



Original Article

A Critical Analysis of Social Realism in Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes the novel, focusing on its protagonist, Munoo, a young boy from a mountain village, whose life journey exposes the brutal realities of poverty, class discrimination, and the dehumanizing effects of colonial capitalism. The paper examines how Anand employs a realist narrative style to depict the systematic oppression faced by the subaltern class, highlighting themes of alienation, identity crisis, and the failure of individual resilience against insurmountable social structures. The analysis delves into the novel's depiction of the caste system, the exploitation of child labour, and the urban-rural divide. Furthermore, it explores Anand's use of symbolism and his apathetic tone to underscore the hopelessness of Munoo's plight, ultimately positioning the novel not merely as a story of a single coolie, but as an indictment of the entire colonial system that perpetuates such suffering. Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Coolie* (1936) is a poignant work of social realism that critiques the severe exploitation and dehumanization of the working class in pre-independence India. Anand uses Munoo's tragic life to highlight key themes: the pervasive exploitation by both colonial and indigenous elites, the stark class struggle, and the inevitable dehumanization of the individual in a system that values labor over human life. The novel's picaresque structure and emotional realism serve as a powerful indictment of social injustice, making it a foundational text in Indian English literature and a timeless protest against systemic oppression.

Keywords: Social Realism, Colonialism, Class Struggle, Caste System, Poverty, Child Labour, Exploitation

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is recognized as a foundational figure in Indian English literature, distinguished by his profound engagement with the socio-political conditions of his time. His literary contributions consistently aimed to portray the lives of the marginalized and oppressed segments of society. Published in 1936, *Coolie* was Anand's second novel and played a pivotal role in establishing his reputation as one of India's leading English authors. The novel offers a trenchant critique of both British colonial rule in India and the deeply entrenched Indian caste system. The narrative of *Coolie* meticulously chronicles the harrowing journey of Munoo, a 14-year-old orphan, whose life is a relentless struggle against the pervasive forces of poverty and the systemic exploitation perpetuated by the prevailing social and political structures of pre-independence India.

Social realism, as a distinct literary and artistic movement, fundamentally seeks to illuminate the authentic socio-political conditions experienced by the working class. Its core objective is to critique the underlying power structures that perpetuate these conditions. The movement typically employs a form of descriptive or critical realism, deliberately focusing on the "ugly realities of contemporary life" and fostering empathy for working-class individuals, particularly the impoverished. This movement gained significant traction during the interwar period, emerging as a direct response to the widespread hardships and societal problems endured by common people in the aftermath of the Great Crash. Proponents of social realism aimed to make art more accessible to a broader audience and to expose deteriorating social conditions, thereby holding existing governmental and social systems accountable. The lineage of social realism can be traced back to 19th-century European Realism, exemplified by artists such as Honoré Daumier, Gustave Courbet, and Jean-François Millet. It is crucial to differentiate social realism from socialist realism, which was an official art form in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc; social realism, in contrast, is not state-sanctioned and allows for greater artistic subjectivity.

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Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* stands as a seminal and highly effective work of social realism in Indian English literature. It meticulously exposes the multi-layered exploitation and systemic injustices faced by marginalized communities in colonial India through the poignant and unflinching narrative of its protagonist, Munoo. In doing so, the novel transcends mere depiction, serving as a powerful medium of protest and an urgent call for profound social change. This engagement with social realism is not merely an aesthetic choice but a deliberate, politically charged narrative strategy. The novel moves beyond simply illustrating poverty and hardship; it frames these conditions as direct consequences of specific, oppressive power structures—colonialism, capitalism, and the caste system. Therefore, social realism, in Anand's hands, becomes a potent tool for decolonization and social reform, adopting an activist stance rather than a purely descriptive one. It underscores that for Anand, the purpose of art is not just to reflect reality, but to actively challenge and seek to transform it. Furthermore, by meticulously detailing the specific, unflinching reality of one boy's suffering, Anand's social realism manages to universalize the experience of exploitation for millions, demonstrating that the depth and authenticity of an individual's plight, rendered through realistic portrayal, can be profoundly impactful in conveying a universal message. Munoo, the individual, effectively becomes a microcosm of collective suffering, fostering empathy and understanding on a broader scale.

The Landscape of Social Realism

Historical Context and Aims of Social Realism

Social realism emerged as a significant artistic and literary counter-movement, directly reacting against the prevailing idealism and the "exaggerated ego encouraged by Romanticism". It sought to ground art in observable reality rather than subjective emotion. Its rise was intrinsically linked to the stark, visible consequences of the Industrial Revolution. This period witnessed the rapid growth of urban centres, the proliferation of widespread slums, and an intensified contrast between the ostentatious wealth of the upper classes and the abject poverty of the working class.

Artists and writers committed to social realism consciously pledged to "fight the beautiful art"—meaning art that prioritized aesthetic pleasure over social commentary. Instead, they focused on depicting the "ugly realities of contemporary life" with the explicit aim of exposing and holding accountable the existing governmental and social systems responsible for these conditions. The movement's artistic lineage can be traced back to the Realist currents of 19th-century European art, with notable figures such as Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet. It also found expression in Russia through the Peredvizhniki movement, which was critically engaged with the social environment of the Tsarist period. This global pattern reveals that social realism tends to emerge and flourish wherever rapid economic shifts, such as industrialization and the rise of capitalism, create stark social inequalities and a burgeoning, marginalized working class.

While social realism shares some thematic commonalities with socialist realism—a state-sanctioned art

form prevalent in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc—it maintains a crucial distinction. Social realism is "not an official art" and, significantly, "allows space for subjectivity". This distinction is vital for understanding the independent and critical nature of Anand's artistic expression, which was not dictated by political dogma. In the specific context of colonial India, the economic transformation brought by industrialization was compounded by foreign rule, making the critique of power structures not only economic but also profoundly political and racial. Therefore, Anand's work, while participating in a broader global literary movement, simultaneously delivers a highly specific and incisive postcolonial critique of industrial capitalism operating under the aegis of foreign domination. His realism is thus a localized manifestation of a global phenomenon of social critique.

Anand's Place within Indian English Literature and Social Reform

Mulk Raj Anand is widely acknowledged as one of the pioneering figures of Indian English literature, distinguished by his profound and consistent engagement with the social realities of his time. His novels, including *Coolie* and *Untouchable*, serve as prime examples of his unwavering commitment to social realism. Through these works, Anand aimed to represent the world truthfully, consistently focusing his narratives on the lives of the working class and the oppressed segments of society. He is characterized as a "dynamic essayist identifying with the Sarva hara (the denied class of society)" and a "social reformist" driven by deep social concerns and profound humanity for the oppressed.

Anand's literary output is consistently described as a "medium of protest— an urgent call for social change". His overarching objective was to "overhaul the discouraged society of India", using his art as a vehicle for societal transformation. This is further supported by the understanding that Anand's social realism is not merely descriptive; it is deeply and consciously ideologically driven. His unique blend of Marxist humanism provides the analytical framework through which he identifies and dissects the systemic causes of suffering—namely, class oppression, unfettered capitalism, and colonial exploitation. This ideological underpinning fuels his "urgent call for social change", transforming his literary work into a purposeful instrument for societal transformation. The "ruthless realism" that characterizes his writing is, therefore, a direct consequence of his deeply felt indignation and his unwavering commitment to social reform, demonstrating that his art is inextricably linked to his socio-political vision.

Manifestations of Social Realism in *Coolie*

Munoo's Journey of Exploitation and Poverty

Munoo, a 14-year-old orphan originating from the Kangra hills, is tragically propelled into a life of labor due to extreme poverty, a condition exacerbated by his father's loss of land to a landlord. His initial innocence is quickly shattered by the harsh realities he encounters. His journey unfolds in a "picaresque manner," moving through a series of distinct locations, each revealing a new, more profound

layer of exploitation.

His early life in the Village is already marked by poverty and the ill-treatment he endures from his aunt, foreshadowing the hardships to come. He is then sent to Sham Nagar to work as a domestic servant for Babu Nathoo Ram, where he experiences relentless "drudgery," "misery," and severe abuse from Bibiji, the Babu's wife. This period serves as his "first taste of bitterness" and a stark realization of the "wide gap between the rich and the poor". In Daulatpur, Munoo finds employment in a pickle factory, facing further abuse from his partner, Ganpat. Following the factory's closure, he is compelled to work as a coolie in the arduous grain market.

The journey continues to Bombay, where Munoo becomes a "full-fledged victim of the capitalistic exploitation" within a textile mill, enduring "insecurity, low wages and inhuman treatment". He is reduced to "a part of the toiling - struggling and starving masses", with Anand vividly depicting the "nauseating surroundings, dirty lanes, labourers relieving in the open fields" that define their existence. His final destination is Simla, where he is employed by Mrs. Mainwaring as both a domestic servant and a rickshaw puller, tragically facing sexual exploitation. His health rapidly deteriorates, leading to consumption and his premature death at the age of sixteen.

Munoo's death is presented not merely as a personal tragedy but as a poignant "reflection of the systemic neglect and abuse faced by the labouring class". His life story is thus portrayed as representative of the "starving millions of miserable Indians". This consistent pattern of inescapable exploitation, despite Munoo's inherent innocence and lack of personal culpability, powerfully highlights the systemic and pervasive nature of the oppressive social forces at play. It suggests that for the marginalized within this system, individual agency is severely curtailed, if not entirely absent. Munoo's premature death, therefore, is not merely a personal tragedy but a direct and inevitable outcome of this systemic entrapment, emphasizing the novel's deliberate fusion of "propaganda and art" to advocate for "quick social change". The narrative argues that the existing societal structure is inherently designed to crush the vulnerable, rendering individual escape or upward mobility virtually impossible, thus making Munoo a symbol of collective suffering rather than an isolated case.

The Interplay of Class, Caste, and Colonial Oppression

The novel is unequivocally "highly critical of British rule in India and India's caste system, presenting them as intertwined forces of oppression. Anand meticulously exposes the intricate "connection of caste, class, and culture against the backdrop of British imperialism", illustrating how these hierarchies reinforce each other. Despite Munoo's Kshatriya caste background, he is systematically devalued and confined to the most menial jobs due to his poverty and lack of skills. The rigid class system is depicted as an insurmountable barrier, preventing any upward mobility or "assimilation to a higher class".

The novel explicitly manifests class conflicts at multiple societal levels, from the rural landlord seizing

Munoo's father's land to the brutal capitalist exploitation in urban industrial settings. British colonizers are shown to have deliberately established industries in India, transforming them into "another tool for them to exploit the Indian working-class people", highlighting the economic dimension of colonial rule. The narrative also reveals how "upper-class Indians have the link between class of Englishman and lower-class Indian," often abusing and humiliating the poor, thus participating in the oppressive structure. A particularly insidious aspect is how the British "systematically debased the character and attitude of the Indians," leading to a corrupted social fabric where "even the poor have begun exploiting themselves, their own destitute brothers and sisters".

Depiction of the Plight of the Working Class and Urban Poor

Anand's realism is described as "vivid and unflinching," presenting a raw and unvarnished portrayal of squalor, disease, and helplessness prevalent in both rural and urban India. The novel vividly captures the "deplorable conditions, devoid of dignity or hope" endured by the urban poor in Bombay, where "coolies, their wives and children had to sleep on the pavement of the city because they had no living accommodations". Workers are consistently depicted as "ill-paid, ill-housed and treated as objects", stripped of their humanity. The narrative starkly highlights the "huge space between the poor and the rich" and the systemic "failure to bridge the gap" between these two classes. Munoo's devastating transformation from an innocent boy with dreams to a "spineless ghost" due to relentless exploitation serves as a powerful illustration of the severe plight faced by the entire working class.

Beyond the tangible aspects of physical suffering and economic hardship, Anand's social realism meticulously details the profound psychological and spiritual degradation inflicted by the exploitative system. The novel critiques not just material poverty but the systematic stripping away of human essence, individual identity, and the very "ethos of the people". This implies that the ultimate tragedy portrayed is not merely physical death, but the living death of dignity, self-worth, and the human spirit under the relentless pressure of oppressive structures. The novel's power lies in exposing this deeper, more insidious form of exploitation.

Critique of Societal Institutions and Power Structures

Anand's narratives function as a "scathing critique of class hierarchy, capitalist oppression, and colonial exploitation", demonstrating how these forces are intrinsically linked and perpetuate suffering. The legal system is critically examined through the "wrongful arrest and abuse of the honest character Prabha," an incident that powerfully underscores "the bias of institutions that serve the interests of the wealthy".

Capitalism is portrayed as a dehumanizing force where "money is the only God" and, consequently, "man has no worth". Industrialists and capitalists are shown to prioritize profits above all else, treating coolies as mere "expendable commodities" rather than human beings. Colonialism is depicted as having "downright devastated the

very ethos of the people," systematically stripping Indians of not only financial freedom but also their cultural and traditional independence, rendering them "soulless". The casual "slapping of Munoo by a policeman for just looking at him is a mere sign of the cruelty of the colonial" regime. The novel also touches upon political exploitation, showing how politicians manipulate "ignorant labourers" for their own agendas, leading to communal fanaticism and further hardship, such as Munoo losing his job.

Anand's Narrative Choices and Artistic Effectiveness Characterization of Munoo as a Representative Figure

Anand deliberately chose to portray the "lowest and poorest" segments of society, individuals who had "seldom appeared in our literature," thereby giving "voice to the voiceless". This choice was a conscious departure from the literary conventions of his time. Munoo is meticulously characterized as a "helpless and unskilled labourer" whose entire life is defined by the relentless forces of poverty and exploitation. Despite his Kshatriya caste background, Munoo does not overtly rebel against his social position, a narrative choice that underscores the deep-seated and overwhelming nature of the oppressive system he inhabits.

Crucially, Anand humanizes Munoo by delving into his "psychological development" and portraying him as a figure imbued with genuine "hopes and fears" amidst his brutal reality. This humanization is vital, even as Munoo simultaneously serves as a symbolic representative of millions of exploited individuals. He is presented as an "embodiment of miserable childhood". The depiction of Munoo's suffering is rendered in an "exceptional style," allowing his individual plight to attain "epic dimensions," thereby universalizing his experience. Munoo's consistent lack of overt rebellion or traditional heroic action, while potentially perceived as a limitation in terms of individual character development, is a deliberate and powerful narrative choice. It underscores the overwhelming and inescapable power of the oppressive system. Munoo functions as an "anti-hero" not due to a lack of moral fibre or personal courage, but because the systemic social forces arrayed against him are so immense that individual resistance is rendered futile. This choice reinforces the novel's central social message: the root of the problem lies with the system itself, not with the individual's perceived weakness or lack of will. Munoo's tragic and passive fate thus serves as a collective indictment, making him a poignant symbol of the "starving millions" rather than an isolated, individual tragic figure, thereby amplifying the novel's social critique.

Use of Vivid, Unflinching Realism and its Impact

Anand's realism is consistently described as "vivid and unflinching," presenting a raw and unvarnished portrayal of squalor, disease, and helplessness. He employs "ruthless realism" to create a "genuine, genuine and unpleasant impression of the society", ensuring that the harsh realities are not softened or romanticized. The portrayal is so effective that it "gives one a true picture of the conditions the workers live in", immersing the reader directly into the grim environment.

Anand's artistic choices extend to his language, as

he makes "excellent use of a combination of Punjabi and Hindustani idioms and words." His analogies and imagery are deeply rooted in "Indian civilization," which not only helps to "build a realistic scene" but also subtly "reveal[s] the societal ills on the one hand and the Indian identity of the author on the other". The "heart throbbing portrayal of their pathetic state" is designed to "strike a string in the hearts of the conscientious Indians", aiming for an emotional and intellectual impact that prompts reflection and action. By deeply embedding his narrative in the specific linguistic and cultural fabric of India, Anand achieves an unparalleled level of authenticity and vivid realism. This profound cultural specificity, paradoxically, allows the novel to resonate universally. The meticulously detailed portrayal of Munoo's particular suffering within a colonial Indian context transcends its immediate setting, becoming relatable to the struggles of marginalized people across diverse geographies and historical periods. This demonstrates that local authenticity, when rendered with such precision and empathy, can be an exceptionally powerful vehicle for conveying universal themes of injustice, human dignity, and the systemic nature of oppression.

The Novel as a "Medium of Protest" and "Call for Social Change"

Anand's fiction, particularly *Coolie*, is explicitly positioned as a "medium of protest- an urgent call for social change". Its purpose extends beyond mere storytelling. The novel's tragic conclusion, culminating in Munoo's premature death, functions as a "powerful plea for quick social change", emphasizing the urgency of addressing systemic injustices. Anand's novels are characterized as "acts of resistance, combining personal empathy with political critique". His deliberate aim is to "awaken a sense of justice and solidarity among readers" rather than simply evoking pity. The novel directly "censures the cutting edge free enterprise Indian society and medieval framework for the bold and lamentable exploitation of poor people and underdog", leaving no doubt about its critical stance. This consistent framing suggests that what some might perceive as "didacticism" or "propaganda" is, in fact, a deliberate and integral component of Anand's social realist artistic vision. For Anand, art is not an end in itself; it serves a higher purpose- "Art for Life's Sake" —acting as a vehicle for social commentary and reform. The "unflinching realism" is not merely for verisimilitude but serves this specific purpose, making the depicted suffering palpable enough to provoke a strong emotional and intellectual response, thereby instigating a desire for change. This perspective challenges conventional literary criticism that often views didacticism as diminishing artistic merit, proposing instead that for social realism, it enhances its effectiveness in achieving its stated socio-political goals.

Critiques and Limitations of Social Realism in *Coolie*

Some literary critics have "faulted" Anand's early works, including *Coolie*, for what they perceive as "didacticism" and a "markedly polemical style". This critique suggests that the novel's overt social message might, for some, overshadow its purely aesthetic qualities. The novel itself is described as a work where "propaganda

and art are welded together", and certain scholars have explicitly "considered it as propaganda". Anand's well-documented Marxist-oriented views and his explicit desire to "overhaul the discouraged society of India" could be interpreted as driving a clear, perhaps too forceful, social message, potentially at the expense of narrative subtlety or artistic detachment. However, it is important to note Anand's own perspective that "art reflects life; but could not be taken as life itself", indicating his awareness of the distinction between artistic representation and direct political tract, even while advocating for social change. This highlights a fundamental and often debated tension inherent in social realist literature: how to maintain artistic integrity, narrative complexity, and character depth while simultaneously serving a clear and often urgent social or political purpose. The critique of "didacticism" suggests that some readers or scholars might perceive Anand's overt social message as potentially sacrificing narrative nuance or artistic subtlety for the sake of advocacy. However, for Anand, this "welding" of art and purpose was not a compromise but an intentional and essential aspect of his artistic vision. This perspective invites a re-evaluation of what constitutes "artistic merit" within the social realist paradigm, suggesting that for certain literary movements, the explicit social message is not a flaw but a defining strength that enhances its effectiveness in achieving its stated goals.

Analysis of Character Development in Relation to the Social Message

Munoo is consistently characterized as a "helpless and unskilled laborer" who, notably, "does not rebel against his social position" despite his Kshatriya caste. Instead, he "silently surrenders and is cruelly crushed". Critics observe that Anand's characters often function as "representatives of larger social classes" rather than solely as individualistic figures with complex internal struggle. While Anand does humanize Munoo by detailing his "psychological development" and portraying his hopes and fears, some arguments could be made that his primary narrative function is to serve as a symbolic embodiment of the exploited masses. This emphasis might, arguably, limit the exploration of his individual agency or the depth of his complex internal conflicts, prioritizing the social message over individual psychological realism. The "tragic refutation of life for Munoo... caused by his deficiency, which is the single reason of his tragedy" suggests a deterministic view, where Munoo's fate is largely a product of his social condition rather than his choices. Munoo's consistent lack of overt rebellion or traditional heroic action, while potentially perceived as a limitation in terms of individual character development, is a deliberate and powerful narrative choice. It underscores the overwhelming and inescapable power of the oppressive system. Munoo functions as an "anti-hero" not due to a lack of moral fiber or personal courage, but because the systemic social forces arrayed against him are so immense that individual resistance is rendered futile. This choice reinforces the novel's central social message: the root of the problem lies with the system itself, not with the individual's perceived weakness or lack of will. Munoo's

tragic and passive fate thus serves as a collective indictment, making him a poignant symbol of the "starving millions" rather than an isolated, individual tragic figure, thereby amplifying the novel's social critique.

Anand was a "staunch Marxist" and his "humanism was based on Marxism". This ideological foundation shaped his vision of a "universe of adoration and human concern". His overarching aim was to "uplift the condition of the" downtrodden and to expose and eliminate "feudalist exploitation and oppression, especially evil social practices including casteism and untouchability". His novels, including *Coolie*, were "deliberately designed to display the suffering and exploitation of the peasants and weaker section", reflecting his commitment to social justice. The novel's "indictment against society as a whole – a society that breeds such prejudices and cupidity and cruelty" is a direct manifestation of his reformist zeal and his belief in systemic change.

Conclusion

Coolie stands as an exceptionally powerful and effective social realist novel, primarily due to its unflinching and comprehensive portrayal of the grim realities of poverty, multifaceted exploitation, and pervasive social injustice. Anand masterfully humanizes the downtrodden through the meticulously detailed and tragic journey of Munoo, successfully transforming abstract social issues into tangible and deeply relatable human experiences. The novel functions as a "scathing critique" of entrenched class hierarchy, relentless capitalist oppression, and the dehumanizing effects of colonial exploitation, consistently highlighting systemic failures rather than individual misfortunes. Its vivid and often brutal realism, seamlessly integrated with Anand's profound humanistic and Marxist influences, elevates the narrative beyond mere storytelling, transforming it into a potent "medium of protest" and an urgent "call for social change".

Coolie remains a seminal and indispensable work within Indian English literature, celebrated for giving "voice to the voiceless" and unequivocally affirming Anand's deeply held belief in "the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings". Its "ruthless realism" and "deeply felt indignation of social wrongs" continue to provoke critical thought, foster empathy, and raise profound awareness about both historical and ongoing social inequalities. The novel's "universal significance" ensures its sustained relevance far beyond its specific historical context, contributing meaningfully to the broader global discourse on human rights, labour exploitation, social justice, and the enduring struggle against oppression. The novel's enduring significance lies not solely in its literary quality or its realistic portrayal, but crucially in its role as a foundational text for "protest literature" within the burgeoning field of Indian English writing. It established a powerful precedent for using fictional narratives as a direct and potent means of social and political advocacy, thereby influencing subsequent generations of writers committed to addressing issues of social justice. This positions *Coolie* as more than just a novel; it is a historical document of resistance, a blueprint for literary activism, and a testament to the power of art to



instigate societal critique and reform. Furthermore, Munoo's tragic and premature death, coupled with the novel's explicit plea for "quick social change", strongly implies that the social problems depicted were urgent and largely unresolved at the time of the novel's writing. Descriptions of "systemic mechanisms that degrade and dehumanize the poor" and the "failure to bridge the gap between these two classes" further suggest deep-seated, intractable issues. The continued relevance and resonance of *Coolie* in contemporary discussions, decades after its publication, point to the persistent and, in many cases, unresolved nature of the fundamental social problems it addresses—poverty, exploitation, class disparity, and systemic injustice. While the specific manifestations of these issues may have evolved since colonial times, the underlying dynamics of power and marginalization often persist. This suggests that Anand's social realism is not merely a historical artefact, but a timeless and universal commentary on the human condition under various forms of capitalism and social stratification. The novel's "call for social change" thus continues to resonate, serving as a powerful reminder of ongoing struggles for equity and dignity worldwide.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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