

Coolie as a Symbol: Munoo's Journey Through Oppression

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Abstract:

This paper examines *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand, focusing on the symbolic significance of Munoo, the protagonist, whose life journey represents the broader struggles of the oppressed under colonial and socio-economic hierarchies in pre-independence India. Munoo is not merely a character but a powerful symbol of India's exploited labor class—voiceless, displaced, and dehumanized. Through his continuous movement from the rural hinterlands to urban industrial centers, and finally to a colonial hill station, Munoo's experiences reflect the structural violence of caste, class, and imperialism that shapes the Indian colonial reality.

As a child laborer, factory worker, servant, and rickshaw-puller, Munoo is subjected to physical and psychological exploitation in every space he inhabits. His lack of agency underscores the systemic denial of identity and dignity to the working poor. The novel uses Munoo's suffering and eventual tragic death not as isolated misfortunes but as a representation of a larger social and historical condition. His innocence and resilience in the face of relentless hardship evoke empathy while simultaneously challenging the reader to confront the injustices embedded in the colonial-capitalist system.

Anand's portrayal of Munoo is deeply humanistic, offering a critique not only of British imperialism but also of Indian complicity in maintaining oppressive caste and class structures. Munoo's journey, marked by displacement, labor exploitation, and social invisibility, becomes a metaphor for the collective plight of India's underclass. Ultimately, *Coolie* presents Munoo as a tragic yet enduring symbol of suffering, resilience, and the urgent need for social transformation.

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* is not merely the story of a young boy navigating the harsh realities of colonial India—it is a symbolic narrative that reflects the conditions of millions oppressed under the yoke of colonial capitalism. The protagonist, Munoo, is not a fully individuated character in the traditional sense; rather, he functions as a social and symbolic figure, standing for the Indian proletariat. Through his suffering, migration, labor, and ultimate death, Munoo becomes a vessel

for representing the alienated, exploited, and dehumanized laboring classes under British colonialism and its complicit native elites. This chapter examines Munoo's character arc through a Marxist lens, positioning him as a symbolic representation of the subaltern under class, caste, and colonial oppression.

The term *coolie* itself is critical to understanding Munoo's symbolic role. A *coolie* was a pejorative colonial term used to describe low-wage laborers of Asian origin, particularly those performing menial or manual labor. By naming the novel after this term, Anand shifts the narrative focus from individual heroism to collective suffering. Munoo is not a name but a role—a position in the socio-economic structure. From the start, Munoo is denied the possibility of upward mobility. As a member of a landless peasant family in a small village, he is born into poverty and dispossession. After the death of his parents, he is thrust into a series of exploitative labor arrangements, which mark the essential function of a *coolie*—to serve, to be invisible, to be expendable. In this sense, Munoo's journey is not unique but representative. His experiences are not the result of poor choices or bad luck; they are structurally determined. His path through multiple labor regimes shows how colonial capitalism created, reproduced, and consumed the lives of India's working poor.

Each stage of Munoo's life is defined by a distinct type of labor: domestic servitude, factory work, menial service, and industrial labor. Despite the changes in setting and job, a unifying thread runs through these experiences—alienation. In Marxist theory, alienation refers to the estrangement of workers from the products of their labor, from the process of labor, from others, and from their own human essence. This concept finds vivid expression in Munoo's journey. In Sham Nagar, where Munoo first finds work as a domestic servant for Babu Nathoo Ram, his labor, though vital to the functioning of the household, is rendered invisible and insignificant. He is overworked, insulted, and physically abused, especially by the Babu's domineering wife. His contribution is never acknowledged as valuable, and he has no control over the outcome of his efforts. Here, Munoo experiences both physical and emotional alienation. His labor does not lead to fulfillment, and his body becomes the target of discipline and subjugation.

The situation worsens when he moves to Daulatpur and works in a pickle factory. There, he is subjected to repetitive, exploitative tasks that lack any form of creative engagement or satisfaction. The labor is purely mechanical, performed under harsh conditions, and focused solely on production for profit. Munoo's humanity is suppressed, as the structure of the factory reduces him to a tool of production. In Bombay, Munoo becomes a worker in a textile mill. This environment is the epitome of industrial alienation. Factory discipline, rigid schedules, and depersonalization erase his individuality. His identity is lost in the noise and routine of the machines. In every form of labor he undertakes, Munoo is not working to develop his personality or achieve any form of self-expression. Rather, he works to

survive—a goal that ultimately remains unmet. He becomes the very image of the alienated worker, one who is estranged from the product, the process, his peers, and ultimately, from himself.

Munoo's physical journey from place to place serves as more than a narrative device—it becomes a powerful metaphor for economic and social dispossession under colonial capitalism. His migration from the village to urban centers, and from one exploitative job to the next, reflects the collapse of traditional rural livelihoods and the rise of a fragmented, vulnerable labor force. Economically, his travels highlight the instability faced by the proletariat. Munoo's movements are not voluntary or exploratory; they are forced by economic necessity and systemic displacement. He never has a stable income or permanent employment. This instability is emblematic of the larger condition of colonial-era laborers, who were perpetually at the mercy of market forces. Socially, the journey emphasizes Munoo's lack of rootedness. At no point in his travels can he establish a home, build enduring relationships, or find a sense of belonging. This nomadic condition symbolizes the broader social fragmentation caused by capitalist modes of production, which break down communal ties and render individuals isolated.

Spiritually and emotionally, Munoo becomes increasingly disillusioned. Each new destination brings with it fresh layers of cruelty, exploitation, and suffering. His journey deepens his alienation rather than alleviating it. This continual displacement can be read through the lens of Marx's concept of primitive accumulation—the process by which peasants are dispossessed of their land and compelled to enter the labor market under coercive conditions. Munoo's physical movement thus reflects the economic forces that transform the rural poor into an unmoored, exploited working class.

Anand uses Munoo's body as a visceral symbol of the violence inflicted by the capitalist system. His physical suffering is not incidental to the story—it is central, representing the material consequences of class oppression and labor exploitation. In Sham Nagar, Munoo endures physical abuse at the hands of Babu Nathoo Ram's wife, a manifestation of how authority and labor hierarchy permit the disciplining of the worker's body. This pattern continues in the pickle factory, where his body weakens due to inadequate nutrition, long hours, and unhygienic conditions. The factory treats him as an expendable resource, extracting value without regard for his well-being.

His condition deteriorates further in the textile mill in Bombay, where the industrial setting is relentless. Under the grinding routines of factory life, Munoo's body collapses. The long shifts, the dust-filled air, and the physical strain finally result in illness. He contracts tuberculosis—a disease often associated with overcrowded slums and poor working conditions, particularly among the urban poor.

In Marxist terms, Munoo's physical decline represents the depletion of his labor power—his only means of survival and his only “commodity.” He has no wealth, no social power, and no legal rights. All he has is his body, which is slowly consumed and discarded by the capitalist machinery. Anand vividly portrays the Marxist idea that labor under capitalism is consumed like fuel—coal, oil, or in this case, human flesh. Munoo becomes a human resource burned out by the system that relies on his toil.

Despite the immense suffering he endures, Munoo rarely articulates any critique of the economic or social system that exploits him. Instead, he tends to blame himself, internalizing failure and accepting his fate without protest. This behavior illustrates the concept of false consciousness described by Marx and Engels—the inability of oppressed individuals to recognize the true source of their oppression. Several factors reinforce this state of mind in Munoo. Religious fatalism plays a prominent role. He often interprets his hardships as the result of karma or divine will, believing that suffering is a natural or deserved part of life. Additionally, he has been shaped by cultural ideologies that promote obedience to authority figures, encouraging submission rather than resistance.

A lack of education further limits his ability to understand or challenge the structural nature of his exploitation. Without the language or knowledge to conceptualize class struggle, Munoo cannot imagine alternatives to his condition. From an Althusserian perspective, he is a subject who has been interpellated into the dominant ideology. He sees himself not as a worker with rights, but as a servant whose place is to be humble and grateful. This is not simply a personal trait, but the result of systematic ideological conditioning that perpetuates the capitalist order by masking its contradictions.

Throughout Munoo's life, one of the most striking features is the lack of collective resistance among the working class. At every stage of his journey, opportunities for solidarity and unity among laborers are undercut by social divisions and systemic fragmentation.

In the factories where he works, laborers do not organize or challenge their exploitation. Instead, they are pitted against each other, competing for wages and survival. There is no sense of a shared identity or mutual struggle. In urban settings like Bombay, the poor are atomized and disconnected. Each individual is absorbed in their own hardship, with little sense of community.

Even among domestic workers and servants, rivalry and distrust are common. Fellow laborers see each other as threats rather than allies, further deepening their isolation. This lack of unity reflects Gramsci's concept of the failure of organic intellectuals—figures from the working class who could offer ideological leadership

and mobilize the masses into a coherent political force. Munoo never encounters such a figure. No one he meets offers a vision of resistance or solidarity. This absence is not accidental but structural; colonial capitalism thrives on division, maintaining its power by preventing the formation of a unified proletarian identity.

The conclusion of *Coolie* departs dramatically from the conventions of the Bildungsroman, which typically charts the protagonist's growth in self-awareness and ends in some form of resolution. Munoo's journey, by contrast, ends in silence and death. He dies of tuberculosis, a victim of poverty, without recognition or justice. Yet this ending is not simply a tragic conclusion—it is a deeply political statement. Munoo's death serves as a symbol of collective suffering. He dies in the way countless workers in colonial India did: unnoticed, undervalued, and unrecorded. His death condemns the economic and political structures that deem human life expendable.

Anand does not romanticize Munoo's suffering, nor does he offer redemption. Instead, he challenges the reader to witness this injustice and to confront the systemic violence that allows such deaths to occur. According to literary theorist Terry Eagleton, Marxist literature should not merely tell a story but should illuminate the historical and political contradictions of its time. Munoo's silent death fulfills that function. It serves not as a narrative failure, but as an invitation for political reckoning.

Though Munoo is an individual character, Anand constructs him to be more than a singular persona. His name comes to represent the collective identity of countless laborers, the "every coolie" whose life story is similarly marked by exploitation and neglect.

This symbolic function is reinforced by Anand's narrative choices. Munoo has little psychological depth or personal history; his character is not shaped by unique internal conflicts but by external social forces. He has no romantic entanglements or familial ties that would isolate his story from the broader masses. His inability to assert agency or affect his destiny makes him a vessel for representing a class condition rather than an individualized protagonist. In this way, Munoo aligns with Georg Lukács' idea of the "typical character"—a literary figure who embodies the essential social and historical dynamics of a particular class or moment. Munoo's anonymity and universality make him not less important, but more representative. His story stands for thousands of others who endured similar fates in silence.

Throughout the novel, Munoo remains largely invisible to the systems of power and history that shape his world. He passes through villages, towns, and cities, yet he is never truly seen or heard. His death does not appear in any newspaper. No

government office registers his labor, and no institution advocates for his rights. This invisibility is not just literal—it is deeply allegorical.

Anand uses Munoo's erasure to critique how colonial capitalism systematically devalues and ignores the contributions of the working class. The builders of industrial wealth—men and women like Munoo—are excluded not only from ownership and power, but even from memory. Their names are not written down; their labor is not commemorated.

Through fiction, Anand challenges this erasure. He uses narrative as a form of historical redress, restoring the dignity and presence of the invisible. In giving Munoo a voice—even if that voice is silenced at the end—Anand ensures that his life, and the lives of countless others like him, are not forgotten.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* is far more than a novel chronicling the tragic life of a single orphaned boy; it is a richly layered socio-political narrative that symbolically represents the lived realities of the proletariat in colonial India. Munoo's journey, marked by relentless hardship, exploitation, and eventual death, serves as a powerful allegory for the condition of millions of oppressed laborers under the twin yokes of imperial domination and capitalist exploitation. Through Munoo's character, Anand does not simply tell a personal story of misfortune—he constructs a vivid literary representation of systemic violence and historical neglect.

Munoo's identity as a "coolie" is not accidental, nor is it limited to a job description. The term itself—often used in colonial discourse to describe unskilled, low-wage laborers—reduces the individual to a function, stripping him of identity, agency, and dignity. Anand leverages this loaded term to emphasize how capitalism and colonialism combine to dehumanize laborers, turning them into disposable tools in service of wealth accumulation. As Munoo transitions from a servant in a middle-class household to a worker in a factory, a domestic helper in a colonial home, and finally a rickshaw puller, his journey is emblematic of the cycles of poverty and displacement faced by the working poor.

From a Marxist perspective, Munoo's labor is illustrative of both alienation and surplus value extraction. He produces value for others but remains alienated from the process of production, the fruits of his labor, and his own sense of self. He has no control over the conditions of his work, receives inadequate compensation, and is treated not as a human being but as a mere economic resource. Anand vividly portrays this dehumanization, especially through the physical toll that labor takes on Munoo's young body. The exploitation is not only economic—it is also deeply embodied, manifesting in fatigue, disease, abuse, and finally, death.

Alienation in *Coolie* is not limited to economic relationships; it is also social and psychological. Munoo is alienated from family, community, and culture. His repeated migrations—forced by necessity, not choice—mirror the dislocations caused by colonial economic restructuring. Traditional rural economies were destabilized through taxation, cash crop cultivation, and land alienation, pushing peasants into urban centers where they became part of the growing industrial labor force. Munoo's inability to find stability or belonging in any social space reflects this broader structural crisis. His rootlessness is not a result of personal failure but a reflection of systemic displacement—a condition faced by countless Indians during British rule. Another important dimension of Munoo's symbolic journey is the ideological domination that sustains these exploitative systems. Colonial and capitalist structures are maintained not just through force but through the internalization of hierarchy. Throughout the novel, Munoo is subjected to verbal and physical abuse by those higher up in the social order—not just British colonizers, but also Indian employers and elites. This complicity of Indian society in perpetuating class and caste oppression is a critical element of Anand's critique. Munoo, born into a lower caste, faces discrimination from his fellow Indians even before encountering the overt racism of the British. His status as a coolie makes him invisible to the structures of power—both colonial and indigenous.

Yet *Coolie* is not a one-dimensional tale of victimhood. What makes Anand's narrative truly powerful is his ability to humanize Munoo while also using him as a symbol of systemic injustice. Munoo is not simply an abstract figure of exploitation—he is a boy with dreams, fears, desires, and resilience. His laughter, curiosity, and yearning for affection allow readers to connect with him emotionally. In doing so, Anand creates a bridge between personal empathy and political awareness. Readers are not merely passive observers of Munoo's suffering; they are compelled to reflect on the structures that allow such suffering to continue.

Anand's narrative strategy avoids didacticism. He does not overtly preach ideology; rather, he constructs a compelling human story that brings abstract political and economic theories to life. By doing so, he makes the invisible visible. The exploitative mechanisms of capitalism and colonialism are often hidden beneath layers of bureaucracy, normalized through social hierarchies, or justified through ideology. Through Munoo's eyes, readers witness the intimate, everyday violence of these systems—violence that is often sanitized or ignored in mainstream discourse. Munoo's suffering is not exaggerated; it is representative of a collective condition that Anand seeks to expose.

The tragedy of Munoo's premature death is not merely a narrative device—it is a moral indictment of the world in which he lived. His end is neither noble nor redemptive. He dies alone, nameless, and voiceless in a hospital ward, a casualty of the very systems that profited from his labor and simultaneously discarded him when

he was no longer useful. His death serves as a symbol of the expendability of labor in capitalist economies, particularly in colonized societies where racial and class hierarchies compounded exploitation. At the same time, his death forces the reader to confront the urgent need for systemic change.

Yet, in death, Munoo also achieves a kind of symbolic permanence. He becomes more than just an individual; he becomes a representation of a class, a historical moment, and a political condition. Anand's genius lies in his ability to transform Munoo's personal tragedy into a larger call to action. The novel invites readers to recognize Munoo not just as a victim, but as a reflection of society's failures—a mirror held up to the colonial and capitalist systems that have long denied justice to the marginalized.

In this sense, *Coolie* is not a pessimistic novel; it is a socially engaged one. It does not offer easy solutions, but it insists on recognition. It compels readers to see what is often ignored: the humanity of the laborer, the suffering behind economic statistics, the life beneath the label of "coolie." Munoo's death may mark the end of his journey, but it also marks the beginning of the reader's moral and political reckoning. Anand's writing becomes an act of resistance against historical erasure, giving voice to those whose stories have been systematically silenced.

In conclusion, Munoo's journey in *Coolie* is a meticulously crafted narrative that operates on multiple levels: personal, symbolic, political, and historical. His experiences encapsulate the Marxist critique of alienation and surplus value, the colonial process of ideological domination, and the social reality of caste and class oppression in India. His suffering body and silenced voice expose the full extent of capitalist dehumanization, yet his story also emerges as a call to conscience and collective action. Anand's narrative does not merely demand sympathy—it demands recognition, understanding, and change. In Munoo, we see not only the tragedy of one boy but the enduring crisis of justice in a world shaped by inequality and indifference.

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