



Exploring the Wretchedness Fate of the Indian Workers: A study in the Light of Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*.

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Abstract:

History and literature are indissoluble and in this context, no other novel can be as worth proving as *Coolie*. The period of British Raj in India, which lasted from 1757 to 1947, is often portrayed as a time of great development and modernization. However, this period was also marked by widespread exploitation of Indian labourers who were subjected to hunched working conditions, low wages, and a lack of basic human rights. The British colonizers exploited the Indian labour force by creating a system of indentured labour. Under this system, Indians were forced to work in plantations, mines, and factories for long hours and low wages. Many of these workers were brought to British colonies like Mauritius, Fiji, and South Africa, where they were used to build infrastructure and extract resources. The conditions under which Indian labourers worked are deplorable. Workers were often subjected to inhumane treatment, including physical and sexual abuse. The labourers were forced to work for long hours, without any breaks or rest periods. They were often subjected to extreme heat or cold, and many suffer from exhaustion, dehydration, and malnutrition. Anand's novel *Coolie* is an epitome of such exploitation where Munoo, the protagonist is well associated with the exploitation by the forces such as capitalism, industrialism and colonialism. Munoo represents thousands of labourers who are denied their right to life and happiness. So this paper is a thought provoking attempt to explore the experience of labourers and coolies during the British rule in India.

Keywords: Indissoluble, Exploitation, Indentured, Exhaustion, Dehydration, Capitalism, Colonialism.

Introduction:

Industrial revolution came in India in the second half of the 19th century much later than in Europe. At the initial stages, cotton and jute factories were built by the Britishers and gradually other industries like mining, tea plantations, railway, iron, shipyards were set up in India. So a large number of new worker and labour class people have emerged in the society. These people have remained throughout their lives under social and economical injustices, as if their lots are destined to suffer whether in a village like Bilaspur or small town like Sham Nagar, or big cities like Daulatpur and Bombay. The condition of the poor is equally wretched and miserable whether in rural or urban India. The novel *Coolie* provides a powerful representation of the deplorable state of labourers in India during the colonial period. The novel humanizes the struggle of labourers by portraying these issues through the eyes of Munoo, making their plight all the more poignant and compelling. The novel remains a relevant and powerful commentary on the contemporary state of labourers.

Marxist Perspective:

Set against the backdrop of British colonial rule in the early 20th century and the oppressive social and economic conditions of the time, the novel presents a scathing critique of the capitalist system and the exploitation of the working class. Marxism is a political and economic theory that seeks to establish a classless society through the elimination of private property and the means of production. Anand, a committed Marxist himself, employs a range of literary devices to convey the tenets of Marxism and its relevance to the struggles of the working class in India. One of the central characters in “Coolie” is Munoo, a young boy who is forced to work as a coolie, or labourer, to support his family. Munoo’s experiences provide a powerful indictment of the capitalist system, which forces individuals to work long hours for low wages in order to survive. Anand uses Munoo’s story to highlight the inherent contradictions of capitalism, which promises economic prosperity and social mobility but ultimately perpetuates inequality and oppression.

Through Munoo’s struggles, Anand also underscores the importance of collective action and solidarity among the working class. He emphasizes the need for workers to come together and fight for their rights, rather than succumbing to the divide-and-conquer tactics of the ruling class. This emphasis on the

power of collective action is a hallmark of Marxist theory, which stresses the importance of the working class as a revolutionary force capable of bringing about social change. Moreover, Anand highlights the role of imperialism and colonialism in perpetuating the capitalist system in India. He suggests that the exploitation of Indian labourers is not just a result of domestic economic policies, but also reflects the larger global economic system that privileges the interests of Western nations and corporations over those of developing countries. This critique of imperialism is another key aspect of Marxist theory, which views colonialism as a form of economic exploitation that reinforces the capitalist system. The novel stands as a testament to the ongoing relevance of Marxist theory in the fight against social and economic inequality.

Plights of Indian Labourers:

The plights of Indian labourers began when Warren Hastings introduced 'Quinquennial settlement' a land agreement for five years to increase revenue in 1772. As a result of the system a ruling zamindar class landlords emerged in the society. These zamindars are often found to exploit his subjects who work as coolie or labourers for them. This exploitation becomes worse when the English Indigo planters force poor farmers and labourers to cultivate Indigo instead of food crops against their interest. D.R Gadgil in his book 'Industrial Evolution of India in Recent Times' (Gadgilin 23) stated that the dramatic economic result of establishing British rule in India is the destruction of handicraft industry.

The construction of the Indian railways serves as one of the most prominent examples of the exploitation of Indian labourers during the British Raj. The British government initiated the construction of railways in India in the mid-19th century to transport goods and people across the country. However, the constructions of these railways are carried out at the expense of Indian labourers. The workers who build the railways are subjected to deplorable conditions. They are forced to work for extended periods in hazardous circumstances without any safety equipment. Many workers get injured or perished during construction, leaving their families without any compensation. They are paid low wages and don't receive any benefits such as healthcare or pensions. Due to such injustices workers from Karachi North Western Railway Factories revolted in 1917.

The conditions of Indian labourers in the textile industry were no better. The British Raj promoted the textile industry in India with the objective of exporting textiles to Britain. However, the workers in the

textile industry were subjected to long hours of work in cramped and poorly ventilated factories. They were often exposed to perilous chemicals and contracted respiratory diseases. Child labour was also rampant in the textile industry, with many children working long hours for meager wages. For such exploitations India witnessed several protest and strikes in textile industry. Bombay Textile Strike (January 18, 1982 to March 8, 1982) was one of the earliest and most significant labour movements in India, led by the Girni Kamgar Union (Mill Workers' Union) in Bombay (now Mumbai). Around 250,000 textile workers went on strike demanding better wages and working conditions. The Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association (TLA) was founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1918 to represent the workers of the textile industry in Ahmedabad. The TLA fought for better wages, working conditions, and workers' rights. The association played a significant role in the Indian independence movement. The Madras Labour Union was founded in 1918 by B.P. Wadia, with the aim of improving the working conditions of laborers in Madras (now Chennai). The union fought against low wages, long working hours, and the exploitation of workers. All these protests help Anand to mold his research on Coolie.

The British Raj also exploited Indian labourers to extract resources from the country. The extraction of resources such as coal and iron ore was carried out at the expense of Indian labourers. The workers were subjected to perilous working conditions with little or no safety equipment. They were paid meager wages and did not receive any benefits. The destitute conditions of Indian labourers during the British Raj were not limited to the workplace. The British government imposed exorbitant taxes on the Indian people, and Indian goods, making it arduous for them to make ends meet. B.D Basu's book 'Ruin of Indian Trade and Industries' illustrates how British government imposed heavy tax on Indian goods so that Indian goods cannot compete with the British goods in Indian and European markets. The labourers were compelled to reside in cramped and unhygienic conditions, with limited access to basic amenities such as clean water and healthcare.

The exploitation of Indian laborers during the British Raj had far-reaching consequences. It resulted in widespread poverty and deprivation, and contributed to the decline of Indian industries and gifted the infamous Bengal famine in 1770 and 1943. The exploitation also fostered deep-seated resentment towards the British colonizers, ultimately leading to India's struggle for independence.

Depiction of contemporary pathetic conditions of workers through *Coolie*:

The novel *Coolie* provides a powerful representation of the deplorable state of labourers in India during the colonial period in multi-layers. The story revolves around the life of Munoo, a young boy who is forced to become a coolie in the city of Amritsar, leaving behind his village. Throughout the novel, Munoo's struggles and those of other labourers are highlighted; bringing to light the harsh realities of the time. The novel portrays the pitiable condition of labourers in various ways.

The labourers are shown to be exploited by their employers, who pay them meager wages and force them to work in inhumane conditions without any rest or break. The workers' efforts are not appreciated or rewarded, and Munoo, for instance, is treated like a slave, carrying heavy loads on his back for a pittance. He is often beaten and humiliated by his employer. The novel also highlights the social inequality that existed in society at that time, where labourers were treated as inferior beings by the rich and powerful. The laborers were regarded as nothing more than tools to be used for the benefit of the rich and powerful. Munoo's low social status makes him vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and he is often discriminated against due to his caste.

Further, *Coolie* provides a glimpse of the poor living conditions of labourers who are forced to live in cramped and unhygienic quarters, with limited access to basic amenities. Munoo, for instance, lives in a small, dark room in a crowded tenement building, where he is constantly exposed to disease and illness. Most of the labourers were uneducated and unskilled. Anand brings here this pathetic condition very minutely. The labourers in the novel are shown to lack education and basic literacy skills. Their inability to read or write makes them vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by those in power. Munoo, for example, is unable to read the contract he signs with his employer and is unaware of the terms and conditions of his employment.

Munoo's story provides a vivid and emotional portrayal of the harsh realities of life as a coolie, and sheds light on the broader social and political issues facing India at the time. The novel begins with Munoo's childhood in a small village in Punjab, where he lives with his mother, sister, and two brothers. Munoo's father died when he was young, leaving the family in a state of extreme poverty. Munoo is

determined to help his family survive, and so he sets out on a journey to find work as a coolie in the city of Amritsar.

The novel chronicles Munoo's experiences as a coolie, including the long hours of grueling physical labour, the constant threat of abuse and exploitation by employers, and the discrimination and prejudice he faces as a low-caste laborer. Munoo's story is one of resilience and determination in the face of immense adversity, and it highlights the incredible strength and courage of the Indian people during this difficult time.

The novelist highlights the exploitation of Indian labourers by British employers, and the way in which the colonial system perpetuated a cycle of poverty and oppression for the Indian people. Anand also explores the deep-seated prejudices and caste divisions that existed within Indian society, and the impact of these divisions on the lives of ordinary people like Munoo.

One of the most powerful aspects of the novel is Anand's depiction of the physical and emotional toll that life as a coolie takes on Munoo. The long hours of manual labor, combined with the constant threat of abuse and exploitation, leave Munoo physically exhausted and emotionally scarred. Anand's vivid descriptions of Munoo's hardships evoke a strong sense of empathy in the reader, and highlight the incredible strength and resilience required to survive in such difficult circumstances.

Despite the hardships he faces, Munoo remains determined to improve his life and the lives of those around him. He is a deeply compassionate and empathetic character, and he forms strong bonds with his fellow coolies, as well as with a group of prostitutes who live near the coolie lines. Munoo's relationships with these characters provide a powerful counterpoint to the harsh realities of life as a coolie, and highlight the importance of human connection and empathy in the face of adversity.

One of the most poignant moments in the novel occurs when Munoo is reunited with his mother and siblings, who have also traveled to the city in search of work. Munoo is overjoyed to see his family again, but he is devastated to discover that his brother has become addicted to opium, a common problem among coolies who use the drug to numb the pain of their physical labor. This moment highlights the destructive

impact of colonialism on Indian society, and the way in which the exploitation of labourers perpetuated cycles of poverty and addiction.

Conclusion:

The labour is the underlying factor in the novel *Coolie* and from this perspective “Coolie” is a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of the experience of a coolie in India during the colonial era. When the man loses his means of production he is forced to work for the owners who determine which article he has to produce. The man is unable to realize himself through his work and in his products for he has no power to determine the purpose of his activity. He doesn't have self – realization in his act of production, rather they feel suffering, as a loss of his human nature. The experience of Munoo at Sir George White's Cotton Mill is the symbol of alienation of labour which takes place under capitalism. The working conditions of the coolies and their living also help produce alienation between one coolie and another. Anand's vivid and emotional portrayal of Munoo's struggles highlights the incredible strength and resilience required to survive in such difficult circumstances, and sheds light on the broader social and political issues facing India at the time. Therefore, Munoo's story is no single story, and through his story Anand draws attention to the exploitation of all Indian labourers by British employers, the deep-seated prejudices and caste divisions within Indian society, and the destructive impact of colonialism on Indian culture.

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