

Critical Perspectives on *Coolie*: Marxism, Colonialism, and the Indian Context

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Abstract

This paper explores *Coolie* (1936) by Mulk Raj Anand through the critical lenses of Marxism, colonialism, and the Indian socio-political context of the early 20th century. *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. A Marxist reading of the novel highlights the pervasive class struggle and economic exploitation faced by Indian laborers under both indigenous feudal structures and British capitalist imperialism. Munoo's movement through various exploitative labor environments—rural estates, urban factories, and colonial households—mirrors the alienation and commodification of labor central to Marxist theory.

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 labor 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 multi-layered critique, *Coolie* emerges as a powerful indictment of colonial capitalism and a call for social justice.

Introduction

The intellectual and literary impact of *Coolie* (1936), Mulk Raj Anand's pivotal work, is integral to discourse on colonial subjection, class oppression, and the development of Indian English literature as a vehicle for social critique. Situated at the nexus of literature and ideology, *Coolie* offers a sharp portrayal of India's

disenfranchised working masses and a critical analysis of the oppressive frameworks of colonial capitalism. Anand's fictional universe transcends ordinary creativity; it is a politically charged narrative landscape influenced by the ideological upheaval of the early 20th century, a period during which India contended with the dual powers of imperial domination and emerging nationalism. This chapter reviews the current scholarship on *Coolie*, analyzing how critics have understood the novel through Marxist theory, colonial critique, and socio-historical analysis. The objective is to situate the current study within this critical debate, emphasizing the similarities and discrepancies in previous interpretations while establishing a foundation for a thorough Marxist analysis.

The release of *Coolie* in 1936 was a pivotal moment in Indian English literature. During a period when most Indian authors were engrossed with themes of cultural nationalism, romantic idealism, or metaphysical contemplation, Anand's oeuvre distinguished itself by emphasizing material realities and subaltern experiences. Munoo, the central character, is neither an educated nationalist nor a spiritual seeker, but rather a disenfranchised child laborer. His journey through the agrarian peripheries and industrial hubs of colonial India exemplifies the overarching proletariat condition that characterized a significant portion of the colonial economy. Scholars such as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and Meenakshi Mukherjee have lauded Anand's dedication to social realism and his narrative compassion for the underprivileged (Iyengar 347; Mukherjee 129). Although these critics recognize the political aspect of Anand's work, they frequently fail to provide a comprehensive critique rooted in Marxist theory or the structural dynamics of colonial capitalism.

The significance of Marxist criticism to *Coolie* is undeniable, considering the novel's thematic focus on class, labor, and economic exploitation. However, most Marxist interpretations of Indian literature have concentrated on vernacular texts or post-independence fiction, thereby neglecting early Anglophone works such as *Coolie*. Aijaz Ahmad's seminal work *In Theory* examines the constraints of Third World literature within Western critical frameworks, while providing only cursory mentions of Anand. Terry Eagleton, in his examination of *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, delineates the tools for a class-oriented interpretation of literature, but refrains from expressly applying them to colonial or Indian contexts (Eagleton 3–5). This significant gap has resulted in *Coolie* being under-theorized regarding its interaction with historical materialism and class consciousness, despite Anand's evident ideological connections to Marxist and socialist movements of his era.

Furthermore, the colonial background of *Coolie* necessitates a sophisticated interpretation that incorporates both Marxist and postcolonial viewpoints. The political economy of British India was characterized by systematic deindustrialization, rural hardship, and the integration of Indian labor into global capitalist networks. The harsh working conditions in factories, plantations, and

domestic service are not merely incidental to Munoo's narrative; they are systemic realities influenced by imperialist policy. Scholars such as Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee have critiqued the economic historiography of colonial India, demonstrating that subaltern perspectives were frequently marginalized in both nationalist and colonial discourses. *Coolie* restores this overlooked history, providing a literary narrative of the material anguish that supported colonial modernity.

Nevertheless, few critics have rigorously analyzed how *Coolie* mirrors or critiques the ideological mechanisms of colonial capitalism. Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) is highly enlightening in this context. Munoo's subjugation is maintained not just through physical coercion but also by ideological instruments—language, discipline, family, and religion—that normalize his inferiority and make exploitation socially permissible. Although Althusser's theory has significantly impacted Western Marxist discourse, its applicability to colonial situations remains limited. A synthesis of Marxism and postcolonialism is essential to fully understand how *Coolie* illustrates both economic exploitation and intellectual subjugation.

A significant aspect of scholarship on Anand centers on his humanism and liberalism, frequently linked to his connections with Western intellectuals like E.M. Forster. Critics such as C.D. Narasimhaiah have highlighted Anand's ethical motivation and moral indignation toward injustice, viewing *Coolie* as a manifestation of universal empathy rather than a class analysis. This approach appropriately highlights Anand's sympathetic realism; however, it often diminishes the structural critique inherent in the story. Anand was actively involved in socialist politics while in England, aligning himself with the Progressive Writers' Movement and drawing inspiration from Soviet and Marxist literary traditions. His portrayal of working-class anguish is not solely emotional but also political—a call to awareness and defiance. Recent academic discourse has begun to reexamine *Coolie* through more analytical frameworks. In *Literary Radicalism in India*, Priyamvada Gopal positions Anand within a lineage of anti-colonial Marxist authors who employed fiction as a means of ideological confrontation. Gopal contends that Anand's oeuvre should be examined in the context of the labor conditions under colonialism, asserting that *Coolie* presents a sharp critique of imperial capitalism and indigenous complicity (Gopal 72–75). Raza Rumi asserts that the novel is a "proto-socialist" work that exposes the economic underpinnings of empire through the experiences of its most marginalized individuals (Rumi 88). These recent readings offer a significant shift from previous romanticized interpretations and facilitate a more thorough analysis of *Coolie* as a Marxist text.

A significant aspect that emerges in modern criticism is the interaction of class with caste, gender, and geography. While *Coolie* predominantly emphasizes class exploitation, it also alludes to the intricate strata that influence Munoo's existence. The apathy of upper-caste landowners, the collusion of Indian

manufacturing proprietors, and the gendered domains of domestic labor collectively indicate a complex matrix of subjugation. Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial subjectivity elucidates how Munoo internalizes feelings of inferiority, reflecting the psychological ramifications of colonization. Fanon's insights, when combined with Marxist theory, provide a comprehensive explanation of the interplay between economic and intellectual oppression in colonial cultures.

This chapter emphasizes the significance of contextualizing *Coolie* within the expansive framework of global proletarian literature. Comparisons with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* or Maxim Gorky's *Mother* highlight common themes of industrial exploitation, alienation, and working-class struggle. *Coolie* distinguishes itself by its colonial backdrop and its portrayal of a workforce ensnared between indigenous feudalism and imperial capitalism. Anand's achievement lies in expressing a distinctly Indian narrative of exploitation that is simultaneously local and global, historical and allegorical.

In conclusion, the current scholarship on *Coolie* has provided significant insights into its realism, humanism, and nationalist undertones. A thorough Marxist analysis—one that considers the political economy of colonial governance and the ideological mechanisms that perpetuate class stratification—remains underdeveloped. This chapter offers a critical synthesis of prior readings, highlights significant theoretical deficiencies, and emphasizes the necessity for a historical materialist analysis that contextualizes *Coolie* within the wider discussions on Marxism, colonialism, and Indian modernity. This approach will enrich our comprehension of Anand's work and contribute to the ongoing discourse regarding the role of literature in social transformation.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) was a pioneering figure in Indian English literature and one of the earliest novelists to give voice to India's marginalized classes. His novels, especially *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), portray the dehumanizing effects of caste, class, and colonial power. S.C. Harrex argues that Anand was “a writer with a cause,” whose narratives consistently seek to expose injustices faced by the underprivileged. Similarly, Saros Cowasjee identifies Anand's realism and moral fervor as defining features of his fiction, noting that *Coolie* remains one of his most sustained indictments of systemic inequality. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in *Indian Writing in English*, acknowledges Anand's early engagement with Marxist ideas during his time in England, particularly his association with leftist intellectual circles and his contributions to the *Left Review*. These influences are evident in his critique of colonial institutions and the exploitative dynamics of labor. Academic readings of *Coolie* have evolved significantly since its publication. Initially praised for its realism and humanist tone, later critics have approached the novel through postcolonial, Marxist, feminist, and subaltern studies perspectives. Critics such as M.K. Naik and Ramesh Mohan emphasize Anand's use

of realism as a literary strategy to depict the suffering of India's underclasses. They note that Munoo's life is rendered with documentary precision, reflecting Anand's belief in literature as a tool for social change. More recent postcolonial readings, such as those by Priyamvada Gopal and Elleke Boehmer, situate *Coolie* within the broader narrative of anti-colonial resistance. These scholars highlight how colonial economic policies, racism, and cultural hegemony intersect in the lives of Indian laborers. Gopal, in particular, notes how Anand complicates the binaries of colonizer and colonized by revealing the role of native elites in perpetuating class oppression. Marxist critics like Aijaz Ahmad and Terry Eagleton have explored how colonial capitalism reshaped class formations in India. Though they do not focus exclusively on *Coolie*, their work provides a critical foundation for interpreting the novel's socio-economic dimensions. Ahmad's critique of Indian bourgeois nationalism and Eagleton's analysis of ideology and form are particularly relevant to this study.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter establishes the complex intellectual and critical terrain within which the present study is situated. Through a careful engagement with existing critical works on *Coolie*, Marxist literary criticism, and the historical economic realities of colonial India, this review lays the theoretical groundwork for a rigorous, historically contextualized Marxist analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's novel. By synthesizing classical Marxist thought with postcolonial critiques of imperialism, this study seeks to offer a fresh, politically grounded reading of *Coolie*—a reading that reveals the novel not merely as a work of empathetic social realism but as a structurally engaged narrative of systemic exploitation and ideological control under colonial capitalism.

Scholarship on *Coolie* has evolved over the decades, with earlier studies emphasizing Anand's literary realism, his empathetic portrayal of India's downtrodden classes, and his commitment to Gandhian and humanist principles. Critics like K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and C.D. Narasimhaiah have praised Anand's vivid social portraiture and moral integrity, often reading *Coolie* as a compassionate indictment of caste, poverty, and social inequality (Iyengar 347; Narasimhaiah 102). While these interpretations have done much to secure Anand's place in the Indian literary canon, they tend to frame his writing in terms of moral and ethical concerns rather than ideological critique. In this framework, *Coolie* is often understood as a novel that arouses the reader's pity and conscience rather than as a deliberate and systematic exposure of the political economy of British India.

This critical orientation toward humanism, though significant, can obscure the fundamentally Marxist underpinnings of Anand's work. Anand's affiliation with the Progressive Writers' Association, his intellectual engagements with figures like E.M. Forster and George Orwell, and his open admiration for Soviet literary models testify to a more radical literary mission (Gopal 70–75). In *Coolie*, this mission is visible in the novel's structuring of labor, exploitation, and alienation not as incidental

social evils but as central organizing principles of Indian colonial life. The episodic nature of Munoo's journey—moving from village to town, from domestic servant to factory worker to rickshaw-puller—mirrors the trajectory of the rural-to-urban proletariat caught in the gears of an expanding colonial economy.

Marxist criticism, both classical and contemporary, provides a rich theoretical framework for analyzing such a narrative. Foundational concepts such as base and superstructure, surplus value, commodity fetishism, and alienation offer tools for unpacking the deeper economic logic of *Coolie*. Karl Marx's formulation of labor as the source of value and his critique of capitalist accumulation find literary expression in the conditions of Munoo's work and life (Marx 31–40). Whether in the exploitative domestic labor at the Babu's household or the dehumanizing conditions of the cotton mill in Bombay, Munoo is consistently presented as a laboring subject whose value is determined by his utility within a market economy structured by imperial domination.

However, as this review reveals, the application of Marxist literary theory to Anand's work remains somewhat underdeveloped in the existing body of criticism. Scholars like Priyamvada Gopal have taken important steps in re-evaluating Anand's radicalism, situating him within a broader anti-colonial and Marxist literary tradition. Gopal asserts that Anand should not be seen as merely a realist or moralist, but as an intellectual committed to revolutionary transformation, using literature as a means to critique the material and ideological foundations of British imperialism (Gopal 73). Nonetheless, there remains a need to deepen this line of inquiry, particularly by analyzing *Coolie* through the lens of historical materialism and locating its class analysis within the concrete structures of colonial capitalism.

The colonial context is crucial to this analysis. British rule in India was not merely a political arrangement but an economic system grounded in resource extraction, labor exploitation, and the integration of Indian markets into global capitalist circuits. As Bipan Chandra and Amiya Kumar Bagchi have demonstrated, the British systematically dismantled Indian artisanal industries, restructured agrarian relations to favor revenue extraction, and developed urban industrial centers that served imperial interests rather than local needs (Chandra 219; Bagchi 44). *Coolie* reflects this colonial economy in its depiction of displaced agricultural workers, burgeoning urban slums, and exploitative labor conditions in industries catering to British markets. Munoo's journey, far from being a tragic personal odyssey, encapsulates the socioeconomic mobility—or lack thereof—of millions of Indian laborers subjected to these extractive forces.

A key theoretical contribution to this analysis is the concept of ideology as articulated by Louis Althusser. According to Althusser, capitalist societies maintain their structures not only through repressive state apparatuses but also through

ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) such as the family, education, religion, and media (Althusser 85–86). These institutions reproduce capitalist relations by shaping consciousness and making social hierarchies appear natural. In *Coolie*, Munoo's submission to authority, his internalized inferiority, and his lack of class consciousness can be read as the effects of such ideological conditioning. The novel dramatizes not only material exploitation but also the ideological processes that justify and perpetuate it. For instance, when Munoo expresses gratitude to his abusive employers or blames himself for his misfortunes, he embodies the success of colonial ideology in masking exploitation as duty or fate.

In addition to the economic and ideological aspects of colonialism, postcolonial theory adds another layer to the interpretive framework. Thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Gayatri Spivak have analyzed the psychological and discursive dimensions of colonization. Fanon's work in *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* is especially relevant in understanding Munoo's experience of alienation and dehumanization (Fanon 18–25). The novel repeatedly stages Munoo as an "Other"—his labor desired but his humanity denied. This othering process is not just economic but ontological; he is rendered invisible by those who benefit from his labor. Spivak's concept of the subaltern, who cannot speak within dominant discourses, further sharpens this point. Munoo's silences, misrecognitions, and failed assertions of agency reveal the limits of his voice within a structure that denies him subjecthood (Spivak 28–30).

The literature also points toward intersections of class with other axes of identity, such as caste and gender. Although *Coolie* does not overtly emphasize caste, it operates in the background, influencing Munoo's social positioning and interactions. Anand's omission of explicit caste references in *Coolie*—despite being a Dalit sympathizer and later exploring caste more directly in *Untouchable*—suggests a strategic focus on class as the dominant axis of colonial exploitation in this novel. Nonetheless, the invisibility and vulnerability Munoo experiences may also be linked to his likely lower-caste background, reinforcing the idea that class and caste function in tandem under colonial capitalism (Omvedt 53).

Gender, too, plays a critical role in *Coolie*. While the novel centers on a male protagonist, it includes peripheral female characters who endure exploitation in gender-specific ways. From domestic servitude to the sexual vulnerability of working-class women, Anand hints at the gendered dynamics of labor and oppression. Feminist Marxist theorists such as Silvia Federici and Angela Davis have argued that the reproduction of labor power—through caregiving, household labor, and biological reproduction—is a critical but often overlooked dimension of capitalism (Federici 33; Davis 98). In *Coolie*, the depiction of women in domestic roles and the patriarchal structuring of labor sites gestures toward this intersection of gender and class, though Anand does not develop it extensively.

While the reviewed scholarship provides a strong foundation for understanding *Coolie* as a socially engaged novel, it often lacks a cohesive framework that unites these disparate critical threads into a Marxist analysis attuned to colonial specificities. This dissertation aims to address this gap by deploying an interdisciplinary methodology that combines classical Marxism, postcolonial theory, and literary criticism. It argues that *Coolie* should be understood as a politically charged text that not only depicts individual suffering but critiques the systemic violence of colonial capitalism. It is a novel of ideological exposure, laying bare the contradictions and coercions that underwrite the imperial order.

Furthermore, this study contends that *Coolie* contributes to a broader tradition of global proletarian literature. Its narrative of dispossession, migration, and labor exploitation resonates with international texts that chronicle the rise of industrial capitalism and the struggles of the working class. However, its distinctiveness lies in its colonial setting, where economic oppression is compounded by racial hierarchies, cultural dislocation, and national subjugation. By integrating *Coolie* into both national and global conversations on literature and class, this study reaffirms the novel's relevance to contemporary debates on inequality, labor rights, and resistance.

In conclusion, the critical perspectives surveyed in this chapter underscore the importance of reading *Coolie* not only as a text of social concern but as a work of literary Marxism that demands structural critique. The novel's portrayal of labor, ideology, and colonialism offers rich terrain for analysis, yet much of its radical potential remains underexplored in mainstream literary discourse. By situating this study within the intellectual lineage of Marxist and postcolonial criticism, and by identifying the key gaps in existing scholarship, this dissertation establishes a clear rationale for a renewed engagement with *Coolie* as a powerful document of colonial capitalism and class struggle. In doing so, it honors Mulk Raj Anand's vision of literature as a tool for emancipation and affirms the enduring relevance of Marxist criticism in understanding the cultural artifacts of oppression.

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