

**Yearning and the Human Psyche: Unfulfilled Desire,
Memory, and Moral Conflict in Anand's Short Stories**

By

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DOI Number: <https://literaturechronicle.com/doi-2026-55666>**Abstract**

Human desire, particularly when left unfulfilled, occupies a complex psychological space where longing, memory, and moral consciousness converge, shaping both individual identity and ethical judgment (Freud, 1923/1961; Maslow, 1943). This chapter, 'Yearning and the Human Psyche: Unfulfilled Desire, Memory, and Moral Conflict in Anand's Short Stories' explores how deprivation and unresolved yearning operate within the inner lives of characters in Mulk Raj Anand's short stories *The Tamarind Tree* (1966), *The Silver Bangles* (1934), and *The Thief* (1934). The study is guided by the central research question: how do unfulfilled desires influence psychological conflict, moral decision-making, and identity formation in Anand's short fiction?

Methodologically, the chapter adopts a qualitative textual approach, employing close reading and thematic analysis informed by literary psychology and social realism. Drawing on psychoanalytic conceptions of desire and lack (Freud, 1923/1961) alongside motivational theory concerning unmet human needs (Maslow, 1943), the analysis examines the intersection of desire with memory, class, and ethical consciousness. In *The Tamarind Tree*, nostalgic longing reveals how memory sustains desire and shapes identity through loss (Anand, 1966). *The Silver Bangles* foregrounds deprivation and self-worth, demonstrating how socio-economic constraints restrict aspiration and transform material longing into a quest for dignity (Anand, 1934). Similarly, *The Thief* portrays desire as a catalyst for moral conflict, where survival-driven choices generate guilt and ethical tension rather than fulfilment (Anand, 1934).

The findings suggest that unfulfilled desire functions not merely as absence but as a dynamic psychological force that actively constructs internal conflict, moral awareness, and emotional vulnerability. By foregrounding longing as an interpretive lens, this chapter contributes to broader discussions on desire, ethics, and social inequality in Indian English literature.

Keywords

(Unfulfilled Desire, Psychological Conflict, Memory and Nostalgia, Socioeconomic Deprivation, Moral Dilemma, Literary Psychology)

Introduction

The essence of human existence is influenced equally by presence and absence, and among these absences, unfulfilled desire emerges as one of the most decisive psychological forces shaping emotion, identity, and moral reasoning (Phillips, 1993; Žižek, 2006). Desire, as both lack and longing, is foundational to human subjectivity and functions as a persistent drive toward meaning, recognition, and belonging (Levinas, 1969). When such desires remain unrealized, they generate emotional turbulence that profoundly alters perception and behavior (Illouz, 2007). This chapter examines the psychological repercussions of unmet aspirations through three short stories by Mulk Raj Anand—*The Tamarind Tree* (1966), *The Silver Bangles* (1934), and *The Thief* (1934). Though structurally simple, these narratives offer complex psychological portraits of yearning shaped by memory, deprivation, and ethical conflict (Mukherjee, 2002).

In *The Tamarind Tree*, longing manifests through memory and nostalgia, as the narrator mourns the loss of both a physical symbol and the emotional security it embodied. He recalls how “the old tamarind tree stood like a guardian over our childhood games” (Anand, 1966), revealing how desire often crystallizes around symbolic objects. In *The Silver Bangles*, Radha’s yearning is rooted in deprivation, where the bangles symbolize dignity and self-worth rather than ornamentation: “She had never owned anything so bright, so beautiful, so utterly her own” (Anand, 1934a). Meanwhile, *The Thief* explores desire as an ethical dilemma, as Bhiku’s hunger compels him toward morally troubling choices: “He knew it was wrong, yet his

stomach cried louder than his conscience” (Anand, 1934b). Collectively, these narratives demonstrate how unfulfilled desire operates not merely as private emotion but as a structural force shaped by memory, inequality, and moral struggle (Eagleton, 2007).

Unfulfilled Desire and the Memory of Loss: *The Tamarind Tree*

Unfulfilled desire often becomes most acute during moments of return, when the past confronts the irrevocability of change (Boym, 2001). In *The Tamarind Tree*, the narrator’s return to his childhood village reveals an emotional rupture caused by the disappearance of the tree that once anchored his identity. He laments, “The place where the tree had stood seemed suddenly empty, as if something vital had been torn away” (Anand, 1966). The tree functions as what Bachelard (1994) describes as a “topography of memory,” a site where emotional experience and spatial attachment converge.

The narrator’s longing is not for the tree itself but for the irretrievable emotional state it represents. Psychological theorists argue that nostalgia often reflects a desire for existential continuity rather than literal restoration (Sedikides et al., 2008). The narrator’s grief thus signifies a deeper confrontation with impermanence, as “the loss of the tree marked the end of a world that could never be recovered” (Anand, 1966). This loss destabilizes identity, reinforcing Ricoeur’s (1992) claim that memory is central to narrative selfhood. The unmet desire to reclaim the past underscores the human struggle to reconcile memory with temporal change.

Desire, Deprivation, and the Illusion of Possession: *The Silver Bangles*

In *The Silver Bangles*, unfulfilled desire emerges from chronic deprivation, revealing how poverty reshapes emotional needs and aspirations (Narayan, 2004). Radha's longing for the bangles reflects a yearning for dignity and visibility in a world that marginalizes her existence. She observes them with awe, thinking "how wonderful it must be to feel their cool weight upon her wrists" (Anand, 1934a). This desire is intensified by scarcity, as deprivation magnifies the symbolic value of objects (Bauman, 2007).

When Radha briefly possesses the bangles, fulfilment proves fleeting. Anand writes, "Her joy trembled with fear, for she knew happiness like this could not last" (1934a). This moment illustrates the psychological paradox of possession: fulfilment often generates anxiety rather than peace for those accustomed to loss (Fromm, 1956). The bangles become a metaphor for illusory satisfaction, reinforcing the idea that material acquisition cannot compensate for emotional neglect (Sayer, 2005).

Unfulfilled Desires and Moral Conflict: *The Thief*

In *The Thief*, desire is inseparable from moral struggle. Bhiku's hunger transforms ordinary objects into symbols of survival, as "the tiffin box seemed to glow before him like a promise of life" (Anand, 1934b). His hesitation before stealing reflects an ethical conflict intensified—not erased—by deprivation. Scholars argue that poverty complicates moral agency without nullifying it (Margalit, 1996).

After stealing the tiffin, Bhiku is consumed by guilt: “His hands shook, and shame burned hotter than hunger” (Anand, 1934b). This reaction confirms that desire satisfied through unethical means often deepens psychological distress (Taylor, 1989). Bhiku’s dream of becoming a teacher further intensifies this conflict, symbolizing what Appadurai (2004) calls the “capacity to aspire.” His unmet aspirations thus function both as a source of hope and a reminder of the chasm between his reality and his ideals.

Analysis of the Psychological Landscape of Unfulfilled Desires Across the Three Stories

Unfulfilled desire functions as a central psychological force in literature, shaping moral judgment, emotional response, and identity formation. In the selected short stories by Mulk Raj Anand—*The Thief* (1934), *The Silver Bangles* (1934), and *The Tamarind Tree* (1966)—desire emerges not as a superficial craving but as a deeply embedded psychological condition shaped by poverty, memory, and ethical conflict. Drawing on psychological, moral, and socio-cultural theory, this analysis demonstrates how unmet aspirations generate guilt, nostalgia, and emotional fracture, revealing desire as a powerful determinant of human behavior under conditions of deprivation and loss.

Unfulfilled Desire and Moral Conflict in *The Thief*

In *The Thief*, unfulfilled desire is inseparable from moral anxiety. Bhiku’s hunger-driven longing arises from systemic deprivation rather

than criminal intent. Anand describes Bhiku as a boy who “had known hunger too long to argue with it” (Anand, 1934b), emphasizing the compulsive force of unmet physiological need. This aligns with Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, which posits that survival imperatives override higher ethical reasoning without eliminating moral awareness.

The tiffin box Bhiku steals is psychologically charged, symbolizing stability and care. Anand notes that “the box lay there, silent and tempting, like a promise of warmth” (Anand, 1934b). Literary psychology suggests that such objects operate as emotional surrogates for absent security (Bennett & Royle, 2016). Bhiku’s desire is therefore not for food alone, but for the dignity and nurturance denied to him.

Crucially, fulfilment does not relieve suffering. Instead, “his heart beat wildly, and shame flooded him before he had even touched the food” (Anand, 1934b). This immediate guilt reflects Freud’s (1923/1961) concept of the superego, wherein moral conscience persists despite deprivation. Bhiku’s dream of becoming a teacher intensifies this conflict, revealing desire’s paradoxical nature: it sustains hope while deepening self-reproach. Thus, *The Thief* portrays unfulfilled desire as both a survival impulse and a moral burden.

Desire, Deprivation, and Emotional Fragility in *The Silver Bangles*

In *The Silver Bangles*, unfulfilled desire is rooted in poverty and emotional invisibility. Radha’s yearning for bangles is not decorative but existential. Anand observes that “she watched the bangles with

aching eyes, knowing they belonged to a world not meant for her” (Anand, 1934a). This illustrates how deprivation shapes aspiration itself, confirming Bourdieu’s (1984) claim that social class constrains not only resources but imagined possibilities.

The bangles symbolize dignity and recognition. When Radha finally possesses them, the joy is transient: “for a moment she felt rich, then afraid, as though happiness were something she must return” (Anand, 1934a). This moment exemplifies hedonic fragility—when fulfillment intensifies anxiety rather than contentment (Kahneman et al., 1999). Psychological research on deprivation indicates that individuals accustomed to scarcity often experience fulfillment as unstable and undeserved (Fromm, 1956).

Radha’s loss of the bangles devastates her not because of material absence but because it erases a fleeting sense of worth. Her longing exposes the illusion of possession: objects cannot compensate for emotional neglect. Thus, *The Silver Bangles* presents desire as both a source of hope and a catalyst for deeper emotional pain, revealing the psychological cost of structural inequality.

Memory, Loss, and Nostalgic Desire in *The Tamarind Tree*

Unlike the other narratives, *The Tamarind Tree* states unfulfilled desire within memory rather than material deprivation. The narrator’s longing is directed toward a vanished past. He reflects that “the tree had gone, and with it something that could never return” (Anand, 1966). This loss exemplifies reflective nostalgia, where desire is aimed at emotional states rather than recoverable realities (Boym, 2001).

The tamarind tree functions as a mnemonic anchor. Anand writes, “under its shade we had felt safe, as though the world could not touch us” (1966). Memory theorists argue that such sites preserve emotional continuity and identity (Assmann, 2011). The tree’s absence thus destabilizes the narrator’s sense of self, forcing confrontation with temporal rupture.

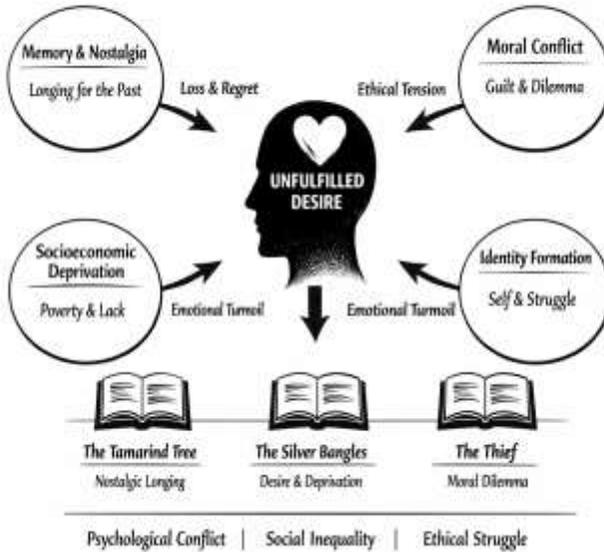
The desire to reclaim the past proves futile, yet persistent. This illustrates Ricoeur’s (1992) notion that identity is narratively sustained through memory, even when the past is irretrievable. In this story, unfulfilled desire becomes an existential condition, underscoring the impossibility of restoring lost time.

Desire, Ethics, and Social Inequality

Across all three stories, desire reshapes moral judgment and reveals class-based injustice. Whether it is Bhiku’s hunger, Radha’s longing for beauty, or the narrator’s nostalgic grief, desire exposes structural deprivation rather than individual weakness. Moral psychology confirms that ethical reasoning is situational and emotionally mediated (Haidt, 2001). The persistence of guilt across narratives demonstrates that deprivation complicates morality without erasing conscience.

Ultimately, desire functions as a lens through which social inequality becomes emotionally legible. As Marx and Engels (1970) argue, material conditions shape consciousness itself. Anand’s narratives reveal that unfulfilled desires are not personal failures but psychological responses to systemic absence.

Exploring Unfulfilled Desire in Anand's Short Stories



(OpenAI, 2026)

Implications of the Study

This study carries significant implications for literary criticism, psychological inquiry, and socio-ethical discourse, particularly within the field of Indian English literature. By foregrounding unfulfilled desire as a central analytical lens, the research demonstrates that longing is not merely a thematic concern but a dynamic psychological and ethical force that shapes identity, moral reasoning, and emotional experience. This reconceptualization invites scholars to move beyond surface-level interpretations of desire as absence and instead recognize it as an active, constitutive element of human subjectivity.

From a literary-critical perspective, the study reinforces the relevance of interdisciplinary approaches, particularly literary psychology and social realism, in interpreting texts that engage with marginality and deprivation. Anand's short stories, often read primarily as social critiques, emerge here as profound psychological narratives that illuminate the inner lives of the marginalized. This suggests that Indian English fiction, especially realist writing, can productively be reread through psychological and ethical frameworks to uncover nuanced representations of interior conflict, moral dissonance, and emotional vulnerability.

In terms of psychological implications, the analysis underscores how unmet needs—whether emotional, material, or existential—shape moral consciousness without erasing ethical awareness. The persistence of guilt, nostalgia, and self-reflection in the characters challenges deterministic assumptions that deprivation nullifies morality. Instead, the study supports psychological models that view moral reasoning as context-sensitive and emotionally mediated, thereby contributing to broader discussions in moral psychology and trauma studies.

The study also holds socio-ethical implications, particularly in its exposure of how structural inequality shapes desire itself. By illustrating that aspirations are socially conditioned, the research highlights the ethical responsibility of social systems in producing emotional suffering. Desire becomes a diagnostic tool through which injustice, exclusion, and deprivation are rendered emotionally visible,

urging readers and scholars alike to reconsider simplistic judgments about poverty, crime, and moral failure.

Finally, the study has pedagogical and research implications. It offers a framework for teaching short fiction that integrates psychology, ethics, and social theory, enabling students to engage empathetically with literary characters while developing critical awareness of systemic injustice. For future research, the study opens avenues for comparative analyses across cultures, genres, and historical periods, encouraging scholars to examine unfulfilled desire as a universal yet socially inflected dimension of the human condition.

In sum, this research affirms that unfulfilled desire is not a passive void but a powerful force that shapes human thought, action, and morality—making it an indispensable concept for understanding both literature and life.

Conclusion

Unfulfilled desire, as revealed through Anand's short stories, operates as a profound and pervasive force within the human psyche, shaping thought, emotion, and action in ways that transcend mere absence (Freud, 1923/1961; Žižek, 2006). In *The Tamarind Tree* (1966), *The Silver Bangles* (1934a), and *The Thief* (1934b), desire emerges not simply as a lack of objects or opportunities but as a dynamic current that structures identity, informs moral judgment, and mediates human experience (Anand, 1934a; Anand, 1934b; Anand, 1966). The

characters' awareness of what they lack—whether emotional security, dignity, or sustenance—perpetually shapes how they perceive themselves and interact with the world (Phillips, 1993). In this sense, unfulfilled desire functions as both an existential and psychological driver, leaving enduring imprints on the mind that oscillate between melancholy, longing, and ethical tension (Illouz, 2007).

Memory is central to this process. Nostalgia, as portrayed in *The Tamarind Tree*, anchors longing in emotionally formative experiences, transforming absence into a persistent psychological presence (Boym, 2001; Ricoeur, 1992). The tamarind tree, for example, is more than a physical object—it embodies security, innocence, and identity, revealing how unfulfilled desire entwines with recollection to sustain emotional continuity (Anand, 1966; Assmann, 2011). Likewise, in *The Silver Bangles*, Radha's yearning for material possession reflects deeper deprivation and social marginalization, demonstrating that desire is socially conditioned and often intensified by inequality (Bourdieu, 1984; Sen, 1981). Material fulfilment, as Anand shows, rarely satisfies the emotional or existential void; the transient joy of ownership is swiftly tempered by fear, anxiety, or awareness of continued deprivation (Anand, 1934a; Fromm, 1956).

Ethical complexity further underscores the psychological weight of desire. In *The Thief*, Bhiku's moral conflict illustrates how deprivation complicates ethical reasoning, generating guilt and shame even as survival necessitates morally troubling choices (Maslow, 1943; Haidt, 2001). Desire, therefore, functions as both a motivator and an ethical test, catalyzing action while simultaneously provoking self-reflection

and moral tension (Nussbaum, 2001). Across all three narratives, Anand reveals that unfulfilled desire is inseparable from broader social, economic, and cultural structures, reflecting inequality and shaping the characters' emotional and moral landscapes (Eagleton, 2007).

In conclusion, unfulfilled desire in Anand's stories is not a passive condition but an active force that illuminates human vulnerability, resilience, and ethical complexity. By exploring the interplay of memory, deprivation, and morality, these narratives provide profound insights into the psychological and socio-ethical dimensions of longing, demonstrating that desire—fulfilled or denied—remains central to the human experience.

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