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Capitalism, Exploitation, and Human Sufferings: A Marxist Rereading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936)

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Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand is credited with establishing the basic forms and themes of modern Indian Literature written in English. He is recognised as the figure who established the foundational forms and thematic concerns of modern Indian literature in English. His *Coolie* (1936) offers a powerful literary critique of capitalist exploitation within the socio-economic framework of colonial India. This paper undertakes a Marxist rereading of the novel to examine how capitalism perpetuates class oppression, economic inequality, and human suffering among the working poor. Focusing on the life of Munoo, a marginalised child labourer, the study analyses the mechanisms of surplus extraction, alienation, commodification of labour, and class hierarchy that shape his tragic existence. The novel foregrounds the dehumanising effects of industrial capitalism, where human beings are reduced to expendable instruments of production under colonial and bourgeois authority. Through a Marxist lens, the paper also explores the intersection of capitalism with caste, colonial power, and social stratification, demonstrating how structural exploitation intensifies the suffering of the proletariat. Anand's realist narrative emerges as a form of social protest, exposing the moral bankruptcy of capitalist systems and advocating for human dignity and social justice. The study argues that *Coolie* remains a significant Marxist text that documents the lived realities of exploitation and underscores the urgent need for socio-economic reform.

Keywords: Marxism; Capitalism; Exploitation; Proletariat; Colonial India; Human Suffering

Introduction:

In the twentieth century, the industrial world dominated the lives of working-class people, and its peak was all over the world. The bourgeoisie and the working class, the have-nots, were subjected to considerable oppression. The workers continued to exist like machines in the factories, deprived of fundamental rights and the freedom to live independent lives. At this juncture, under the influence of Karl Marx and Mahatma Gandhi, Indian writers began to expose the exploitation practised by the British capitalist class, as well as social inequality and economic oppression. Mulk Raj Anand was one of the prominent voices among them. The intellectual and literary impact of his *Coolie* (1936)

is integral to discourse on colonial subjection, class oppression, and the development of Indian English literature as a medium for social commentary. Its intellectual and literary influence is profound. At this juncture, under the influence of Karl Marx, Mahatma Gandhi, and Indian writers, they began to highlight British capitalist exploitation, social inequality, and economic suppression in their writings. Mulk Raj Anand is one of them. *Coolie* tells the story of Munoo, a young boy from rural India who becomes a symbol of the exploited working class, navigating a brutal colonial economy and a deeply stratified social order. Munoo, a young boy from the countryside, is the central figure in *Coolie*. His journey, set against the backdrop of a cruel colonial economy and a rigidly hierarchical society, turns him into an emblem of the exploited working class. A Marxist reading of the novel highlights the pervasive class struggle and economic exploitation faced by Indian labourers under both indigenous feudal structures and British capitalist imperialism. Munoo's movement through various exploitative labour environments, rural estates, urban factories, and colonial households mirrors the alienation and commodification of labour central to Marxist theory.

A Marxist reading of the novel highlights the pervasive class struggle and economic exploitation faced by Indian labourers, a struggle rooted deeply in the interaction between entrenched indigenous feudal structures and the encroaching forces of British capitalist imperialism. The protagonist, Munoo, becomes a focal point through which this systemic oppression is analysed. His relentless, forced movement through a series of exploitative labour environments, from the archaic, personalised oppression of rural estates, to the dehumanising machinery of urban factories, and finally to the insidious, veiled exploitation within colonial households, serves as a devastating narrative mirror. This movement perfectly encapsulates the fundamental processes of alienation and the commodification of labour, concepts central to core Marxist theory. In each setting, Munoo's inherent human value is systematically stripped away, and he is reduced to a mere 'factor of production' or a disposable cog in the relentless machine of profit generation, thereby illustrating the corrosive, universal logic of capitalist exploitation across disparate socio-economic backdrops in colonial India. From a postcolonial perspective, *Coolie* critiques the dehumanizing effects of British colonial rule and its collaboration with Indian elites. The novel exposes how colonial capitalism reinforced existing hierarchies while introducing new forms of oppression rooted in race, class, and economic dependency. Anand's work challenges the myth of colonial benevolence, revealing the systemic violence at the heart of empire. Set in the context of 1930s India, during a period of growing nationalist sentiment and labour unrest, *Coolie* also engages with contemporary debates on identity, resistance, and reform. Anand combines literary realism with political advocacy, portraying Munoo not only as a victim of circumstance but also as a representation of the broader suffering and resilience of India's working poor. Through this multilayered critique, *Coolie* emerges as a powerful indictment of colonial capitalism and a call for social justice. From a postcolonial perspective, Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *Coolie*, offers a profound and incisive critique of the deeply dehumanizing effects of British colonial rule in India. The narrative meticulously exposes the structural violence inherent in colonial capitalism and, crucially, the insidious ways in which it collaborated with and empowered existing Indian elites. This collaboration was not merely a side effect; it was a mechanism that reinforced and ossified pre-existing social hierarchies while

simultaneously introducing novel forms of oppression. These new oppressions were fundamentally rooted in a complex interplay of race, class, and debilitating economic dependency, ensnaring the protagonist, Munoo, and millions like him.

Munoo's journey, from a Himalayan village to towns, factories, and urban slums, maps the economic geography of colonial India. Each stage of his movement corresponds to a specific mode of labor exploitation: agrarian servitude, domestic service, industrial factory work, and informal urban labor. Anand's narrative thus mirrors the historical processes of proletarianization and migration generated by colonial capitalism. Rather than presenting Munoo's suffering as exceptional or tragic in a sentimental sense, the novel insists on its typicality, suggesting that Munoo represents millions of similarly dispossessed laborers. Critics such as K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar and Meenakshi Mukherjee have acknowledged Anand's commitment to social realism and compassion for the underprivileged (Iyengar 347; Mukherjee 129). However, such readings often prioritize ethical sympathy over ideological critique. This article contends that *Coolie* must be read not merely as a humanitarian novel but as a Marxist text deeply invested in exposing the political economy of colonial exploitation. By situating the novel within Marxist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, this study aims to recover its radical political vision.

Critical Reception and the Limits of Humanist Interpretation:

Early critical responses to *Coolie* primarily celebrated its documentary realism and moral urgency. C. D. Narasimhaiah viewed the novel as an ethical protest against injustice, emphasizing Anand's universal humanism and moral outrage (102). Similarly, M. K. Naik and Ramesh Mohan praised Anand's vivid portrayal of poverty and suffering, reading *Coolie* as an appeal to the reader's conscience. While such interpretations played a crucial role in establishing Anand's literary reputation, they also tended to depoliticize the novel. By framing exploitation as a moral issue rather than a structural condition, humanist readings risk obscuring the systemic nature of capitalist oppression. Suffering becomes an object of pity rather than a symptom of historically produced class relations. Later critics began to reassess Anand's ideological commitments. Iyengar acknowledges Anand's engagement with Marxist thought during his years in England and his association with leftist publications such as *Left Review* (347). Saros Cowasjee describes Anand as "a writer with a cause," whose fiction consistently seeks to expose structural injustice. Priyamvada Gopal goes further, situating Anand within a tradition of anti-colonial Marxist writers who used literature as a form of ideological intervention (72-75). Despite these reassessments, sustained Marxist analyses of *Coolie* remain relatively rare. Much Marxist criticism of Indian literature has focused on vernacular texts or post-independence writing, leaving early Anglophone works, such as *Coolie* under-theorized. This gap necessitates a renewed Marxist reading that foregrounds class relations, labor exploitation, and ideological domination within the colonial context.

Colonial Political Economy and Historical Materialism:

British colonialism in India was fundamentally an economic enterprise structured around extraction, accumulation, and labor control. As historians such as Bipan Chandra and Amiya Kumar Bagchi have shown, colonial policies dismantled indigenous industries, intensified agrarian distress, and integrated Indian labor into global capitalist circuits (Chandra 219; Bagchi 44). These processes produced widespread displacement, unemployment, and

poverty. *Coolie* reflects this political economy with remarkable clarity. Munoo's displacement from his village is not the result of personal failure but of structural impoverishment. His subsequent migration to urban centres mirrors the historical movement of rural populations forced into wage labour. Each labour site Munoo inhabits represents a different manifestation of colonial capitalism's exploitative logic. From a Marxist perspective, Munoo exemplifies the alienated labourer. His labour generates value for others while denying him dignity, security, and agency. Marx's theory of surplus value is particularly relevant here: Munoo's labour power is extracted without adequate compensation, ensuring profit for employers while perpetuating his misery (Marx 31-40). Anand thus exposes the exploitative foundations of colonial accumulation.

Labour, Alienation, and the Proletarian Body:

One of *Coolie's* most striking features is its focus on the labouring body. Munoo's physical exhaustion, illness, and eventual death foreground the corporeal cost of exploitation. Labour is depicted not as a means of self-realisation but as a site of dehumanisation.

In the Bombay cotton mill, Munoo encounters industrial discipline that reduces workers to mechanised units. Long hours, dangerous conditions, and authoritarian supervision exemplify what Marx describes as the transformation of human beings into "appendages of the machine." Anand's realist narration underscores how industrial capitalism erodes individuality and agency. Munoo's episodic movement across labour sites reflects the instability of proletarian existence under colonial capitalism. His lack of continuity or security highlights the absence of class solidarity among workers fragmented by migration, caste divisions, and ideological conditioning. The novel thus exposes not only material exploitation but also the conditions that prevent collective resistance.

Ideology and Colonial Subject Formation:

Louis Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) provides a crucial framework for understanding how exploitation is sustained in *Coolie*. According to Althusser, capitalist systems reproduce themselves not only through repression but also through ideology embedded in institutions such as family, religion, education, and language (85-86). Munoo's internalisation of inferiority exemplifies ideological domination. He often blames himself for his suffering and expresses gratitude toward abusive employers, revealing how ideology masks exploitation as fate or duty. Colonial discourse normalises hierarchy, making inequality appear natural and inevitable. This ideological conditioning prevents the emergence of class consciousness. Munoo's inability to recognise exploitation as systemic rather than personal reflects the success of colonial ideology in sustaining capitalist relations. Anand thus dramatises the psychological dimensions of domination alongside material oppression.

Postcolonial Marxism: Fanon and the Subaltern Condition:

Postcolonial theory enriches Marxist analysis by foregrounding the psychological and discursive dimensions of colonial domination. Frantz Fanon's analysis of internalised inferiority illuminates Munoo's experience of alienation and self-negation (Fanon 18-25). His humanity is consistently denied, rendering him socially invisible despite his economic usefulness. Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern further clarifies Munoo's predicament. As a subaltern subject, Munoo lacks access to discursive agency; his voice is repeatedly ignored or misrecognised (Spivak 28-30). His silences and failed assertions of dignity expose

the limits imposed on marginalised subjects within colonial-capitalist structures. Together, Marxist and postcolonial frameworks reveal how economic exploitation is reinforced by ideological and psychological domination.

Intersections of Class, Caste, and Gender:

While *Coolie* foregrounds class exploitation, it also gestures toward intersections with caste and gender. Munoo's vulnerability is inseparable from his likely lower-caste status, even though caste is not explicitly foregrounded. As Gail Omvedt argues, caste and class often function conjointly within Indian capitalism (53). Gendered labour appears in the novel through domestic service and the marginal presence of exploited women. Feminist Marxists such as Silvia Federici and Angela Davis emphasise how reproductive and domestic labour sustain capitalism while remaining undervalued (Federici 33; Davis 98). Anand hints at these dynamics, suggesting a broader matrix of oppression.

Coolie and Global Proletarian Literature:

Coolie belongs to a broader tradition of global proletarian literature, sharing affinities with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Maxim Gorky's *Mother*. Like these texts, Anand's novel critiques industrial exploitation and capitalist alienation. Its distinctiveness lies in its colonial setting, where racial hierarchy and imperial domination intensify class oppression. Anand offers a uniquely Indian articulation of proletarian suffering that is simultaneously local and global.

Conclusion:

This article has argued for a renewed Marxist reading of *Coolie* grounded in historical materialism and colonial political economy. While earlier criticism emphasised Anand's realism and humanism, such approaches often obscure the novel's structural critique of capitalism. By synthesising Marxist and postcolonial theory, this study demonstrates that *Coolie* is not merely a narrative of compassion but a politically charged exposure of systemic exploitation and ideological domination. Anand's novel stands as a foundational text of Indian proletarian literature, affirming the enduring relevance of Marxist criticism in understanding literature as a force for social transformation.

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