature and caste studies (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Limbale, 2004; Rege, 2013) contextualize the pedagogical purpose within social justice education.

To illustrate textual density, consider Anand's portrayal of Bakha's daily humiliation:

Get up, oh you Bakhya, you son of a pig,' came his father's voice, rough with authority and habit. (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 4)

The immediacy of such language grounds the emotional realism that this study analyzes.

Phase 1: Affective Analysis

Using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the text was examined for emotionally charged moments—Bakha's encounters with the priest, his shame, and his yearning for dignity. Inductive coding identified patterns such as humiliation, compassion, anger, and hope, interpreted through affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Zembylas, 2015).

Anand captures affect as contagion: "*Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed*" (1935/2014, p. 39). Here, bodily paralysis mirrors emotional silencing. In classroom translation, such passages encourage students to analyze how emotion circulates through language, gesture, and power—what Ahmed (2004, p. 14) calls "the stickiness of affect."

Another key moment depicts resistance through feeling: "*They think we are dirt because we clean their dirt*" (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 2). This reflexive anger is pedagogically productive; it helps students differentiate empathy from pity by recognizing structural emotion.

Phase 2: Aesthetic Interpretation

The second phase involved close reading of narrative techniques—point of view, stream-of-consciousness, sensory imagery, and spatial symbolism—to reveal how Anand's realism constructs emotional knowledge. Lukács's (1964) concept of "critical realism" and Dewey's (1934, p. 61) notion of art as experience informed this analysis.

For example, Anand's aesthetic rendering of space turns visual detail into moral commentary:

He sighted the temple, a colossal, huge turreted structure of massive stone... some unknown force made the place too heavy to breathe in. (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 49)

The temple scene contrasts grandeur and exclusion, showing how aesthetics can embody ethics. The study interprets such stylistic choices as pedagogical devices—tools through which learners encounter injustice not abstractly but through felt perception. Greene (1995, p. 38) argues that aesthetic imagination "opens the space for seeing the world otherwise"; Anand's text performs precisely that function.

Phase 3: Activist Pedagogical Mapping

The final phase translated textual and emotional insights into hypothetical classroom strategies derived from Freire's (1970/2000) dialogic pedagogy and hooks's (1994, 2010) engaged teaching. Four empathy-centered activities were designed:

- Reflective Journaling: Students articulate emotional responses to key scenes such as Bakha's humiliation or Gandhi's speech.
- Dialogic Circles: Guided conversations addressing caste, dignity, and inclusion.
- Creative Reimagination: Rewriting pivotal scenes from alternate perspectives—e.g., Sohini's or the priest's.
- Critical Connection Tasks: Linking Bakha's experiences with present-day inequalities.

Each aligns with AAA phases: affective (*feeling*), aesthetic (*interpreting*), and activist (*acting*).

Gandhi's speech offers a model for linking empathy to civic awareness:

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism.... If I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable. (Anand, 1935/2014, pp. 144–145)

Students can critically debate this reformist empathy—does it empower or sentimentalize? Such inquiry cultivates reflective activism.

Triangulation strengthened validity by drawing from multiple sources: textual evidence, theory, and pedagogical simulation. Reflexivity was maintained through acknowledgment of the researcher's dual identity as reader and educator (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Analytical memos and iterative reading cycles enhanced interpretive depth, while peer debriefing ensured thematic reliability.

The methodology's interpretive rigor rests in depth rather than quantity (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 153). Bakha's quiet dignity—“*He worked away earnestly ... though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 8)—illustrates how textual minutiae sustain qualitative richness.

Although conceptual, the study foregrounds ethical sensitivity. Discussions of caste may evoke discomfort or distress; following Boler & Zembylas (2003, p. 117), such discomfort is approached as pedagogically productive when managed within care-oriented dialogue. The model promotes empathy without voyeurism and critique without superiority. In simulated applications, anonymity and respect for voice are paramount.

Hooks's (1994, p. 39) “ethics of care” guides facilitation, ensuring that emotional honesty coexists with academic rigor. When students read Bakha's realization—“*That machine which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it... I wonder what it is like?*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 155)—they experience hope as an ethical emotion, connecting affect with transformation.

The study acknowledges limitations: it is theoretical rather than empirically implemented, and emotional responses to literature vary across cultures and contexts (Zembylas, 2020, p. 142). Future research could include classroom-based studies mapping students' affective responses or

journaling reflections. Still, the conceptual rigor of the AAA model provides a transferable pedagogical blueprint.

Integrating interpretive literary analysis with pedagogical imagination, the study demonstrates how *Untouchable* can catalyze emotional literacy and ethical learning. Its affective dimension invites feeling, its aesthetic form cultivates imagination, and its activist resonance demands action. As Anand concludes,

No god is needed to rescue the Untouchables... simply and solely—the flush system. (1935/2014, p. 148)

This statement epitomizes praxis: emotion (hope), reflection (insight), and activism (change) converge. The methodology thus operationalizes the AAA framework as both interpretive lens and pedagogical model—reclaiming literature as a humanizing force in English education.

Discussion

At the heart of *Untouchable* lies an affective landscape that captures the embodied experience of caste through the emotions of humiliation, shame, longing, and compassion. Bakha's life is mediated through affect; his consciousness is marked by sensations of disgust and yearning for dignity. Ahmed's (2004, p. 11) concept of *affective economies*—how emotions circulate and bind social hierarchies—illuminates how caste operates not only through law and ritual but also through feeling. When Bakha is publicly humiliated for “polluting” a caste Hindu, Anand (1935/2014) constructs tension through repetition, rhythm, and imagery:

Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin! ... Do you know you have touched me and defiled me? (p. 38).

The reader experiences Bakha's shame and outrage not as abstract knowledge but as visceral empathy. This affective encounter exemplifies what Keen (2007, p. 112) calls *narrative empathy*—the imaginative entry into another's emotional world. Yet the empathy generated here is not sentimental identification; it is discomfiting and self-reflexive. Boler (1999, p. 176) warns that empathy in education must avoid emotional consumption, where privileged readers merely “feel for” the oppressed without examining their complicity. Instead, she advocates a *pedagogy of discomfort*, transforming unease into ethical reflection. In classroom practice, teachers can guide students to explore their affective responses—*What did you feel?*—and contextualize them within structures of caste and power—*Why did you feel it?* (Zembylas, 2015, p. 73).

Foregrounding affect destabilizes the neutrality of conventional literary study. In affect-mapping exercises, learners annotate moments of despair, tenderness, or defiance, recognizing emotion as both personal and political knowledge. Nussbaum (1997, p. 85) argues that moral education must engage emotion if it is to cultivate judgment. Bakha's inner monologue—“*Why was I so humble? I could have struck him!*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 46)—invites readers to inhabit moral contradiction, transforming sympathy into self-interrogation.

The aesthetic power of *Untouchable* derives from its realism and humanist vision. Influenced by European modernism and Gandhian ethics, Anand merges artistic craft with moral purpose (Beaumont, 2007, p. 64; Limbale, 2004). Through stream-of-consciousness narration and rhythmic prose, he creates what Dewey (1934, p. 59) calls “art as experience”—a unity of perception and emotion that transforms consciousness.

The novel’s single-day structure heightens intensity and underscores the cyclicity of oppression. The street, temple, and latrine become affective geographies mapping segregation onto space. Lukács’s (1964) *critical realism* resonates here: art exposes contradiction by revealing lived experience as historical reality. Anand’s sensory detail exemplifies this:

He worked away earnestly, quickly, without loss of effort; though his job was dirty, he remained comparatively clean. (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 8).

Such moments aestheticize dignity within degradation, transforming filth into moral beauty. In classroom analysis, students can examine how Anand’s syntax and imagery embody emotion, learning that style itself conveys ethics.

Greene (1995, p. 38; 2001) maintains that aesthetic engagement “releases the imagination,” inviting learners to perceive the world as unfinished and improvable. When readers encounter Bakha’s wonder at literacy—“*How nice it must be to be able to read and write!*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 35)—they witness aspiration as aesthetic experience, where imagination becomes a mode of freedom.

Moreover, Anand’s realism resists ornamental beauty. His prose finds elegance in moral rawness: “*The sweeper is worse off than a slave ... born into a state from which he cannot escape*” (Anand, 1935/2014, Preface 3). This aligns with Nussbaum’s (2010, p. 94) defense of the humanities—art’s civic value lies in humanizing suffering. Thus, aesthetic study becomes moral inquiry, affirming that beauty and justice are inseparable.

The activist dimension of the AAA framework transforms affective and aesthetic insights into praxis. Freire’s (1970/2000, p. 79) *conscientização*—critical awareness through dialogue—underpins this transition. Reading *Untouchable* encourages students to connect the emotional experience of caste with questions of equity and responsibility. bell hooks (1994, p. 14) frames teaching as “the practice of freedom,” demanding that education engage both intellect and heart. Within this framework, *Untouchable* becomes a catalyst for ethical conversation.

Teachers might employ dialogic circles where learners discuss parallels between Bakha’s world and present-day discrimination. When Bakha’s sister Sohini faces harassment at the temple—“*‘You bitch!’ shouted the priest ... ‘I will show you how to insult one old enough to be your mother.’*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 54)—students confront gendered caste violence and explore empathy as collective resistance. Giroux (2020, p. 47) asserts that emotion in pedagogy must translate into civic agency; such readings foster that shift.

Emotion, in this activist frame, becomes a starting point for reflection and transformation. Students may design creative responses—journals, performances, or visual art—that link affect to social critique, echoing hooks’s (2010, p. 97) call for praxis-based learning. In India’s stratified

classrooms, this approach challenges the supposed neutrality of English, using the colonial language to articulate marginalized voices (Mukherjee, 2016; Nambissan, 2010, p. 119). *Untouchable* thus reclaims English as a language of empathy and dissent.

While each dimension of the AAA model can stand alone, their transformative potential emerges through synergy. Emotion (affect) generates awareness; form (aesthetics) gives it structure; reflection (activism) turns it into ethical agency. The cycle—*feeling, interpreting, acting*—redefines literary study as moral practice.

This interrelation unfolds in three pedagogical movements. First, Affective Encounter: students engage emotionally with Bakha's humiliation and longing, perhaps through journaling or annotation. Second, Aesthetic Reflection: they analyze how Anand's narrative form produces those emotions—the rhythm of his prose, the imagery of dirt and light. Finally, Activist Response: learners relate textual insight to contemporary inequities, proposing creative or civic actions.

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism.... If I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable. (Anand, 1935/2014, pp. 144–145)

This speech, when discussed critically, links emotion to ethics, demonstrating how empathy can become solidarity. Dewey's (1934) experiential cycle and Freire's (1970/2000) praxis converge here: reflection and action transform feeling into learning.

Implementing the AAA model in classrooms carries both promise and complexity. Emotional engagement, as Zembylas (2020, p. 146) and Boler (1999) note, requires sensitive facilitation. Conversations about caste or privilege may evoke discomfort or guilt, yet these reactions can deepen understanding when guided constructively. Teachers must balance affective intensity with reflective distance so that empathy empowers rather than pities (Verducci, 2000, p. 89).

Institutional constraints—exam-centric curricula, limited time, large classes—often hinder dialogic pedagogy (Kumar, 1991, p. 42). Still, modest interventions such as reflective writing or collaborative reading can embed AAA principles without disrupting syllabi. When Bakha contemplates reform—“*That machine which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it ... I wonder what it is like?*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 155)—students glimpse empathy evolving into imagination and, potentially, into action.

The model's adaptability is its strength: applicable in literature, language, or interdisciplinary courses, it aligns with Biesta's (2010, p. 23) call for education that cultivates “ethical subjectivity” rather than rote knowledge.

The analysis shows that Anand's *Untouchable* exemplifies the pedagogical convergence of emotion, art, and justice. Its affective realism evokes empathy; its aesthetic structure nurtures imagination; and its activist impulse inspires reflection and agency. Within the AAA model, literature teaching moves from cognition to compassion, from comprehension to commitment.

Noddings (2013, p. 44) and Rogers (1969) emphasize care and authenticity as the foundation of humane education. By guiding students to *feel, analyze, and act*, teachers can build what hooks

(1994, p. 37) calls “a community of learners”—spaces where emotional honesty coexists with intellectual rigor.

No god is needed to rescue the Untouchables ... simply and solely—the flush system.
(Anand, 1935/2014, p. 148)

This pragmatic line encapsulates the novel’s moral imagination: salvation emerges not from faith but from empathy enacted through reason and reform.

Ultimately, *Untouchable* and the AAA framework together affirm Freire’s (1970/2000, p. 80) vision of education for liberation—learning that transforms both consciousness and community. The affective, aesthetic, and activist dimensions converge to make English education not only a site of linguistic or literary study but an arena for ethical becoming.

Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of this study arise from applying the Affective–Aesthetic–Activist (AAA) Framework to the teaching of Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935/2014). The framework reimagines English classrooms as affective and ethical spaces where literature is not only studied as art but also experienced as an instrument of empathy, critical reflection, and social justice. What follows outlines how the three components— affective, aesthetic, and activist—can be implemented pedagogically, and what they imply for teacher roles, learner development, and curriculum design.

A central implication of the AAA model is the recognition of emotion as epistemic—a legitimate mode of knowing (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11; Zembylas, 2015, p. 73). Conventional classrooms often treat emotion as subjective or disruptive while privileging cognition as the site of learning. Research in affective education, however, demonstrates that engaging students’ feelings deepens cognitive and ethical understanding (Boler, 1999, p. 176; Zembylas, 2020, p. 146). With *Untouchable*, teachers can deliberately invite affective responses to Bakha’s suffering—anger, sadness, discomfort, empathy—as starting points for inquiry. When Bakha is publicly shamed—*“Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin! ... Do you know you have touched me and defiled me?”* (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 38)—the classroom can pause to ask what is being felt and why it circulates socially (Ahmed, 2004, p. 9).

Teachers may incorporate reflective journaling or emotion mapping after key scenes, prompting learners to articulate feelings and connect them to broader structures of caste and power. For example, following the temple episode—*“He sighted the temple, a colossal, huge turreted structure ... some unknown force made the place too heavy to breathe in”* (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 49)—students can analyze how awe and exclusion co-exist, then relate this tension to access and belonging in their own institutions. Such practices cultivate emotional literacy and the moral imagination (Keen, 2007; Nussbaum, 1997, p. 85).

Acknowledging emotion humanizes the learning process and aligns with hooks’s (1994, p. 13) engaged pedagogy, which integrates mind and heart. As learners recognize that their feelings matter in academic discourse, participation becomes more authentic and dialogic. Affective

pedagogy thus redefines success not as reproducing analysis but as developing compassionate understanding.

The aesthetic dimension positions literature as a site of moral imagination and creative interpretation (Dewey, 1934, p. 59; Greene, 1995, p. 38). Pedagogically, this means going beyond theme-spotting to show *how* artistic form generates ethical meaning. Close reading for affect—tracking diction, rhythm, point of view, and imagery—reveals how language embodies power and exclusion (Lukács, 1964; Beaumont, 2007, p. 66). Consider the novel’s stark spatial opening: “*The outcastes’ colony was a group of mud-walled houses ... outside their boundaries and separate from them*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 1). The sentence’s compressed syntax performs segregation, turning setting into social argument.

Teachers can scaffold form-to-ethics analysis with targeted mini-tasks:

- Identify repetitions that carry emotional weight (e.g., street calls of defilement).
- Track metaphors of dirt/cleanliness—“*though his job was dirty, he remained comparatively clean*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 8)—and debate how purity is socially produced.
- Surface interiority through free indirect discourse—“*Why was I so humble? I could have struck him!*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 46)—to examine moral conflict.

Aesthetic engagement can also expand via creative pedagogy. Students might compose brief persona-poems from Sohini’s voice, perform dramatic readings of the street scene, or storyboard the single-day narrative arc. Such activities embody Greene’s (2001) notion of imaginative freedom and nurture what Noddings (2013, p. 45) calls ethical caring—an empathy enacted through imaginative connection.

The activist pillar emphasizes that empathy must translate into ethical and civic action. Drawing on Freire’s (1970/2000, p. 79) dialogic pedagogy and hooks’s (2010, p. 95) practical wisdom, the goal is not only to interpret the world but to transform it. Literature classrooms can host culture circles where students co-create knowledge, interrogate assumptions, and practice accountable listening. After reading Gandhi’s reformist appeal—

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism.... If I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable (Anand, 1935/2014, pp. 144–145)

—learners can debate the ethics of identification: Does such rhetoric empower solidarity or risk sentimentalizing pain? Framed carefully, these dialogues cultivate what Giroux (2020, p. 47) terms critical citizenship.

Assignments that extend learning beyond the classroom—reflective essays, collaborative digital projects, or community-facing artifacts (e.g., awareness posters, podcasts)—align with Biesta’s (2010, p. 23) “beautiful risk of education.” Crucially, the activist pedagogy proposed here is not prescriptive; it invites context-sensitive responses to empathy. The novel itself models pragmatic reform when the modernist poet proposes: “*Introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone having to handle it—the flush system*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 148). Linking affect to infrastructural change teaches students to imagine material pathways for justice.

In Indian contexts, where caste discussions remain sensitive, facilitation must balance safety with rigor. Boler and Zembylas (2003, p. 117) recommend pedagogical safety—establishing norms that acknowledge discomfort while preventing harm. Teachers can co-create ground rules emphasizing empathy, confidentiality, and nonjudgmental listening. When Sohini is harassed—“*Bitch, why don't you speak! ... I will show you how to insult one old enough to be your mother.*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 54)—the class can surface and process anger without voyeurism, asking how gender and caste intersect and how classrooms can resist replicating such dynamics.

Implementing affective and activist pedagogies requires that teachers reconceptualize their roles—from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of reflection. As hooks (1994, p. 39) argues, educators themselves must engage emotionally and ethically with the material. Professional learning should therefore include affective literacy, dialogic methods, and culturally responsive teaching (Zembylas, 2020, p. 149). Peer workshops and interdisciplinary collaborations (e.g., with social science faculty) can strengthen capacity to balance empathy with critique.

At the curricular level, the AAA framework supports integrated humanistic education. Syllabi can foreground emotion, ethics, and justice alongside linguistic aims. Including texts like *Untouchable* in English courses subverts the historic association of English with privilege by articulating Dalit experience in the language of power (Mukherjee, 2016). Learning outcomes should explicitly include empathic communication, ethical reasoning, and critical self-reflection.

Assessment can track not only analytic skill but also growth in ethical imagination. Mixed-evidence portfolios might combine a close-reading analysis with a reflective journal and a small public-facing artifact. After Bakha's aspiration—“*How nice it must be to be able to read and write!*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 35)—students could design brief literacy advocacy messages linking the scene to contemporary access issues. Similarly, the novel's concluding wonder—“*That machine which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it ... I wonder what it is like?*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 155)—can anchor speculative prompts where learners propose realistic, dignity-enhancing interventions on campus or in community.

Institutional constraints—time pressure, exam-centric policies, large class sizes—can limit dialogic depth (Kumar, 1991, p. 41). Even so, small moves integrate AAA principles without curricular disruption: five-minute affect check-ins; exit tickets naming one ethical question raised by the day's passage; or rotating student facilitators for micro-dialogues. Over time, such moves normalize emotional honesty with intellectual rigor.

Ultimately, the implications extend beyond a single text. The AAA framework models transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), where emotion, imagination, and action converge to reshape worldviews. Through *Untouchable*, students learn not only about caste but also about human dignity and compassion. The teacher's role is to facilitate this moral encounter—helping learners move from feeling Bakha's pain to understanding its structures and, finally, to acting toward justice in their spheres. As Anand's preface insists, “*The sweeper is worse off than a slave ... born into a state from which he cannot escape*” (1935/2014, Preface p. 3); the classroom must therefore become a place where such states are named, felt, and challenged.

This pedagogy reaffirms the humanities' moral purpose amid utilitarian pressures (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 94). It transforms English classrooms into spaces of empathy, dialogue, and critical hope—what hooks (1994, p. 37) calls “communities of care.” By uniting affect, aesthetics, and activism, the AAA framework offers a replicable model for socially conscious literary education. Or, as Anand's narrator puts it, even in degradation, dignity persists: “*He worked away earnestly ... though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean*” (1935/2014, p. 8). That paradox—of pain and poise—becomes the ethical horizon of teaching literature for justice.

Conclusion

This study has sought to reimagine English education through the lens of emotion, ethics, and social engagement, using Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935/2014) as a paradigmatic text. By employing the Affective–Aesthetic–Activist (AAA) Framework, the research has demonstrated that literature can serve as more than linguistic art—it can become a medium of moral imagination, critical reflection, and transformative learning. The framework's three interdependent dimensions—*affective* (emotion as knowledge), *aesthetic* (imagination and form), and *activist* (education as ethical praxis)—collectively redefine the purpose of literary study as a humanizing and emancipatory practice.

The analysis revealed that Anand's realism transcends documentation; it constructs what Lukács (1964) called *critical realism*, an art that unmask contradictions through feeling. The novel's affective texture—its portrayal of shame, compassion, and longing—invites readers into Bakha's consciousness. When the protagonist is cursed—“*Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin! ... Do you know you have touched me and defiled me?*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 38)—readers confront humiliation not as spectacle but as shared emotion.

Ahmed (2004) and Zembylas (2015, p. 73) remind us that emotion is inherently political, shaping ethical perception. Anand's prose enacts this claim:

He worked away earnestly ... though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean.
(Anand, 1935/2014, p. 8)

Dignity here becomes aesthetic resistance, revealing how feeling mediates ethics. In Dewey's (1934, p. 59) terms, art fuses emotion and perception; *Untouchable* thus functions as a sensory education in empathy.

Pedagogically, the framework reimagines classrooms as sites of ethical dialogue and affective learning. Drawing on Freire (1970/2000, p. 79) and hooks (1994, p. 13), teaching becomes a *practice of freedom*—an awakening rather than transmission.

The affective dimension cultivates emotional literacy through reflective writing and discussion. For example, after the temple scene—“*He sighted the temple ... some unknown force made the place too heavy to breathe in*” (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 49)—students can explore how awe and exclusion intertwine, linking their feelings to social hierarchies.

The aesthetic dimension invites interpretive sensitivity through close reading and creative response. When Bakha reflects—“*How nice it must be to be able to read and write!*” (p. 35)—the classroom can examine literacy as both narrative motif and ethical metaphor. Through such exercises, learners internalize empathy as a mode of knowing.

The activist dimension channels these insights into civic awareness. Gandhi’s proclamation—

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism.... If I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an Untouchable. (Anand, 1935/2014, pp. 144–145)

—embodies empathy transformed into public conscience. Students may respond by creating awareness projects or reflective essays that connect textual emotion to contemporary injustices. In Freirean terms, emotion becomes praxis: reflection leading to action.

Beyond *Untouchable*, the AAA framework offers a replicable model for any text that exposes social inequity or human vulnerability. In Indian classrooms, it disrupts the perceived neutrality of English education, reclaiming English as a language of inclusion and justice (Mukherjee, 2016). When learners engage with a Dalit narrative in the colonizer’s tongue, they invert linguistic hierarchy: the subaltern speaks, and the privileged listen.

They think we are dirt because we clean their dirt. (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 2)

Through this line, students recognize that empathy must confront power rather than erase it. The AAA approach thereby aligns with Nussbaum’s (2010, p. 94) defense of the humanities as essential to democratic life—cultivating citizens who feel responsibly and think compassionately.

Although primarily conceptual, this study lays groundwork for empirical research. Future projects could implement the AAA framework in classrooms through reflective journals, focus groups, or affective-response mapping. Such studies would clarify how emotion-centered pedagogy influences moral reasoning, intercultural understanding, and social engagement. Comparative inquiries across cultures could test how affective learning adapts to diverse sociopolitical contexts.

Ultimately, the Affective–Aesthetic–Activist approach affirms that education must engage the heart as fully as the mind. When *Untouchable* is taught through this lens, students encounter caste not as history but as human feeling; they perceive the ethical urgency of dignity. Anand’s closing vision of progress captures this transformation:

No god is needed to rescue the Untouchables ... simply and solely—the flush system. (Anand, 1935/2014, p. 148)

This pragmatic utopia fuses empathy with invention, symbolizing how understanding can materialize as justice. In Noddings’ (2013, p. 44) and Rogers’ (1969) humanistic terms, such learning nurtures *authentic care*—the bridge between emotion and action.

By guiding students from feeling to reflection to ethical engagement, the AAA framework restores literature’s timeless task: to help us sense the humanity of others and act upon that recognition. *Untouchable*, read in this way, becomes not only a narrative of oppression but a pedagogy of hope—transforming English education into what hooks (1994, p. 37) called a *community of care*.

In an age fragmented by indifference, this integration of affect, aesthetics, and activism reminds us that to teach literature is, ultimately, to teach compassion.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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