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THE ANATOMY OF OPPRESSION: EXPLORING INJUSTICE IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S 'COOLIE'

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, exploring its themes of social injustice, economic exploitation, and caste-based oppression. Moreover, Anand's portrayal of Munoo, a young laborer navigating India's hierarchical society, serves as a scathing critique of systemic inequalities. Furthermore, the novel, deeply influenced by Marxist thought, offers a poignant reflection on the struggles of the marginalized, underscoring its lasting significance in contemporary discourse.

Key Words: Marginality, Exploitation, Social Injustice, Caste System, and Colonial Oppression.

Human civilization has witnessed numerous instances of deliberate and intentional ill-treatment and humiliation from those in governing or controlling positions. Notably, a brief study of history highlights that those affected by such suppression often belonged to the lowest sections of society, whether under the caste system in India or racial discrimination elsewhere. Additionally, another factor to consider is the lack of opposition from the suppressed class. It might be due to their smaller numbers, an internal equilibrium among lower-class people, a lack of education, or primarily a lack of critical thinking ability.

One wonders how an individual patiently tolerated the intentional cruelty heaped upon him by another. This thought led me to study Indian society in the pre-independence era when the population was smaller. Moreover, among the members of society, only a negligible percentage governed most of the people. It is quite understandable that Varnashrama Dharma, or the caste system, directly placed a majority of people under the control of a few. Furthermore, even within Varnashrama Dharma, though Brahmins were considered the upper class and enjoyed privileges, the other three castes such as Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra were not without power.

However, the most oppressive elements from all four castes created another caste known as the Panchamas. This deliberate creation served to provide a labor force for all four castes, particularly for menial jobs. In addition, we have heard of African slaves being oppressed in America, but that situation was different—it was a system of owners and workers. In contrast, India's caste system created even more complex layers of discrimination.

A person with a dark complexion, ragged clothes, a timid demeanor, or poor speech was labeled as a Panchama. The Shudra community provided unpaid service to the other three castes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. Moreover, the only advantage they had was being included among the four castes. Nevertheless, there was another group of people who were entirely casteless, working mainly as agricultural laborers.

Their entry into their masters' homes was prohibited, and their children were denied education. They had no rights, and their fate was decided by the four upper castes. Yet, these so-called Panchamas were created by the same God, with the same minds, as the rest of humanity.

Writers like Mulk Raj Anand personally witnessed the injustices inflicted upon the helpless lower castes. What kings and rulers failed to do, novelists like Anand achieved through their art, creating sensational novels like *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. Many city dwellers were unaware of the atrocities committed by the upper castes against the Panchamas.



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Literature became the medium to expose how marginalized societies were formed by fellow humans who believed themselves superior. These two novels are Anand's eyes into the brutalities of the caste system.

Coolie tells the story of Munoo, a boy from the hills who leaves his idyllic surroundings to search for a better life. His first contact with society shatters his dreams. He arrives at the house of a bank clerk, where he witnesses the cruel behavior of the clerk's wife, a shrewish and vindictive woman. In anger, he runs away.

His next experience is working in a primitive pickle and jam factory, where he witnesses a terrible quarrel between two employers fighting over money. Depressed, he decides to try his luck in Bombay's cotton industry, only to find more misery. Eventually, he ends up in Shimla as a servant to an Anglo-Indian woman, pulling a rickshaw for her.

He contracts tuberculosis and dies, longing for the peaceful hills of his childhood. In contrast to Bakha's experiences in *Untouchable*, Munoo's birth into a Kshatriya family defies traditional caste system norms. Anand goes beyond caste discrimination to highlight class struggles.

In *Coolie*, wealth determines social hierarchy rather than caste alone. The novel critiques capitalism, showing how those with money oppress those without it.

In 1926, Anand witnessed a workers' strike in Britain. At first, he did not support it, but after learning about its cause, he realized that Britain was controlled by a small, powerful minority that suppressed the majority. This understanding led him to explore Marxist ideology, inspiring his literary work. Furthermore, Anand believed that socialism alone could create a climate for human development.

He sought to reveal life's harsh realities through literature, hoping to raise awareness about marginalized communities. *Coolie* was written in just three months and was accepted for publication immediately. Anand, influenced by Dickens, was pleased to have done for India what Dickens had done for England. He based Munoo's character on a childhood friend who had worked in a pickle factory.

Encouraged by Herbert Read, Anand crafted *Coolie* into a powerful social critique. The novel takes readers on a journey through India's class divisions. Munoo moves from the hills to towns and cities, encountering various characters and dialects. Peter Quennell describes it as a novel that exposes the bleak reality of India's underclass, unseen by many English writers.

Coolie received widespread attention from Western publications, with many praising Anand's deep human sensibility. The novel's opening sets the tone with Munoo's aunt's shrill voice calling him, symbolizing his forced departure from his village. His journey is marked by physical and emotional suffering.

Anand skillfully contrasts innocence with experience, avoiding an idealized portrayal of village life. Munoo's experiences in the bank manager's house, pickle factory, and Bombay's cotton mills highlight urban exploitation. Anand's characterization stands out in *Coolie*. The oppressed and exploited, the uneducated and guideless, and those leading aimless lives populate the novel.

Munoo embodies all three categories. Driven from his village by his cruel uncle and aunt, he wanders without guidance, enduring hardships at every turn. *Coolie* is a social tragedy, depicting human cruelty through poverty, illiteracy, caste, and economic oppression.

Anand's novel is a striking critique of capitalism and caste oppression. Despite its social message, *Coolie* remains an engaging work of fiction. Munoo represents the universal struggle of the poor and marginalized. His life is not bound by geography—whether in Bilaspur, Sham Nagar, or Bombay, he faces the same exploitation.



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The novel’s realism and reformative value make it a significant literary work. Throughout history, societies have institutionalized oppression, ensuring that the powerful maintain control over the weak. In India, the caste system has long been a mechanism of such oppression, condemning lower-caste individuals to a life of servitude and deprivation.

Coolie, a seminal work by Mulk Raj Anand, provides a profound critique of this social hierarchy, using Munoo’s journey as a lens to examine the interplay of class, caste, and economic injustice. Munoo, the novel’s protagonist, is a young orphan whose life is shaped by the exploitative forces of society.

Anand traces Munoo’s journey across different social spheres, illustrating how oppression functions across various economic and social settings. As he moves from rural India to the industrial hubs of Bombay and finally to Shimla, his experiences reveal the universal nature of exploitation.

Social Stratification in *Coolie*:

Munoo’s journey begins in a small village, where poverty forces him to seek employment. His first experience as a domestic servant in the home of a bank clerk exposes him to the rigid hierarchies of urban India. His employer’s wife treats him with cruelty, reinforcing the idea that servitude is his inevitable fate.

Unable to endure the abuse, Munoo flees, only to enter another world of exploitation in an industrial setting. Working in a pickle factory, Munoo witnesses firsthand the capitalist greed that reduces human beings to mere laboring machines. The factory owners prioritize profit over human welfare, mirroring the harsh realities of industrial labor conditions in colonial India.

When Munoo later arrives in Bombay, he joins the workforce in a textile mill, where he is subjected to extreme working conditions. The overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions of the laborers highlight the brutal realities of urban poverty.

Munoo’s final employment as a rickshaw puller in Shimla seals his tragic fate. The physical exhaustion and relentless demands of his work take a toll on his health, ultimately leading to his death from tuberculosis. Through Munoo’s suffering, Anand illustrates the inescapable cycle of poverty and exploitation that defines the lives of the marginalized.

Marxist Influence and Anand’s Vision:

Anand’s political consciousness was shaped by his exposure to socialist ideologies during his time in Britain. Observing labor strikes and engaging with Marxist literature, he developed a deep understanding of class struggle, which he infused into his writing.

The novel aligns with broader global discourses on social justice, echoing the works of Charles Dickens and Upton Sinclair, who similarly exposed the injustices of industrial capitalism. Anand’s depiction of Munoo’s plight highlights the intersection of caste and class oppression, demonstrating how economic structures perpetuate systemic inequalities.

Characterization and Narrative Technique:

He employs a picaresque narrative structure, chronicling Munoo’s episodic journey through different social settings. This technique allows for a panoramic view of oppression in colonial India. Each of Munoo’s experiences serves as a microcosm of broader societal injustices, reinforcing the novel’s central themes.

He also applies a stream-of-consciousness technique to delve into Munoo’s psyche. This narrative style captures his shifting emotions—hope, fear, despair—as he navigates an unforgiving world. By giving readers direct access to Munoo’s thoughts, Anand fosters a deep emotional connection between the protagonist and the audience.



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Notably, Munoo’s characterization places him among literary figures like David Copperfield and Huckleberry Finn— young boys navigating a world that is cruel and indifferent to their suffering. However, unlike these Western protagonists, Munoo’s fate is not one of triumph but of inevitable demise, underscoring the novel’s tragic realism.

Thematic Concerns in *Coolie*:

1. Caste and Social Hierarchy:

The caste system is a dominant force in *Coolie*, dictating Munoo’s position in society. Moreover, although born into a Kshatriya family, his low economic status strips him of any privilege. Through Munoo’s experiences, Anand critiques the rigid hierarchies that perpetuate discrimination and suffering.

2. Capitalist Exploitation:

The novel exposes the ruthless nature of industrial capitalism, where workers are mere cogs in the machine of profit-making. Munoo’s experiences in the pickle factory and textile mill illustrate the disregard for human dignity in the pursuit of wealth.

3. Colonial Oppression:

While *Coolie* primarily focuses on internal social injustices, it also critiques British colonial rule, which exacerbates economic disparities. The colonial system facilitates the exploitation of Indian laborers, reinforcing existing class and caste inequalities.

4. Human Resilience and Tragedy:

Despite his suffering, Munoo exhibits moments of hope and resilience. His unwavering spirit in the face of adversity makes his eventual death even more poignant. Anand presents Munoo not just as a victim but as a symbol of the countless marginalized individuals whose struggles go unnoticed.

5. Anand’s Literary Legacy and Impact:

Mulk Raj Anand’s work played a crucial role in shaping modern Indian literature. His commitment to social realism influenced a generation of writers who sought to use literature as a vehicle for social change. *Coolie* remains a cornerstone of socially conscious literature, often compared to novels like Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers!* and Premchand’s *Godan*, which also focus on the struggles of the underprivileged.

6. Gender and Marginalisation:

Anand subtly incorporates gender dynamics into *Coolie*, revealing how women from lower socio-economic backgrounds face double oppression—both as laborers and as women. Female characters in the novel endure systemic discrimination, further intensifying their struggle for survival.

7. Migration and Displacement:

Munoo’s journey from his village to different cities reflects the widespread issue of migration among India’s rural poor. Anand highlights how migration does not necessarily lead to economic improvement but often results in further exploitation and instability.



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8. The Illusion of Social Mobility:

One of the most striking themes in *Coolie* is the illusion of social mobility. Munoo's journey represents the false hope that hard work alone can elevate one's status. The novel exposes the brutal reality that those born into poverty remain trapped within the confines of economic and social stratification.

9. Dehumanisation of Labourers:

Throughout *Coolie*, Anand critiques the way labourers are treated as expendable commodities rather than human beings. Munoo's experiences serve as a stark reminder of the inhumane conditions endured by the working class, drawing attention to the systemic devaluation of labour.

Beyond India, *Coolie* has found resonance with global audiences, drawing parallels with the struggles of the working class worldwide. Anand's use of English to narrate an authentically Indian experience helped bridge the gap between regional literature and global readership, further cementing his influence on postcolonial literary studies.

Anand's Literary Legacy and Impact:

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Relevance in Contemporary Society:

Even decades after its publication, *Coolie* remains relevant in discussions on social justice, labor rights, and economic inequality. Despite the passage of time, the novel's portrayal of social inequality, economic exploitation, and systemic oppression remains a stark reflection of the ongoing struggles faced by marginalized communities. In an era of growing economic disparities, Anand's critique of an unjust social order serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for reform.

The continued existence of exploitative labor conditions in modern-day factories, construction sites, and domestic work mirrors the challenges faced by Munoo. The global nature of worker exploitation, especially among migrant laborers, highlights the persistence of economic and social inequalities.

Anand's work urges readers to acknowledge and address these issues rather than view them as relics of the past. The expansion of capitalism and globalization has led to new forms of worker exploitation that parallel Munoo's experiences. The gig economy, corporate monopolies, and unfair labor practices all reinforce the themes Anand explores in *Coolie*.

His work remains an essential literary touchstone for activists and scholars advocating for human rights. The early 20th century was a period of great social and political upheaval in India. The rise of nationalist movements, the influence of socialist ideologies, and growing awareness of labor rights contributed to a shifting social landscape.

Anand's *Coolie* captures this transformative era, offering a powerful indictment of caste discrimination and economic exploitation. Munoo's tragic fate serves as a stark reminder of the countless individuals trapped in cycles of poverty and servitude.

Through *Coolie*, Anand not only exposes these injustices but also challenges readers to confront the realities of oppression in their own societies. The novel remains a testament to literature's ability to drive social change, making it a crucial work in the canon of Indian and global literature.



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In sum, at the turn of the 20th century, European political and social thought influenced India, sparking a revolution. The humanitarian and labor movements, along with industrialization, altered societal structures. Social regeneration efforts aimed to uplift the marginalized, including women, who suffered both social and economic discrimination.

Social philosophy must be practical. If it cannot provide bread to the starving, freedom to the oppressed, and power to the powerless, it remains an empty academic exercise. The distinction between social classes must be erased to achieve true equality. Political, social, and spiritual democracy must merge to create a just society.

Novels with ideological themes often use stream-of-consciousness techniques, as seen in Afro-American and Dalit literature. Mulk Raj Anand's works, influenced by James Joyce's *Ulysses*, capture the holistic and experiential nature of oppression. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* transcend mere storytelling to depict deep social realities.

Bakha in *Untouchable* struggles between tradition and modernity. Though he desires change, social oppression prevents him from achieving it. His frustration mirrors the broader Dalit struggle for dignity. Anand evokes sympathy for Bakha but does not create a sense of righteous indignation, possibly because Anand himself was not an untouchable.

Moreover, *Coolie* presents a more nuanced exploration of class struggle. Munoo's experiences in various industries and locations illustrate the pervasive nature of exploitation. Anand's portrayal of Munoo's struggles evokes a sense of outrage and indignation, underscoring the need for systemic change.

Anand's commitment to social realism and his use of literary techniques like stream-of-consciousness narration have influenced generations of writers. His work has also resonated with readers worldwide, providing a powerful lens through which to examine social justice issues.

The relevance of Anand's work extends beyond the Indian context. His exploration of universal themes like oppression, exploitation, and the human condition continues to resonate with readers globally. As a writer, Anand's legacy serves as a testament to the transformative power of literature.

Conclusive Remarks:

In essence, Anand's *Coolie* remains a seminal work of Indian literature, offering a powerful critique of social injustice and economic exploitation. Through Munoo's tragic journey, Anand exposes the darker aspects of human nature and society, urging readers to confront the harsh realities of oppression.

Anand's literary legacy continues to inspire writers and readers alike, cementing his place as one of the most important Indian writers of the 20th century. His work serves as a powerful reminder of the need for social change and the transformative power of literature to drive that change.

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