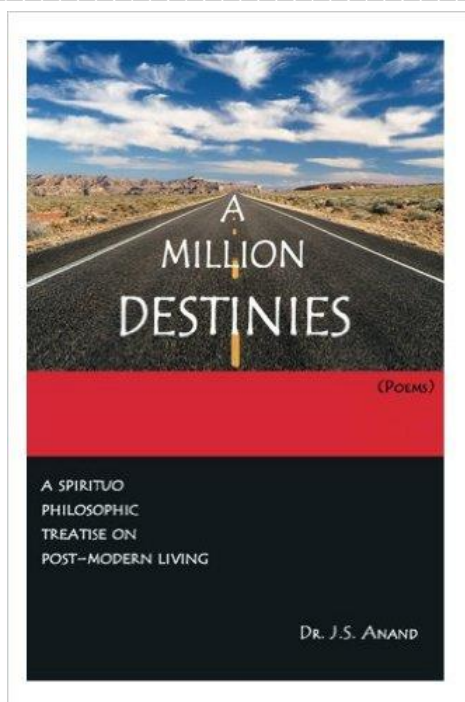


## The Bleak World of Anand's *A Million Destinies*

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### Abstract

The present article deals with J. S. Anand's poetic collection, *A Million Destinies*. An analytic scrutiny into the poems shows the world of this collection is highly bleak, replete with suffering and despair. There is an endeavor to elicit the signs of this darkness. It is argued that despite being backed up by a rich tradition of Buddhism, Anand's world is a thwarted one wherein Western notions of postmodernity have destabilized Indian traditions without giving people the comforts of a postmodern lifestyle. Indian culture, as manifest in this collection, is viewed as the battlefield between the demands of a traditional outlook and the sea changes the colonial and/or imperial has brought about onstage. Anand's poetry emerges out of such clashes and testifies to the state of suspension (post)modernized Indian man is exposed to. His speaker is a man torn between the yearnings of his soul, still crying out to him, and the unheeding space of technology-ridden life breaking his bones.

**Key words:** Anand, suffering, pain, happiness

## **Introduction**

Anand's time is an epoch of struggles between man and machine, morality and utility, body and soul, self and other, real and virtual. The world which lacks God, faith, or at least any sort of supernatural power proves to be strange to Anand's speaker. India is famous for having embraced almost all types of religions and being home to miscellaneous beliefs. In such a spiritual laden context, Anand's de-spiritualized world comes as a shock to the reader. Scrutinized, however, his nagging speaker takes issue with the spiritual introduced and hailed to people as being instrumentalized by the powerful. This article analyzes most of the poems of the collection in the line of these claims trying to justify the bleakness of Anand's world.

*A Million Destinies* is a collection of forty seven poems; all of them are centered on the page. None of them has rhyme scheme or follows any rhythmic pattern. If it were not for the concrete arrangement of the lines on the page, they would have read like prose. Even the lengths of the lines follow no specific pattern. It looks as if each poem, each stanza, or each line cherishes its own individuality. This feature sets up a semiotic relation between the body of the text and its title; hence likewise a million destinies, a million lines and a million styles. The semantic feature of the collection which draws the attention of the reader to itself is the reiteration of the notion of suffering and despair which is manifest in the choice of diction, the grammatical lapses, and even the punctuation.

This collection develops out of a sharp contrast the speaker of the poems finds himself tackling with his environment. His environment can include himself, society, nature, cosmos, even a god. What is at point here is the dark glasses he has taken up to approach his world. It is this dark lens that is in charge of embodying the theme of suffering in different concepts. Therefore, a glance over these concepts would help us see the dominant melancholic mood all through the collection.

## **Theoretical Framework**

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Suffering has different dimensions; it has a psychological meaning. To suffer means not to feel good. Here we use suffering in the sense that Jamie Mayerfeld defines it as “disagreeable overall feeling” (14). The disagreeable overall feeling can be inflicted on an individual through multiple ways and it may emerge from several causes. Suffering may be categorized into four major types such as bodily or physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychical. The causes for suffering are similarly diverse but they can be grouped into those emanating from the self, and those given rise to by the milieu. Standing in opposition to the self, the milieu includes various factors like the other human beings (in the form of society, culture, political situation, economic conditions, the intellectual trends), technology, science, and their demands, and nature; all in all whatever comprises the environment is accomplice in imbuing the sense of suffering. Suffering is closely intertwined with pain. Yet pain is not restricted only to the body; rather, it could be emotional, spiritual or mental. The kind of pain that reigns over *A Million Destinies* is of all four types, aching the speaker almost to the point of death.

The point that Mayerfeld aptly raises and opposes to is the reduction of suffering only to human wickedness. When one states, “To say that some people are suffering is to say that some other people are oppressing them or acting unjustly toward them and that, consequently, these people should change their behavior so as to end the oppression and remove the injustice” (14), the notion of suffering is politicized. Mayerfeld tries to distinguish the cases in which disagreeable feeling arises out of a human cause from those which emanate from “non-human causes that other people are powerless to prevent” (14). As an instance, one may refer to the distressful feelings that Anand’s speaker experiences when he is confronted with the changes he perceives and suffers from in his modernized era. The sweeping wave of technology is unavoidable; yet it has its own sordid impacts of people’s outlooks, their preferences, and behaviors. Here, a non-human agent has been poisoning the human nature.

Contradistinction to Mayerfeld, this article argues that even in ostensibly non-human torments, one can always detect human interference if not as the cause of the distressful situation, at least, in its development. The fact that everyone is in a rush in megacities is undeniable; yet people can have brakes on themselves at least within their own limited scopes,

trying not to knuckle down those who cannot keep up with the demands of the environment. What tortures Anand's speaker here is this point.

Here, one may object to us that the other which may suffer the self could be nature and nature is a non-human cause. This objection is apt but it can be answered in this way: the person who feels disagreeable because of nature definitely cannot be living alone and in caves. He is there among people and within the society; the violence which is done to him on behalf of his society is that people around him have not cared to help him out of that distress; they have remained indifferent about his situation. They could have raised him up spiritually at least by showing their sense of sympathy instead of leaving him alone to the perpetration a non-human agent has inflicted on him. And it can be claimed that it is the same lack of sympathy and care from his own people that makes bold his distressful plight. Therefore, we claim there is always a human interference involved in cases of suffering. In the following analysis of most of the poems of Anand's collection, we try to show how our claim works out.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

In the first poem, suffering is conveyed through such words as "tragic", "fade away", "dies", "lamenting", "cry", and "a deep depression" (Anand 10-11). The poem targets the transience of life and takes the blooming of a flower as a gesture to this reality. This makes the speaker interpret the blooming of a flower as "The most tragic event" since it represents "the joy of so many/at the cost of/one". (Anand 10). The flower dies "lamenting people/ who think /they have come here/to stay" (Anand 10). The core of this poem is immortality, a wish that remains embedded in every creature. Apparently, the cause for suffering is non-human; however, when the poet describes the blooming of a flower to "the joy of many/at the cost of one", it concretizes the dictatorial manner of the minor who procure their happiness by torturing majority of people. It is within this context that the issue of eternity is raised.

In "Lisp" the speaker is contemplating on himself as a man ushered by different thoughts. Thoughts come and go and each one gives him a specific mood. Yet being surrounded by thoughts is not the point here. Rather, what makes him dismay is the inevitable fact that his "vacant hours" are "falling like me/ and decaying like/ us" (Anand 14-15). What is of

significance here is the bitter reality that his hours, though filled by thoughts, are in fact vacant and this makes him suffer since he knows his time is fleeting like anything and he cannot stop the chariot of time. While a realist may approach this matter quite realistically, noticing both negative and positive aspects, the speaker here is a desperate aging man who measures his time by coming and going thoughts. This view itself conceptualizes the theme of suffering which is also reiterated in the verbs “falling” and “decaying”. What is of consequence here is that the speaker shares this state of decaying with the reader as well, ending the poem with “decaying like/ us” (Anand 15). The pronoun “us” helps him universalize his melancholic mood. All through the poem there rules a mood of estrangement which has distanced the speaker from “us”. Significantly enough, he suffers from his “vacant hours”; what renders his hours vacant is lack of human sympathy especially that he is in the process of aging. Although he suffers from “vacant hours”, he knows he is not alone in this collapse; the only companionship others around him can offer him is this “decaying like” him, hence a human cause.

The poem “Curse” itself stands as a concept of suffering. This poem is all about being born and life as being a curse. The speaker here is a philosopher who regards life as being composed of only two points, birth and death and what fills in the between is “tears”. Even birth for him is not a happy note as he describes it as “Pain at the first cry” (Anand 16). By contrast, death is promising for the speaker since in death he finds the redeeming force. For him, dying means getting rid of this life, which has nothing other than suffering for him. Viewed in this way, those who shed tears for a departing soul do so out of joy because he has been relieved of pain of living. Like the previous poem, the speaker’s loneliness is distressing him.

What Anand’s speaker finds in “The Whirl” is not the force of life and energy which turns everything topsy-turvy, nor is it the instability that it brings about; rather, it is the pain and sorrow that it gives to those caught in the whirl which draws the attention of the speaker to itself (27). The other poem, “Earth”, does away with traditional outlooks on the Earth as the motherly figure. Here Anand’s Earth is a beast that “feeds on death/ it has inhaled the living;/men and civilizations” (28). The beastly features are present in the Earth being described as the animal that smears the bones of the victims in the mud; the animal that enjoys cries of the limbs and whose jaws are blood-stained. Earth is the enticing witch that tempted man and brought him to

the Fall and continues its destructive force on man. (29). Deploying religious narratives of the Fall of man, Anand fears mortality. Symbolizing Earth as the life with which he has found himself grappling, the speaker's view of people as victims is his figurative gesture to injustice and oppression done on many.

"He and Me" compares God and man and thus adopts a religious discourse. The speaker is a philosopher who plays on the word "otherwise" and decides man is God's "other" which is supposed to be "wise" (30). Anand then goes on to detect similarities between himself and God; he finds some common points which represent his pessimistic view of God. God is absent from his world, just as the speaker sees himself away from his works, "I disown them" (33). He finds himself originating from nothingness, so is God invisible. The poem ends with a twist: while God is helpless, incapable of helping his creatures, namely, his children, man can do the needful action, "I can dress up their wounds/if I choose" (33). While God is condemned of lack of moral judgment, man is equipped with it; yet even here, it is a matter of choice, "if I choose"; this choice politicizes moral issues and sheds light on all types of suffering one may inflict on others only because of enacting or de-enacting the will to choose. Implicitly, here Anand views the human interference in man sufferings.

A play on the perfect present tense, the poem "The Imperfect Tense" revolves around the in-between-ness of man. Man is caught up between truth and untruth, ideas and actions, being and nothingness (34). His world is a world of uncertainty (35). He finds neither the conventional god, nor the valorous devil which he had come to know through books. Thus he feels "something is lacking/in everything/perceived as perfect;/be it the best/be it the worst" (35). Although man is wise, "the bricks of the days/are laid/with the cement of folly" (35). The description "cement of folly" is Anand's sarcastic view of the religious discourse and its impotence to convince the followers of its truthfulness and authenticity.

In "Beyond Living", the speaker deals with theme of suffering in its entirety. He regards everyone as being "sick at heart/and desperate/lonely and helpless" (37). Life has become "a gone affair" which makes the pain of boredom stay. In such a world only a dead man can be happier (37). Located within the context of India, modernized and mechanized, the poem laments

of the spreading sense of paralysis among his people and the ensuing suffering. The sense of loneliness shows how humanity has been influenced by the force of urbanization. “My Anaemica” views men as a dishonored race “sick in their blood vessels” (40). He calls his land *Anaemica* “where children die of hunger/ women are dishonored/men are shot/in their heads/ for thinking” (41). All these scenes of violence are direct reflection of human-caused suffering and the lost sense of morality. This justifies why he claims his world is not God’s creation; rather it is the creation of “injustice and foul minds” (41). In his world, social discrimination reigns since “God’s chosen ones/who have amassed the/wealth of the nations;/and many, so many/ who suffer at their hands” (41).

The speaker is so hopeless that “Nothing impressed me/I was crestfallen as ever” (45). He blames citylife for his desperate state. In “Ode to Man” the speaker argues everything in the world has a plan except man, “man is known to /transcend his brief/and come to grief” (49). Doing away with the harmony that rules over the universe, “he turns an agent of chaos and confusion” (50). Yet at the heart of this highly disagreeable feeling lies human cause.

“Love on Conditions” develops out of a lover’s grief not for the beloved but for her own failure not as a gendered being, but as a human being, “how can I bring/solace to you/when this heart/is bleeding/with pain and suffering” (54). The heart is bleeding because society has caused it so with its devalued definitions of human being. The speaker of “Surviving” is a man deprived of his dignity, rationality, will, pride, desires and dreams. He sees himself as “a mound raised on earth/without a will/without a kill” (56). One may stop to ask what makes a man feel about himself this way? Divested of those features that defines a man, he stands a victim to the norms of his society.

The poem “Scarecrow” recognizes pains as never-leaving companions. The man is a hopeless being reduced to a scarecrow standing in a deserted field “waiting for the sparrows/to confirm/that I am alive/still” (58). In “Destiny” the speaker goes under the painful process of disillusionment and this new understanding makes him suffer. Belonging becomes a misconception (59); love is a foul passion. While “flowering/is only a season/ . . ./ it is all/pale and death/spreading over the vasts” (59-60). He finds out even God himself is entrapped “in his

own machinations” (60); joys of life are just paper boats floated by kids. Life is a river of passion and despair where “the wise . . . fish for lost wishes” (60).

The same bleak mood is dominant on “Love” which disillusiones the lover’s dreams. In love there is only “a process of self-/disintegration” (61); the poem concludes all lovers are doomed failures, again a human cause is involved.

In “Self Portrait” the speaker finds his heart as the abode for all maladies, “greed, lust, jealousy,/anger, fighting/everything that turns/foul the flow of life” (63). What makes the poet suffer from is that all these maladies have turned “foul the flow of life” (63). Referring to his face, the speaker finds himself far, far away from God. His face shows his worries and his heart has got despair. He metaphorizes his heart to a well dried up. The only word that can describe his plight is fear (64). Then he blames his own self for all that suffering, “this is how I have cut/ myself into pieces/ and drained all blood / of my vessels”(64). When he speaks of the sun setting in his eyes, he is actually complaining of his spiritual calamity. This poem ends not with the portrait of a human being in godly blessings, but a pen with dried up lead; a “columbus who could not find america/and Socrates, whom immortality/eluded for want of hemlock” (65). In contrast to the heroic narratives of discovery and exploration, this poem gives a counter-description of himself and others. The overall mood of his society is in charge of this feeling; yet in this predicament, the speaker sees no sympathetic eye or ear to expose his agony to. The only way he can find is writing and it could be nothing other than a lamenting poem.

“Time” focuses on one of the antagonistic forces which has inflicted suffering on the speaker. What the speaker complains of is the rush of time and its unavoidable push (66). What time has in stock for man is old age “in which one’s/own kin stands to disown us” (67). Mortality is unavoidable just as aging is. Yet the bitter fact is being disowned by one’s own kin. This is torturing the speaker. If the poem speaks of any promising future when a change may occur, the speaker sadly knows he will not remain alive to witness the change since time has a unidirectional course; life would never turn back to give him his lost youth.

In "A Peace" the speaker realizes that even God has a sneer at him as if He ridicules him when he prays for peace. Looking back at his life, he finds peace only in the necropolis (69). Finding his praying as void, he decides not to pray, but to weep and stay alive since in peace and silence he sees himself more a victim, a Jesus-wise sufferer than a mentally and spiritually poised person (70).

"The Poorest of the Poor" discards God, turning Him into a mere simulacrum. Significantly enough, even God's replica is not a genuine one, "That too,/badly imprisoned;/besieged by followers/ who shouted louder/than God himself" (71). The God of which he speaks is the one, followers define and construct for themselves to fool people in temples, churches, and religious sites. Ironically, when God wants to show Himself, those mesmerized followers shun away from Him, busy with reciting spells. (71). In this poem, it is not man who is perpetrated, but God, since God is lost to stupefied people and is found(ed) by "some clever men/Who would now retail Him" (80). The poem expresses the speaker's sense of pity for God, "Poor God" is the poorest of the poor, indicated in the title. This richly loaded poem grapples with religion, monks, and followers and nullifies them all. Anand is not specific about any religion; what he is targeting is the institution of religion itself, or religion as formalized by preachers.

The image of simulacrum links this poem to another one entitled "The Lost Champion"; this poem acknowledges that man no longer has genuineness and authenticity. Like the duplicated God, man here is a replica. The speaking man bears no trust even in himself; he is an incomplete entity fit for this incomplete world. He is alone and remains alone with no one to love as "The eyes which loved me/Have lost this race" (91).

The next poem "You" is about the speaker's relationship with his friend, maybe a beloved. In relation, he finds no impetus, no hope to keep on. A strong sense of estrangement dominates the two people involved: "how irrelevant I am/ to your existence;/and how meaningless you are/for me" (74). The force of technology is well expressed when he describes himself as being impotent in friendship, "a sophisticated machine/self-set, self-created/an automaton/ which did not have a heart" (74). Finding no satisfaction in a human relation, the

speaker helplessly turns to non-human creatures for love and even for hate (75). The poem quite well expresses what makes a man to discard his human relation and choose the non-human beings instead. Having relation with non-humans has less tortures than with humans who are expected to be sympathetic but they fail to be so.

The same theme runs through the other poem entitled "Only" which depicts the speaker as a ghostly figure who lacks shadow for having lived among shadows. Describing others as shadows deprives them not only of authenticity and substantiality but also of their humaneness. Living with shadows has turned him into a man who has lost his sense of being, hence the sordid impact of life among such people. "The Promised Land" emerges out of an ironical tone. The speaker is now an aged man awaiting his death. He remembers briefly how "those days of dreary struggles" have been spent on his duties as a husband and a father, nourishing desires, dreams and thoughts (78). He knows he is going to leave this land only after promising he would return to it as "The Promised Land". Thus the poem mocks the Biblical notion of the Promised Land, as it would be no better than the one the speaker is living in and suffering.

The same irony runs through "Light House" in which the speaker tells of a city which ostensibly looks charming, but in fact, no citizen there feels happy. People of this city are like automatons, replicating what others do, with no thoughts, no feelings, no emotions. Such a place is well described as the "city of scarcity" (81) as he views it as a city "scarce in sense/deficient in sensitivity" (81). As soon as the curious speaker looks into their heads, they all go black "plunged in darkness". Their lapse into darkness reiterates the theme of their ghostly beings, lacking substantial and thereby influential presence.

"Flesh and Superflesh" compares how a stone changes to a god and how a new born is given identity. Both of them are regarded as mere human constructs. (82). The poem can be regarded as a bitter mock of both religion and human identity. The fact that both of them are mere constructs shows not only their arbitrariness but also their partiality and being only illusions of being. Just as some stupid followers turn a stone into a god, society makes identities for individuals and thus reduces their humaneness.

The highly rich poem "Sleep" is the poet's harsh criticism of the way modernity has deprived people of their rest and joys of life. Here sleep is personified as a girl who, weak and impotent, appears to the speaker in a dream and complains of people who are all in a rush captivated in the hands of clock. She who had once been source of peace and rest to people and their bodies and minds, is herself torn away, shaken, with a bruised face and a mutilated body (85). In a flashback, she remembers the days when people used to cherish their peace of mind and had enough rest; but now all that poise has gone away. People no more sleep as they used to, so they no more nurture dreams, joys, and romance. This has even inflicted children as they fall asleep "driven crazy by homework" (87). If men sleep it is not for its joy, nor for its dreams; they sleep out of necessity as they are exhausted by worries and works day and night (87).

Thus "Sleep" can be taken as Anand's extreme critical note on the way people have yielded to modernity and its dehumanizing forces. While there is an implicit acknowledgment of the inevitability of modernization, there rules a harsh gesture to the passivity of people in confrontation to the demands of modern life.

The same critical note runs through "Carcass" in which the speaker is the messenger of death; he takes people's bodies back to the earth and their souls to the underworld. However, when he comes to modernity-ridden people, he finds them all already dead, "I carry neither living, nor dead,/not corpses . . . sigh . . ./but carcasses" (89). The thematic continuity links these poems to "The Survivors" which is based on Darwinian Theory of the Survival of the Fittest. In his society, the Indian poet suffers from people who compromise. In the modernized society, the fittest are those who can best adapt themselves to the demands of their time, hence the need for compromise. Caught up among hypocrites, he finds no one nourishing faith or any convictions. The very few who have convictions are marginalized as madmen deserving of death. This is not the individual's fault; the society, its norms and discourses that push people to bargain their survival at the cost of losing their beliefs. (94).

"Waste" presents man as "a child of wastes" in whom one finds no sign of divinity (96). Yet the speaker knows there is no way out of the predicaments since he is fated to waste away.

The wastes get apparent only when he witnesses himself aging, "only when the bones/developed pores/and the ravages/appeared on the face" (96).

## Conclusion

The detailed analysis of most of the poems of Anand's collection shows the various manifestations of theme of suffering. More than mere bodily pain, the poems evince psychological, mental, emotional and spiritual suffering. At times, some poems specify suffering to the individual but mostly the causes of the pains are detected in his environment. The society, in which Anand is living and writing, has imbued a strong sense of pain in him, depriving him of his humaneness. Far from being a Romantic forlorn who complains of loneliness, depression, anger, or dejection, Anand poeticizes as a social critic; his main target is his society and all of its discourses, be it the discourse of modernity which divests one of faith or the discourse of religion which stupefies one with some merely human constructs of divinity. The analysis has been centered on showing how even in cases of suffering in which non-human agents are involved one can always detect a human interference. This renders the issue of suffering political and accords the poet a particular ideological stance.

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