

Class Conflict and Capitalist Indian Society in Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

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Abstract

This paper explores the issue of class conflict, focusing on the tension between the wealthy capitalist colonizers, the upper-class Indians, and the lower-class laborers. The novel portrays the deep social and economic divisions exacerbated by colonialism in India, shedding light on the dehumanizing impact on the working poor and the role of various societal groups in sustaining these oppressive systems. Within the capitalist framework, characters like Munoo, Daya Ram, Parbha, Tulsi, Hari, and Ratan, who represent the working class, endure constant exploitation and oppression. Munoo's journey begins in a rural village, where poverty and limited opportunities force him to move to the city. His experiences as a coolie in various settings—such as a pickle factory, a cotton mill, and as a domestic servant—reveal the brutal conditions faced by the working class. Anand critiques the complicity of British colonialism and capitalism in perpetuating class conflict, highlighting how the colonial economy benefits both the British and the Indian elite while exploiting the labor of the working class.

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Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* is a powerful social critique that vividly portrays the deep-rooted class conflict within the capitalist structure of colonial India. The novel underscores the stark contrast between the privileged rich and the downtrodden poor, while emphasizing the inhumanity of a social system that marginalizes the vulnerable. Through the life of Munoo, a poor, oppressed young boy, Anand highlights the exploitation and suffering endured by the working class, exacerbated by both Indian capitalists and British colonial rulers. Munoo, the protagonist, eventually becomes a servant in Parbha's factory, which already employs several workers. However, Parbha himself faces his own challenges, as he lacks sufficient funds to properly run the factory and has taken out a loan from his neighbor, Sir Todar Mal. As a result, Parbha is continually exploited and subjected to humiliation by Sir Todar Mal. Although Parbha is portrayed as a kind-hearted person, his business partner, Ganpat, is the opposite: harsh, sullen, and abusive toward the workers, including the servants. The upper-class Indians, many of whom have benefited from colonial rule, exploit the lower working class. They further enhance their power and influence by collaborating with the colonial capitalists, who themselves are wealthy and dominant.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* is a novel that responds to the widespread exploitation and oppression caused by colonial rule in India. For over two centuries, the British colonizers dominated India, subjecting its people to severe exploitation, degradation and brutality. Under British rule, industries were introduced to India, which, instead of benefiting the local population, became another tool for exploiting the Indian working class. European industrialists and capitalists were primarily concerned with maximizing their profits and showed no interest in improving the living conditions of the impoverished Indian population.

During this period, Indian society was riddled with extreme poverty, religious conflicts and social unrest. A large segment of the population, especially from the lower working class, was plagued by hunger, starvation, and the harsh realities of poverty. The forces of capitalism and colonialism not only devastated the lives of the working class but also taught the Indian upper classes to adopt exploitative practices, reinforcing a cycle of inequality and oppression. The novel reflects the deep social and economic divisions that colonialism exacerbated in India, highlighting the dehumanizing effects on the working poor and the complicity of various societal groups in maintaining these oppressive structures.

In *Coolie*, Anand portrays class conflicts in a clear and explicit manner at various levels of society. Within the capitalist system, characters such as Munoo,

Daya Ram, Parbha, Tulsi, Hari, and Ratan, who represent the working class, are subjected to relentless exploitation and oppression. Their lives are marked by poverty and suffering as they endure the harsh realities of an economic system that disregards their well-being for profit. The novel also reveals that class conflict is not confined to urban centers but extends even to rural areas. In the village, the local landlord, a wealthy and powerful figure, seizes a small plot of land that belonged to Munoo's father, Jay Singh. This act highlights the ongoing exploitation within rural society, where the poor and powerless are at the mercy of the rich and influential, further deepening the divide between the classes. The writer describes the tragic death of Munoo's father as a heartbreaking event:

"He knew how his father had died a slow death of bitterness and disappointment and left his mother a penniless beggar to support a young brother-in-law and child in arms." (*Coolie*, 3)

After the death of his father, Munoo's mother also passes away. He was then sent to live with his uncle and aunt. They decided to send him to the city of Sham Nagar to work and earn money. Though, Munoo was reluctant to leave his village, he had no say in the matter, as the decision had already been made by his uncle and aunt.

In Sham Nagar, Munoo stayed at the house of Nathoo Ram, who worked as a sub-accountant at the Imperial Bank. Munoo's life there was filled with exploitation and humiliation at the hands of his relatives. Nathoo Ram's wife treated him harshly, frequently belittling and physically punishing him. He was not allowed to sit with the rest of the family in the living room, which made him feel like an outsider. His role was confined to that of a servant, and he was paid very little for his labor, making him feel like an object, rather than a person with dignity. His experience at Nathoo Ram's house serves as a powerful example of how social and economic circumstances can lead to the degradation and mistreatment of the vulnerable. The wife of Nathoo Ram instructs him as: "Your place is here in the kitchen! You must not enter the sport of Chota Babu and children, you must get on quickly work in the house." (*Coolie*, 23)

Munoo spent a restless night in a cramped corner of the kitchen, where the buzzing of mosquitoes in his ears and their relentless biting made it nearly impossible to sleep. His life at Nathoo Ram's house was quickly turning into a monotonous routine of domestic servitude. He was constantly subjected to physical and verbal abuse, and his sense of dignity was stripped away. One day, while he was standing in the kitchen, Bibiji, Nathoo Ram's wife, continued her tirade of insults and mistreatment. She shouted at him mercilessly, her words cutting him down, showing no sign of kindness or empathy.

“There is no time to lose since you are being paid a good wage, more money than you ever saw in your whole life in village, more money in fact than your mother or father ever saw, it would be worthwhile for you to do a little work for it.”(Coolie, 23)

In reality, they barely provided him with enough food to sustain him. Even his meager wages of three rupees a month were never paid to him.

One day, when Bibiji was away, Munoo joined Shila, Nathoo Ram’s daughter and her friends in their play. In a playful moment, Munoo bit Shila’s cheek, causing her to cry out in pain. Her friends quickly ran to tell Bibiji, who became enraged. She refused to listen to Munoo’s explanation and without any mercy, had him severely beaten by Nathoo Ram. The unbearable mistreatment pushed Munoo to his breaking point. Unable to endure the constant abuse any longer, he quietly slipped away from the house and left for Daulatpur. In Daulatpur, Munoo found work at a jam factory, but his struggles didn’t end there. The factory’s owner, Parbha Dayal, was unable to repay a loan from Sir Todar Mal, leading to the closure of the factory. Parbha Dayal had no choice but to return to his village, leaving Munoo without a job. Once again, Munoo was left unemployed and facing severe difficulties. Determined to escape his hardships, he eventually made his way to Bombay.

In Bombay, Munoo found work in one of the city’s many unsanitary and poorly managed workplaces, where he was paid a meager wage for long hours. The conditions were harsh, and the workers—both Indian and British—shared a common experience of exploitation. Sir George White’s cotton mill, with its advanced machinery and superior technology, symbolized the intense exploitation of the workers, who were trapped in a cycle of poverty, disease, and humiliation. The workers, struggling with dehumanization and mistreatment, had little hope or means of improvement. Among them, however, was Ratan, a worker who refused to accept the abuse. He stood up against the mistreatment he and his fellow workers faced, but as a result, he was dismissed from his job. Undeterred, Ratan took the matter up with the Trade Union to which he belonged, seeking justice for himself and his fellow workers. Soon after, Sauda Muzaffar and Jackson, two members of The Red Flag Union, became involved. Both unions agreed to cooperate with each other, combining their efforts to support the workers and fight for their rights in the face of exploitation. In these dire circumstances, a member of the Red Flag Union delivered a speech, saying:

“There are only two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor, and between the two there is no connection. The rich and powerful are honored and admired by the whole world.... and by themselves. You, poor and the humble, the meek and the gentle are swindled out of your rights, and you are respected by no

one. Stand up, then, stand up for your rights, you rootless wretches. Stand up for justice.” (*Coolie*, 233)

He urged the workers to stand up for their rights and demanded that they take action by going on strike. However, in an attempt to undermine the workers’ unity, the mill management spread a malicious rumor designed to create division among them. The rumor falsely claimed that a Hindu child had been kidnapped by Muslims in the city. This sparked a violent communal conflict, diverting the workers’ focus from their strike to religious tensions. The chaos resulted in many deaths and injuries in the large crowd. Despite the danger, Munoo managed to narrowly escape being caught in the violence.

The mistreatment by industrialists and the burden of excessive labor not only made the lives of workers dejected but also pushed them toward dishonesty and moral decline. As a result, whenever workers had a day off, they often turned to alcohol and visited red-light districts in search of fleeting pleasure and escape. Munro, however, was not only a victim of poverty but also of sexual exploitation by Mrs. Mainwaring. Their paths crossed when her car accidentally hit him, and she took him to her home in Simla. Drawn to the sixteen-year-old boy, she subjected him to sexual abuse. Munoo was forced to work as her rickshaw puller and endured grueling labor in her household. Overworked and exploited, he met an untimely death at a young age.

Class Conflict and Indian Society

Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* is a powerful exploration of class conflict and social inequality in Indian society during the Colonial era. The novel, published in 1936, is set against the backdrop of British India and follows the life of Munoo, a young boy from the hills who is forced into the harsh realities of urban exploitation and rural poverty. Through Munoo’s journey, Anand critiques the systemic oppression perpetuated by class hierarchies, colonialism, and capitalism.

Munoo’s story begins in a rural village, where poverty and lack of opportunities force him to migrate to the city. This migration highlights the disparity between rural and urban India, as well as the exploitation of rural labor in urban centers. In the city, Munoo encounters the brutal realities of industrialization and capitalism, where the working class is exploited by factory owners, merchants, and the elite. Munoo’s experiences as a coolie in various settings—such as the pickle factory, the cotton mill, and as a domestic servant—expose the dehumanizing conditions faced by the working class. The factory owners and employers, who belong to the upper class, exploit Munoo and others like him for cheap labor, paying little attention to their well-being or dignity. While the novel primarily focuses on class,

it also touches on the intersection of caste and class in Indian society. Munro, as a lower-caste boy, faces additional layers of discrimination and marginalization. The hierarchical nature of Indian society, with its rigid caste system, exacerbates the exploitation of the lower classes.

Anand critiques the role of British colonialism and capitalism in perpetuating class conflict. The colonial economy benefits the British and the Indian elite at the expense of the working class. The cotton mill where Munoo works symbolizes the exploitative nature of industrialization under colonial rule, where workers are treated as expendable commodities. Throughout the novel, Munoo and other characters attempt to resist their exploitation, but their efforts are often futile due to their lack of power and resources. The novel underscores the systemic nature of class oppression, which makes it difficult for individuals to escape their circumstances.

Anand portrays Indian society as deeply divided along class lines, with a small elite controlling wealth and power while the majority struggles to survive. The novel highlights the lack of social mobility and the entrenched nature of poverty. The rapid urbanization of colonial India is depicted as a double-edged sword. While cities offer opportunities, they also lead to the displacement and exploitation of rural migrants like Munoo. The city is portrayed as a place of alienation and suffering for the poor. Anand emphasizes the loss of human dignity faced by the working class, who are reduced to mere tools for profit. Munoo's gradual physical and emotional decline symbolizes the toll of exploitation on the individual. Despite the bleak portrayal of class conflict, Anand infuses the novel with moments of hope and resilience, particularly through Munoo's spirit and determination. However, the novel ultimately ends on a tragic note, underscoring the devastating impact of systemic oppression.

Thus, in *Coolie*, Mulk Raj Anand provides a searing critique of class conflict and social inequality in Indian society. Through Munoo's journey, he exposes the exploitation of the working class, the intersection of caste and class, and the destructive impact of colonialism and capitalism. The novel remains a poignant commentary on the struggles of the marginalized and the need for social justice.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that in *Coolie*, Mulk Raj Anand explores the theme of class conflict within the context of capitalist Indian society. The novel highlights the harsh realities faced by the working class, particularly through the experiences of Munoo, a poor, young boy who is forced to navigate the oppressive systems of exploitation. The story traces Munoo's journey from his rural village to the cities, where he encounters different forms of social and economic oppression.

As he moves from one job to another, working as a servant, factory laborer, and rickshaw puller, he is subjected to the exploitation of both the wealthy Indian capitalists and the British colonial rulers. The upper classes, driven by greed and a desire for power, view the working class as disposable, while the workers are caught in a cycle of poverty, misery, and helplessness. Through Munoo's struggles, Anand critiques the capitalist system, which perpetuates inequality by exploiting the labor of the poor for the benefit of the wealthy. The novel presents the grim reality of class conflict, where the lower classes are denied agency, dignity, and basic human rights. The brutal treatment of workers and the systemic oppression they face are central themes, illustrating how the capitalist structure creates a divide between the rich and the poor, leaving the underprivileged trapped in a relentless struggle for survival. Finally, *Coolie* is a poignant depiction of the suffering of the marginalized in a society that values wealth over human dignity, and it serves as a powerful critique of the capitalist system in colonial India. Anand powerfully portrays and depicts the plight of the underprivileged and the marginalized in a caste-class-ridden socio-economic spectrum of society in which humans are used and money is loved.

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